

Memorising no more: Redefining Education in cities

Abstract:

Over the last year, India has borne extreme consequences of the great divide between poverty and prerogative, amidst a deft virus unleashing all kinds of irrational fears in general public. While the spread of virus was initially credited to the affluent people stepping down, with infection, from an international trip, it was always the “have-nots” who were found to be forcefully moving across states on foot, by the institutional violence made unprecedentedly obvious. The children, as a vulnerable group, felt the destruction closer than most others—losing parents, dining on footpaths in mass labour migrations, and totally disconnecting from schools. Education, then, appears as a privilege available only to those who have access to mobile phones, and no other circumstantial woes to take care of. On an intersection of receiving vulnerable outcomes is a sub-group of impoverished, adolescent girls living in Central Delhi slums, who not only stop receiving school education as their constitutional right, but also battle for space and time in the patriarchal backdrop of North India. This paper examines their fate, as oral narratives are combined with the visual representation of other similar children published across channels of mass media, and analyses the complication in interpreting Education as the most/sole important aspect of a child’s life. It ranks low on the priority list of children and their parents, as bright futures and hope wistfully disappear in the chaotic hustles of being able to live past the present day. Restructuration is expected. Cities, in particularly departing from towns and villages, promise space for social mobility on the basis of opportunity and merit, while attracting a lot of underprivileged groups like the daily-wage workers (rickshaw-pullers, masons) to the national capital. It becomes crucial, then, to figure whether learning in cities has more demerits attached to it, than being advantageous as it is often imagined to be. New immediate memory is created in the “new normal”, rummaging through the undisrupted past of urban lived experience.

Keywords: COVID-19, Education, Gender, Labour migration, Urbanism

1. Introduction

A city undergoes lifelike changes when it's expected to face anomalies that don't run parallel to the order established over years. It reacts, in the most gruesome ways for those who weren't, in fact, a priority even before the pressures abound. The urban space, which promises progress and/or sustenance by design, fails to provide for its people; the infrastructure demands a rethought and protrudes the inherent shortcomings of the existing system. This upheaval is marked by momentary reactions from those who were always struggling to sit on the border: the poor. Last year, casual laborers, placed at the bottom of socio-economic hierarchies, started packing their bags from all major Indian cities to move back to where they (or their previous generations) came from. The channels of mass media were soon flooded with sights of deprivation, of starving men traveling across state borders, accompanied by dependent women and children. Survival became a grave necessity. And inequality floated up, naked, to the surface, again.

The protocol dictated children, and adults, to be confined at homes, and this necessitated a vigilance that they could earlier escape. Learning was restricted, and so was play. It held up the constraint that the urban design inherently accounted for—routine activities being mediated by physical interaction alone. And this is a consequence of barriers related to accessibility of technology, which is itself a function of economic class. It produces (and reproduces) difference, that troubles the eye only if these stories manage to gain and retain popularity in social circles. The wildest threat to human existence is to be unnoticed in misery. Nonetheless, it is assumed that this almost never bothers the children; after all, they have no responsibilities. To add to this, patriarchy is often glorified to have aggravated the situation for just the older men in the families, keeping women and children at bay. But, the truth of vulnerability is actually realized in the assessment of roles in extraordinary circumstances: blocking entry to financial responsibility (and therefore resources) is but a superficial guard to protecting the dominant status, primarily in terms of decision-making for the whole unit. The entitlement often comes from the innate male privilege, observed in (North) India, so the power generation is somewhat cyclical—it widens the gap for those who shall remain pregnable regardless of where they are placed in class hierarchies.

This paper examines the changing relationship of a city's structures to its people, while focusing on whether Education is affected during extraordinary times, like the Covid-19 pandemic. Once that has been established, we move to assess what Education encompasses in urban spheres, and whether the "opportunity to learn" is equitable even when it comes to the 'privileged' national capital. For this purpose, the lived experience of adolescent girls in a slum at Yamuna Bridge, ITO in Delhi, is juxtaposed with how children from disadvantaged groups are portrayed in media to provide a public lens to problems on ground. Finally, there is an attempt to read how public policy views the whole situation, to analyze if the change is expected at the fundamental level on how Education is delivered to school-goers, or if the structured structure still continues to remain formidably unshaken.

