

Experiencing Education at the Margins of the City: An Ethnographic Exploration of a Basti in Delhi

Urbanisation

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Vijitha Rajan¹, Jyoti Dalal² and Chetan Anand³

Abstract

Through the ethnographic study of urban margins, this article explores the questions of statecraft that involve evoking aesthetic governmentality to ascribe illegalities onto the informalities of the margins. With an aim to understand the lived experiences of children, the article examines the role that education plays in maintaining the unequal urban order, and how it exists as a potent site for exploring the order-making function of the state. This calls for a perspectival shift that does not look at the margins but looks from there, obviating the conventional connotations of being a site of statelessness, chaos and disorder. Located in the anthropology of margins, the present article demonstrates that margins are the site that makes state functioning visible and not its failure. The article draws from our long-term engagement with a *basti* and several state-run schools in South Delhi, where children from the *basti* are enrolled. The article draws from scholarship in urban sociology to examine the site of education and finds how categories of spatial illegality and aesthetic rationality are activated to hone the earlier rational, calculative rationality of the state for its order-making purpose.

Keywords

Education, ethnography, informal settlements, urban sociology

Introduction

The relationship between the city and its margins is fraught with tensions, asymmetries and contradictions. While the city requires the margins for its survival and functioning, it simultaneously engages in its blurring. The space of education is a domain that concretises this hierarchical nature of the city. There is growing empirical evidence that far from countering and challenging social inequalities like class, caste, religion, region and gender, education has instead been reproducing them (Raina, 2020; Ramachandran, 2004). In this context, the urban landscape has become an important site to study the questions of social inequalities

¹ Azim Premji University, Bengaluru, Karnataka, India

² University of Delhi, India

³ Azim Premji University, Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, India

Corresponding author:

Jyoti Dalal, University of Delhi, Delhi 110007, India.

E-mail: jyoti.ihe@gmail.com

and hierarchies in education. Researchers have found that people in urbanised spaces—especially spaces on the margins of the city that struggle with informality and precarity—use education as a means to achieve modernity, meritocracy and equality while reintegrating the same social hierarchies of caste, class, religion, gender and so on, into the modern secular worldview (Deshpande, 2017; Madan, 2017).

The education sector in India has gone through unprecedented changes since the 1990s. On the one hand, education has been linked to rising social and economic aspirations, leading to its increased demand, while on the other hand, it is a part of the order-making function of the state. The promise of education along the lines of aspirations works alongside the biopolitical inertias of the state, bringing to the fore the concerns of ‘quality’ and ‘equality’ (Anand & Dalal, 2022; Sharma, 2021; Velaskar, 2010). This rich debate of prioritising quality over equality is demonstrative of the paradoxical nature of the state where its rights-based welfare avatar is in constant tension with its prevalent biopolitical nature (Dalal, 2021). Margins emerge as an important site where this tension in the paradoxical nature of education becomes visible.

The slums of a city, marked with informalities, hold a peculiar status. They neither stand completely inside the city nor on the outside. They have been classified under the conceptual apparatus of margins, which acts as a border that separates but cannot be defined by the inside–outside binary. Slums are critical for the everyday functioning and sustenance of the city, yet are invisibilised and ignored by the ‘legitimate’ residents of the city. Post the economic liberalisation in India in the 1990s, there has been a widespread movement of labour from rural areas to urban spaces (Bhagat, 2011). The majority of these migrants, especially those involved in temporary forms of migration, work in the unorganised sectors and are badly underpaid (Keshri & Bhagat, 2012; Srivastava, 2019). They do not receive even basic civic services and are thus pushed to the peripheries of urban spaces, making it further important for us to address the question of urban margins.

The demand for education has grown significantly in urban spaces due to rising social and economic aspirations across India’s unequal social landscape. Against this backdrop, this article explores questions of urban marginality and education and focuses on how educational experiences at the margins throw light on the nature of statecraft. Specifically, the article examines how the exclusionary pressures of urban order shape the schooling system, contributing to both creating and sustaining the city’s margins.

The article draws from our long-term engagement with a *basti* and several state-run schools in South Delhi, where children from the *basti* are enrolled. While drawing from earlier research (Dalal & Das, 2019) that explored questions of violence in the space of school, this article unpacks the experience of education for children in the space of *basti*. With an aim to understand the lived experiences of children, the research examined the role that education plays in maintaining the unequal urban order, and how it exists as a potent site of exploration to examine the order-making function of state (Rajan et al., 2023). As part of the study, an informal learning space was created in the *basti*, where researchers worked with and observed children. Ethnographic in spirit, the enquiries explored the inner logic of the field, that is, the forms of life that unfold in the primary state-run schools and the *basti*. The present article draws from conversations over the last seven years with children, parents, teachers, NGO volunteers and other adults at the *basti* and the associated schools.¹

