

Policy Briefs

Project Title: Education, Margins and City: Examining the Linkages through an Ethnographic Exploration

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Introduction

The question of policy becomes important in our engagement with the practice, specifically in the marginal context. How should the field inform the theory becomes further pertinent when the concern is around policy. Another reason for policy for becoming important comes from its sheer nature. While coming under the rights-based apparatus, it has the potential to receive the contours of the field more than what is possible by law. We know from Foucault that laws have the aspect of rights as well as ordering woven in it. The coming of the modern state was marked by the shift that happened from the sovereign power to the modern power, concomitant with the coming of governance that was rule based and had rationality woven in it. Modern state governed its population through laws, and so has the side of rights towards it as well as ordering woven in it. A balance is always needed between this rights-based apparatus with the biopolitical inertia of the state that has its proclivity towards a totalitarian control. This dark side of ordering of the state has to be pushed by the rights which pose as 'counter-conduct' (Golder, 2015). By resisting the modern forms of governance, the critical counter conduct deploys the rights.

As the modern state works through law – having the side of rights and ordering woven in it; striking the balance between the two becomes essential. However, in the contemporary times, as is noted by political philosophers like Agamben, this balance is becoming increasingly difficult. State, by using the laws, is demonstrating a movement towards controlling the populations and is short-circuiting the rights that are the other side of it. Law is being deployed today to ensure control and regulation and not to question the biopolitical side of the state. This can be seen in the case of evictions (as is shown by Gautam Bhan), or the 'bourgeoisie environmentalism' (Baviskar) where progressive measures of laws are used to ensure the ordering of society that continues to then discriminate the marginal population by using the rational arguments of order, hygiene and beauty, as against the traditional social exclusionary measures of caste, class and religion. These social markers of divisibility have acquired a new skin making any grasp of them difficult.

When laws are going through this struggle, the internal command of being rights-oriented has to be addressed by the policy. Policy needs to have the aspect of having counter-conduct in them so that state doesn't hollow itself out in the face of its own biopolitical move. In our work with margins, we have seen how city manages to invisibilize the margins and what is the role that education is playing in maintaining the order making function of the state. Located in the anthropology of margins, the present work demonstrates that margins to be the site that make state functioning visible, and doesn't just show its failure. How the state, that is an incomplete project, is trying to attain its completion through ordering the sites that appear chaotic and messy. The informal world of the margins become illegal as it comes in contact with formal spaces of the city. Law has acquired a force today of turning the informal into illegal, as has been demonstrated by the significant works of Bhan, Ghertner, Routary, Srivastava and Baviskar. Policy then has to be more in tandem with the informal world and be more rights oriented. The difficulty of this in the context of the political economy of south asia as well as the larger geopolitics cannot be dismissed. At this point in history, resonating the rights-based approach is increasingly getting difficult as the spiralling effects of these cycles – rights-based and the biopolitical one – is getting intensified. Policy then has to uphold this rights-based apparatus.

Our research has demonstrated margins to be the site that reveals the violence through which state operates. This tension of order and rights become most visible in the margins, making it important for policy to be informed by the informal world of the margins – the world that is rife with the need of upholding the rights. Through our work with margins, the three observations that need to inform the policy would be as follows:

1. Affirming the informalities of margins.

The present literature in urban studies is demonstrating the vacuousness of the debate between the legal and illegal, and how these binaries are activated to only suit the ordering and governing of the population. The formal, legal world of the city ascribes illegality to the informal lives that are lived by the marginal population. Policy has to struggle with informalities of margins, as law will make the informalities as illegal. Policy has to see this informality important for the functioning of the city.

In the context of education, the present movement away from the public funded education and the appropriation of market signals a shift away from an engagement with informalities. This affirmation of the public funded education is central to upholding the character of the public. Arendt has demonstrated the concomitant fall in the political, which is our investment in the world, leading to the decay and stagnation that the political is witnessing today. Upholding this public sphere then is important for policy, and one of the significant ways of doing that is through affirming the knowledges, skills, languages of the informal world of margins, regardless of how abrupt they might appear in the formal world of the city.

This is equivalent to give space and value to the aesthetics that emerge from the informal world of the margins. The present project has demonstrated the aberration that the formal and informal educational spaces attribute to the life of children that is marked by this informality. Their dress, language, body type, educational resources that they have in terms of copies, stationaries as well as the school work that they do goes through enormous pressure because of not suiting the aesthetics upheld by the formal educational world. It becomes important for the policy, specifically in the context of education, to be in tune with this marginal world and the children's voices that emerge from there. Any affirmation of the informal lives of the margins would be connected to the strong public sphere – significantly important in the times we are living in.