2. *The Chatty Girls at Yamuna Bridge: Living the reality*

2.1 The site: The slums are located right on the banks of river Yamuna, on the side of East Delhi. A walk down the gentle slope from the bridge takes you to the upper area, dominated by the shanties of Muslim families on the right, most of whom rear goats for supplying meat and also keep horses for being used in Hindu marriage processions (*baaraat*). As one moves ahead, a small temple is found, with figurines of multiple Hindu Gods facing a low-lying field. Right opposite the temple, goes a dusty lane that has croplands on both sides. A 2-minute-walk across this path follows into another group of shacks on the left, occupied by Hindu families who are primarily engaged in farm labor, or (seasonally) being employed as daily-wage earners on construction sites. The office of the contractor who leases out these spaces to families is located in front of this block. The residents pay an additional 400-500 rupees for the electricity supplied illegally to their homes, as in most Indian slums. The clean, drinkable water is only available at Laxmi Nagar, which is about 4 kilometers away; usually, the women would start on foot in the afternoon, after getting done with the morning chores, with all kinds of vessels for this journey to carry back loads of water, in both hands and placed on their heads, for daily usage. There is a single toilet cabin, which isn't supplied with any water, for the 20-25 families living in this block. So, the dump is still taken in the fields, even after the impressive promotion of *Swachh Bharat Abhiyaan* (Clean India Drive) as a national campaign in the recent years. What is also ironic is the fact that this miserable state of urban poverty is located less than 2 kilometers away from ITO's IP Estate, which is home

to premier government workspaces like the Delhi Secretariat, Vikas Bhawan, Delhi Police Headquarters, and Indian Medical Association, along with significant educational institutions like the famous School of Planning and Architecture, and the Indian Institute of Public Administration.

The makeshift school, in what seems like a tiny patch of barren land with marigold cultivated on both sides, is also located here. Ek Raah Trust² operates classes here on almost all days of the week, simultaneously for adolescents and younger children categorized as two groups by a meter's distance, to supplement what is being taught at school while still focusing on the fundamental things like word-formation and arithmetic, the learning levels of which are extremely poor across the age groups. Founder, Kalpana Singh, expresses concern over the State's no-detention policy, adopted by schools to promote kids "without fail" till middle school, which "hampers their learning abilities in the long-run, when students of Class 9 and 10 are not even able to read passages (in both Hindi and English) or solve questions of single-digit arithmetic operations." Other than Ek Raah, a bunch of other tutors have also started giving regular tuitions, mainly to get through the work required for school, for a marginal amount of 50-100 bucks, which is still unaffordable for the parents. And some of them are also concerned about the safety of their daughters to go for learning, on foot or bus, to Laxmi Nagar. The cost of having two less hands, for cooking and cleaning at home, is also something the parents constantly grapple with, when it comes to their daughters, who are all destined to get married in near future.

2.2 Narratives: During our first meeting in February 2021, the group of 25 odd girls were too shy to interact with me—the only male instructor in a group of three, which had been selected to discuss about the various aspects of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) with them, through the use of visual tools (mainly, comics and videos). Surely, the second day was going to get more awkward, since it was dedicated to the topic of menstruation. If there was any respite for my fear, it was the interactive games meant to break the ice for them, to eventually ask us any doubts they had about their changing bodies or the changing environment around them. We finally became really comfortable over the next two days, for the girls to share personal anecdotes of the year gone by, even without asking. The fact that these weren't the regular classes at school did take a lot of effort for my colleagues to manage a third of the actual number of girls in the

neighborhood to attend our sessions. They had to get signatures of the parents on the consent forms, which was mammoth task. One of the parents told them, “*Ladka hota toh bhej dete, ladki toh na jaayegi ye sab seekhne*” (We would have sent our kid for such sessions, if they were a boy... girls aren’t meant to learn all this). This, and other such statements, is rooted in the deep sense of control on women’s bodies in the country, and also the fact that anything to do with sex isn’t even remotely tolerable to be discussed in public, even if it carried high health risks. Harassment is almost always swept under the carpet for similar reasons, and to evade any potential legal trouble for the victim’s family. In an interview later, 13-year-old Reema¹ revealed that she could talk about an incident of guys following her after school a few years ago only with her mother, when the father was out for work, so that there wasn’t the slightest chance of him knowing about this, or he might make her quit school altogether. Her mother, too, shushed her down, and Reema was just relieved that the stalkers stopped after three (whole) weeks. When asked why she didn’t tell any teacher at school about this, she said that it was only for the best that she didn’t, or the boys would have done something worse to her. She was so convinced about the consequences of her actions, because she wasn’t the first/only one at school who had faced this. These things were often discussed within the groups of girls in her class, she confirmed—it happened very often. Senior girls, too, would tell her about similar incidents, if they walked back home together.