This article is divided in six sections. The first section locates the article in the anthropology of margins that proposes examining the state from the everyday lives of the margins rather than as top-down from state institutions. In this state–margin–city matrix, it becomes important to explore the contours of aesthetic rationality at the site of education with the earlier calculative rationality. The context of the research is traced in the second section, describing the *basti* being studied and the methodological underpinnings of the research. The third, fourth and fifth sections explore the concepts that emerge from the field. In the schools,

children are identified in the space of *basti* fusing the disparaging connotations attached to the physicality of *basti* with their bodies and beings. On the one hand, this obfuscates the earlier prominent markers of discrimination that worked through caste, class and religion, and on the other hand, it gives shape to spatial illegality as the informality of the slum is translated into illegality. This translation is important for the ordering of the state as it plays a crucial role in maintaining the precarious, unequal hierarchical relationship that the city shares with its margins. With spatial illegality, aesthetic rationality emerges as another significant way for urban scholars to understand the functioning of the state. The last section of the article grounds this aestheticisation in the space of education to demonstrate how aesthetic rationality works with calculative rationality for the purposes of ordering.

State, Margins and Aesthetic Rationality

The state has largely been examined as a political organisation from its centre. For it to be understood as an object of ethnographic study is a recent phenomenon (Das & Poole, 2004). There is growing literature that argues for looking at the state in the everyday lives of the people, and within this conceptual apparatus, margins have emerged as a pertinent site of study (see Anand & Dalal, 2022; Das, 2011, 2022; Ghertner, 2017; Gupta, 2012). Conventionally, the margins in their territorial and social nature are recognised through the failure of the state (Das & Poole, 2004). These two strands—state being studied from its centre and state's failure in the margins—complement one another and determine the default common trend in research.

This research breaks away from this convenient, traditional position and tries to look at how the state becomes visible when it is seen bottom-up from the everyday lives of the margins rather than top-down from state institutions. Here, the state as an ethnographic object of study is informed by the gaze from the everyday lives at the margins rather than the gaze from the centre. Talal Asad, in his illuminative essay, gives three ways to understand margins in relation to the state: first, 'as peripheries or territories in which the state has yet to penetrate'; second, as 'spaces, forms, and practices through which the state is continually both experienced and undone through the illegibility of its own practices, documents, and words'; and third as the 'space between bodies, law, and discipline' (Asad, 2004, p. 279). All three categories reveal to us three different aspects of how the state enters into margins and in the everyday lives of the people living there. In slums, which are informal settlements, the presence of the state is different from that in any formal locality. This is visible in the flawed, sub-standard manner in which basic services of water, electricity and cleanliness are provided in slums. The difference can also be seen in the paperwork that is maintained for the houses, where ambiguities are maintained.

In literature, slums have been classified as sites that represent disorder, chaos and statelessness and are seen as being in the margins of the city. For instance, the modern history of 'improvement' schemes in Delhi is deeply connected to both colonial and post-colonial efforts to create sanitised spaces—through initiatives like slum clearance and labelling certain areas as criminal—and to shape urbanised individuals to inhabit these spaces (Srivastava, 2014). The centre-periphery distinction forms a graded terrain in which the presence and absence of the state can be marked. This literature on the anthropology of margins states that the margins are not just sites of statelessness, chaos, and disorder but become the site that reveals the techniques and practices of the state in ordering and governing its population. Thus, the margins become a site to study the order-making function of the state (Anand & Dalal, 2022; Das & Poole, 2004).

The calculative rationality of the state, which is 'enumerating, collecting statistics, and categorising populations', is central to understanding the political economy of urban planning in contemporary times

(Routray, 2022) and is essential not only for its development projects, such as provision of resources, but also for demolitions and surveillance. Here, our thinking of politics constituted categories of rationality, but aesthetics remained unthought of in this process. If the twentieth century was the age of rationality, then the twenty-first century is fast becoming the age of aesthetics. As Asher Ghertner (2015) writes in his book:

Rule by aesthetics is a process of translating broad aesthetic codes into a governing lens for organizing urban space. Land uses that conform to dominant aesthetic codes thus appear as sensible features of the urban landscape, even if they violate the law. In contrast, land uses that defy these codes appear out of place.... In this way, rule by aesthetics sets in place a certain ‘hegemony of form’— what I have been calling a world-class aesthetic in Delhi. (p. 125)

Literature in urban sociology acknowledges the growing relevance of aesthetics to understand urban governance (Ghertner, 2017). Education, when linked to the order-making function of the state through its disciplinary and biopolitical apparatus, has largely grounded itself on questions of calculative rationality as its point of analysis (Anand & Dalal, 2022; Dalal, 2021). It is important that an examination of education processes and practices is informed by the role of the aesthetic dimension in the ordering of our societies. In the examination of state–margin relationship on the axis of education, the present article hopes to demonstrate the role aesthetics plays in the everyday lives of children and how aesthetics is emerging as a category in our education system.