2. Resonating the local knowledges:

Policy, specifically in the context of education, with its best intentions will always make a distinction between the legitimate and the not-so-legitimate knowledge. This can be captured in the language and the nature of school work that is given in the schools. It's imperviousness to the informal world of the margins gives a new fabric to the discrimination that has been anchored on the social categories of caste, class, religion and gender.

This binary created between the knowledges is a result of the order making function of the state, and this is the tension that the policy needs to be aware of. Papering over this contradiction will be equivalent to short circuiting the rights-based approach that can be upheld by the policy framework.

NCF 2005, as well as NCFTE 2009 emerge as important frame that at the level of knowledge were able to give more space to the milieu from where children are coming. By giving space to the milieu of children in the formal knowledge base of the curriculum framework became an important step in the direction of shaping the policies that are also amenable to the informal lives that are lived in the margins.

3. Caring for the aspirations

Our research project has demonstrated how margins are rife with aspirations. These aspirations are largely around the utilitarian, instrumental nature of education and do not connect with the creative, progressive aspect of education. Interestingly, despite the awareness located in the impossibility of attaining the instrumental objectives of education as was evinced in close interviews, the popular appeal and legitimacy of education has not weaned away from the life of margins. Children as well as adults at the margins are aware that their claim to the city is possible only through education. This education that continues to give them hope is connected with certifications as well as the aesthetics of looking educated.

It is important for the policy to be cognizant of this desire of changing the landscape of their lives through education. The capability approach of Amartya Sen as well as the aspiration matrix put forth by the work of Abhijit Banerjee is located on building the capacities that can feed on to their aspirations. The aspiration gap between the life they have and one that they desire shouldn't be big enough and education must continue to bridge these two ends. In this context, it is important for policy to have nourishing, caring attitude towards the aspiration goals that the people at the margins have, regardless of how narrow they appear to be.

It is also important for a well-functioning state to be responsive towards the aspirations that are emerging from the informal world of the margins, else market will appropriate the space that is left out. In the Indian context, this is already getting visible with the increasing number of non-state actors entering in the field, pandering to the aspirations connected with speaking English, looking educated, and getting the certificates. In the name of education, one can witness the damage that private players have already incurred. It is important for policy to be aware of this contradictory nature of education that only values the instrumental aspect of education. Policy can take care of it while continuing to rescue the creative aspect of education. The curriculum frameworks of 2005, as well as the one for teacher education (NCFTE 2009) are the brilliant examples of maintaining this balance. The B.El.Ed. curriculum framework also evinces the feasibility of remaining creative and critical while suiting the market demand as well.

Our research project became reflective of the pharmacological aspect of education. Pharmakon, as is evinced in the Greek culture, is not just a poison that is cure as well. Instead, the curative potential can come from the poisonous aspect only. Education as is demanded by the margins, with its narrow aspect, when cared for, does have the potential of rescuing its progressive aspect as well.

4. Flexibility on the documentation.

State activates itself through its legible practices. This anxiety becomes visible at the site of margins where an incessant need to satisfy the statistical practices can be captured. The translation of the informal lives into the illegal happen is anchored on the documentation. Our research project has demonstrated the systemic violence that the formal education spaces incur on the margins in the name of documentation. Children are denied admission because of not having the paper work. The movement between the city and the village is not supported by the documents that have a tendency to locate a body with a particular space itself. The movement of bodies then goes against the documentation that state demands. This has clear consequences on margins' access to education.

The institutions of the state demand as well as produce these documents. If margins go through the systemic violence through the gap that is created in satisfying the documents that are desired by the formal institutional world of the state; in another movement, this gap is also further increased by the same institutions. Children and adults, are not provided the certifications that are becoming essential for becoming part of the city. In our field, we found children who are refused entry into the school and transfer certificate or the last passed class certificate is not being provided to them. Arbitrary rules around their procurement not only give rise to petty sovereigns, as decrees take the form of law; this has real consequences on the lives that are lived by the margins.

It is essential for policy to allow for flexibility in these legible practices of the state. This is one important way through which policy can be informed by the informal world of the margins. These lives for any nourishment and for making them to be part of the city, instead of new documentation, certain relaxation around documentation will be beneficial. The space of education can be one from where these beginnings can be made.