During the pandemic, there has been a shift in the role of girls at home—they are expected to do more work, even when the schedule of online classes coincides with the one, they followed in the physical mode of learning. Mobile phones, which are the sole medium of instruction as not even one of them has laptops or bigger screens, have become a luxury. Usually, four to five of them share a phone, as almost all of them are enrolled in the same government school. Boys are given priority in the family, over their sisters who are called upon to help their mothers in the field or at home. Nazneen¹, a 12-year-old, has to manage her two younger sisters and one brother at home while the parents are away for work. She wasn’t expected to do all this, when she would go to school; of course, helping her mother in cooking and washing clothes was still a part of her day, but the responsibilities have suddenly increased now. She burst out, to our surprise, in one of the meetings expressing her discontent over the fact that she won’t be able to maintain her rank in Class 6 because of all this. Clearly, the pandemic introduced new challenges for her, where she naturally

has no time for even her homework. Her parents can't afford to send all the four children to tuition classes, so they decided to let the two elder ones sit out. She was, in fact, scolded by her math teacher, who also taught her in Grade 5, about her deteriorating performance, but Nazneen was reticent, as a "mature adult, to endure the stress at home".

Unlike Nazneen, contrary to our initial belief, a whole lot of other girls were too happy about getting locked down at home, or just out of school. While they miss the breaks where they could jibber-jabber on all things under the Sun, not one of these misses the classes in school. "They were terrible", screamed one, when asked in a group. "Teacher *pakaati thi. Ab humein tension nahi hai*" (the teacher(s) would stultify us, we are happier now), said the other. Not only them, but the parents, too, believe that school wasn't the best place for these girls. Rajni's¹ mother, who was drying out the clothes she just washed, right next to the place where we took our sessions, overheard what the girls were saying, and said, "*Wahaan bhi kahan padhte the. Achha hi hai ghar mein haath bataayengi*" (It's not like these girls studied at school. It's actually better to have them at home to help with chores), while the girls giggled. It seems like this wasn't the first time they were hearing such a cold remark from the parents—they had accepted that they will never be great at school, to the extent that they could now laugh about it, and probably even leave it right away if the choice was theirs to make. So, the parents weren't the only ones responsible for their educational journeys ending after Class 12 (if not before); they wanted it more than their parents did, and saw no point in even trying hard to pass throughout the academic calendar. One of the female colleagues, a graduate from Miranda House, University of Delhi, couldn't control but ask them if they never wanted to work and have an independent life. To her surprise, a stern "No" was the unanimous answer. The yeses, even if there were any, may have faded out in what was one of the loudest replies we ever got in our interactions with the group.

Regardless of gender bias, the number of smartphones is too less, and none of them attend online video lectures, because the data is expensive. Instead, the schools have started sending them worksheets for homework, with instructions laid out on it, for them to send back photos for assessment; the same method is used for conducting mid-semester and end-semester tests. It's easier for them to pass an exam now, because they can just sit with each other and write the papers, or just write exactly whatever is written in the books. This has made them lose interest in whatever they are supposed to read and understand.

Comprehension requires motivation, which they don't have anymore because they will get answers to the standardized questions their teacher sends them for evaluation by one way or another. Most of them are just called to the coaching center when the exam begins, and the answers are either dictated by their tutors, or already written on paper for saving time, narrates Anuradha¹, one of tuition-goers, as she grins realizing still that this is (morally) “wrong”.

One of the other obstacles that the students here faced, more now than ever, are the physical spaces. While there are fields and grounds to run around, play, and interact, there's no space at home to concentrate. The sizes of their homes are extremely small, only to provide them space to sleep, no matter the family size. The kids don't have a dedicated place to read, learn or attend classes. They come out in this open space, where Ek Raah tutors, but it isn't enough, and can be completely useless in summer days when the scorching heat makes it impossible to do anything. In the shared courtyard of a complex of 6-7 houses, right next to this open space, though, the tree provides shade to a cot laid down by one of the households for at least a few kids to sit on it and study. One worn-out carpet and a plastic sheet are also used for the same purpose, when it isn't the time for tuitions. 10-year-old Saama's¹ problem isn't with where she would sit to study, though—it's the same uncomfortable surface she eats and sleeps on. It's the nosy mother, who doesn't give her much space to just be, that vexes her. She says, “*Mummy peechha hi nahi chhodti. Ek second ke liye khaali dekhti hai, toh ya padhaani ko lekar taane maarti hai ya sabji katwaa leti hai, nahi toh kapde dhoti hu. Gadhi bann gayi hu. Ab shaam ko Mani (a domesticated dog) ke saath bhi nahi khel paati*” (Mother doesn't leave me alone for a second. She constantly taunts me for [not]studying, makes me chop vegetables or wash clothes... I work like donkeys. Doesn't even let me play with Mani.) The constant presence of parents around has regimented things for children; they seem to have lost a considerable amount of control on their own lives. A few conversations that followed in the coming days pointed to the time after school, in the afternoon before they were off to the coaching center, that was the most important to them—they would just walk leisurely, eat something off the stalls outside school, and discuss what their favorite characters in soap operas did in the last night's episode. Evenings, after it was dark, soon after they were back from Laxmi Nagar, wasn't the time for girls to hang out. It was the time their fathers would be back home, and all children had to be inside before they arrived. So,

now, they have bartered the morning classes at school to wander off with each other in the late mornings, after the fathers have left. But they aren't very successful in this pricey act of delinquency, because they are always spotted by somebody from the neighborhood. The surveillance is sustained.

One of the other great dangers that came out during COVID-19, around the infrastructural arrangement of the city, is the lack of information about the pandemic among the people in this community. What the pandemic is, and what it meant for them, was dictated primarily by the employers of these families. They were directed by somebody else to wear masks, which were later distributed by Ek Raah and other organizations working in the area. They weren't tested at all, as a community that resides on fringes of the urban landscape. The essentiality of education about health disasters wasn't made available to them, because they couldn't afford to obtain this information on their own. Organically, when the whole world was asked to not leave their houses, the families here confirm that there was a sense of hysteria about what the whole fuss is about. Food wasn't available for very long. News channels were terrorizing, and it made some families who were not engaged in rendering agricultural labor in the area, to pack their bags and move back home. Now, when the adults were so clueless about whatever was happening, believing that there wasn't a positive end to this, the children were definitely not a part of the decision that could uproot their lives from the city. One of the mothers confessed that they were scared for their life, and also the fact that it was perceived as some form of 'God's wrath on humans for their sins'. So, the only thing they believed could save them were prayers, and not masks, tests or vaccines. They lost a few relatives and neighbors, while they were still processing how to tackle a number of vulnerabilities that they might soon have, no choice over but, to succumb to.

3. *Children in media and public policy: Projecting the reality*

While the families at Yamuna Bridge were struggling to live their lives, there were some similar lives captured by the lens of media and political representatives. One of the most horrifying sites of poor urban planning ever witnessed in the history of India were the mass labor migrations across states. UNICEF published a report in 2021 that explains how children are often left out of the discourse on migrant workers. Whether it was losing jobs for parents in the pandemic or the increased incidence in child trafficking and child

labor—they have gone through it all. The closure of schools is somewhere responsible for this, it points out; the schedules aren't the same, and they are not expected to follow the order of the day when a significant part of their day is now available for more work. Income generation is always a priority for the (ever so) underpaid and illegally-employed children in brick kilns or mass-production industries. They have no idealism for healthcare during these extraordinary circumstances, which makes them more prone to the communicable infection that COVID-19 is known for. The protocol is rarely followed at these sites, since the private sector by its very inherent structure in India is informal. Multiple images of children, in a state of wonderment, floated on the internet, including births being given on the roads, while the migrant labor groups walked miles to reach their safe places.

A report from CRY also corresponds with the fact that a lot of students who are now out of school may never be returning back, and the statistic doesn't only include the ones who have left off with their parents due to migration. A fraction of dropouts are the ones who can't afford to study anymore due to financial and emotional pressures caused during the pandemic. What this report also brings out is the deficiency in nutritional requirements of children who are out of school; While, earlier, the State was responsible for supplying at least one meal in government schools to children from the underprivileged families, now they are just left to meet the ends by themselves. This is aggravated because of the insecurities the pandemic brought about, in the financial systems and crippling even the general lifestyles of people they were anyway struggling to keep up with. There are plenty of children who lost one or both parents during the last year and a half, and have continued to strive for survival. The identification of over 30,000 children who have been either orphaned or abandoned during the period has been presented by NCPCR in front of the Supreme Court, for tallying a number to be included in the list of CNCP (Children in need of care and Protection). Since a large fraction of these children are part of the age group 8-13, the dependence is absolutely left for the State to accommodate. The trauma associated with bearing losses, while jostling through procedures of being compensated, at such a young age is often too scarring to recover from. Amidst all this, Education is not expected to be the least of their priorities.

Economist Jean Dreze's recent survey titled SCHOOL (The School Children's Online and Offline Learning) revealed that no more than 24% students in urban areas were

attending regular classes online, when about 75% of the urban households sampled claimed to have at least one smartphone. Neither the parents were satisfied with the kind of material being supplied for the online learning, nor did the children feel that they have a “conducive environment” to study at home. The parents of children being educated online or offline, felt that the reading abilities and learning capacities of children was going down the drain, and the only stoppage to this tragedy would be the resumption of classes, as they used to be. But, if one were to believe that COVID-19 is the sole factor of decline in learning abilities and literacy levels, they would be mistaken. ASER, a leading organization for educational surveys in India, found a huge learning gap even in 2019 report—the districts didn’t report very great learning outcomes because of infrastructural deficiencies. A methodological flaw in this statistic could be the standardized assessment of skill, which makes students try hard to match up to the required scoring techniques, still measured in discrete numbers. There could be application based arithmetic exams, which generally check the oral abilities of children to respond to word problems of, say, the change they would get from a shopkeeper when they give 20 bucks for an article of Rs. 15, instead of just expecting them to calculate the difference on paper between the numbers 20 and 15. Similarly, too much emphasis in these reports is made towards readings texts, while comprehension of the text isn’t given much importance. Interpretation of pictures could be an alternative to this,

4. Conclusion

From the interaction with adolescent girls at Yamuna Bridge, the factor that strikes a conversation in the future of Education in India is related to their memory of what life was like, before COVID-19. A new sense of imagination is forged when the circumstances aren’t as normal: the negotiations made in the way of adjustment to the ‘new normal’ narrates a tale of the past imbricated on the present unforeseen times. As Foucault points out, (genealogical) knowledge is found in the ruptures of history, as is the case with this pandemic, that brought a paradigmatic shift to how we perceive realities of the systems around us that we often took for granted. The adaptability to what Darwin conveniently calls the “survival of the fittest” (and is actually “survival of the finest/richest”) rings true when the systems collapse: the urban infrastructure fails to accommodate the changing scheme of things. It is, then, that the shortcomings of the

structure are brought out; Education, as a seemingly fair cause for human development demands reassessment.

In the political versions of realities on ground, the theorists/planners often excuse the idea of drastic redevelopments, which can only be thought of once Education itself takes into account essential factors like the information about healthcare, the needs of sanitation and “conducive” space for learning in cities, and the demand for having hybrid models of virtual and physical classes. Plus, the onus of Education lies primarily with the kids, so they must have the intellectual and physical space to breathe and discuss whatever they wish to, by not moralizing/stereotyping what Education is supposed to be, so that they don’t feel therapeutic only by venting out to (Schuetz-ian) strangers, like the facilitators of irregular sessions. There is a lot to yet encompass under the umbrella of Education. The imagination, though, will have to start from the grassroot inspection, because the alternatives, like the ones we usually see, are exclusionary. Inclusion, not just in terms of who reads how, but also the way texts are written is necessary. So that, even in situations where the limits of pre-existing structure don’t match up to the new challenges, Education doesn’t crumble and expose the incompetence, but accepts changes and becomes more stable. For that, the investments will have to be made wisely in the urban infrastructure than can withstand pressures, which can only happen if the cities aren’t accepted easily as the ideal types of living arrangement. Modernity and Urbanization shouldn’t be so imperceptible to change. (displacement and poverty in policy__long and middle term permanent changes – road to welfare – horizons of education – making the household more conducive to it)

Notes

¹Names of the adolescent girls have been changed to preserve confidentiality

²Ek Raah Trust has been designing and building educational programs for a few years now. They mainly provide free tuition here, apart from donating stationery items and books for the 150 children under their ambit. They also partner with organizations like Beyond Eye to generate awareness in the area on various social issues.

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