Research Site and Methodology

The *basti* chosen for the current study has a mixed population of 300 households. This is a Jhuggi Jhopri (JJ) *basti* [slum] and is notified. It is in one of the middle-class areas of the city that has government flats. It is physically distinct from the neighbourhood that surrounds it, and a wall separates it from the middle-class colony of government servants. This big wall hides the slum from the outside. The main outer ring road of Delhi and a CNG petrol station border the other side of the slum. The main entrance to the slum is an opening in the wall bordering the government flats. There is also a huge garbage dump right outside the neighbourhood. Despite its dominant physical presence, the location of the slum is such that it faces certain invisibilisation. The labyrinth of streets and the pulsating life within are not visible to the city outside it. The houses are cramped together along small lanes and are of varying quality—some on the outside are better built, while many in the interior are small single rooms with shared toilets or not even that. The public and the private fuse in the space of the slum. This is an informal settlement and has a complex relationship with legality. The informality of the space plays a considerable role in the lives of the children and their relationship with schooling and the city. In this sense, school emerges as one of the important sites that deal with the informality of the slum.

The slum entrance forks into streets divided by caste and religion. One area is seen as Muslim, and the other as Hindu. Mobility of children and adults is restricted across the areas and streets, maintaining strict divisions of caste and religion. The slum is marked by the strong stench of the drain or *naala* that flows through the middle of it. It flows parallel to the main streets and is visible from the houses. Despite being visible and marking the entire slum, it is the Dalit households that are identified with this drain; participants are often referred to them as living close to the drain [*naale ke paas rehta hai*] or in the drain [*naale main rehta hai*].

In terms of jobs, men work as cleaners, guards, masons or drivers. Women work as domestic workers, labourers, cooks and cleaners in parlours, schools and malls. Many have stalls at weekly markets and around the neighbourhood selling vegetables, clothes and other items. A couple of NGOs work in the slum. Children go to nearby state-run or low-fee private schools. A sizeable number of them avail the tuitions provided by NGOs and social workers.

The slum houses various animals—chickens, goats, pigs, caged birds and dogs—which contribute to perceptions of filth and congestion through which marginalised communities and children are often labelled. During the early times of the COVID-19 pandemic, these perceptions were amplified by fears that proximity to animals and living in cramped, unsanitary spaces increased the risk of virus transmission, as was shared by many participants. For the authors, befriending the dogs was a pleasant experience. There were various breeds of dogs in the slum. Taking biscuits for them, interacting with them and discussing them gave us entry into the lives of people in the slum. There was a clear differentiation between street dogs and pedigree ones; while street dogs could be found in the open, pedigree ones were always chained and, in most cases, stayed within the homes of their owners.

The main findings of this article emerge from our sustained and intensive engagement for a period of eight months, from February to September 2022. On average, we made three visits per week to the *basti* in the evening. This is an ethnographic study and relies largely on participant observations. The anchoring and the entry point for us in the *basti* became children and how education unfolds in the space of the margins. While the work is based in the slum, our work specifically focuses on the children with Dalit backgrounds. These are 50 Dalit households in the slum, and most of these children go to the nearby state-run school. With our study objective, we established an informal learning space on a raised platform between the community centre [*baratghar*] and a public toilet. What was otherwise a common space, largely used as a passage to go to the public toilet, acquired a different tempo in the evenings when we visited the space. It was imagined as a space to enable meaningful interactions with community members and children in ways that would directly benefit them. In research contexts where participants are typically treated as objects of study in one-way transactions of data, this space represents a modest attempt to create a reciprocal relationship between researchers and participants.

Coming from the two main streets of the *basti* that has Dalit households, the number of children that came to the learning centre varied from 20 to 30, with an age range of 5–15 years. Sometimes, children also brought their toddler or infant siblings along for us to meet them. While the majority of them were from the Dalit caste (Valmiki caste), there were two Muslim children and three to four children belonging to other backward castes. They studied in classes ranging from preschool to class IX, with the majority of them being in classes III to VI. Except for two girls and one boy who had recently shifted to the state-run school from a low-fee private school, all the children go to the nearby state-run schools.

At the learning space, we helped them with their difficulties in learning, helping them read, write and understand scientific concepts and mathematical questions. We also told them stories and poems and sang with them. We carried storybooks and a lot of drawing and colouring material. Depending on the children's needs and interests for the day, they either studied with us or did their own reading, colouring or drawing. As we walked through the narrow *basti* lanes, with our bags of stationery and books, we found children following us, shouting out the names of their friends, saying *aaaja, didi, bhaiya aa gaye* [Come, they are here]. They were full of excitement, leaving behind whatever work they were doing or negotiating with their parents about the same, who would also be keen on having their children at the learning space.

The standard ethical guidelines have been followed in the research. Their parents or adult guardians gave their consent before any form of engagement. Right from the beginning, the adults were keen on sending their children to the learning space. This usually had the moral, ameliorative agenda that is

commonly associated with education, as they would tell us to modify and civilise them [*inko sudhaar do*] by giving them manners [*achi harkatein karein ye*] and taking care of their studies [*inhe padha do*].

During this time spent at the learning centre, we also had conversations with the parents of these children, who often came to talk about their children and their lives. The space, by virtue of being accessed by many people of the *basti*, also provided us moments of candid conversations with other adults living there.

Identification with the Place Image

The children of the *basti* went to neighbouring state-run primary schools or low-fee private schools. In some of our interactions with the schoolteachers, what emerged was a negative attitude towards the *basti*, that is, the place image. These adults—largely from the formal world of the city—call them *basti ke bachche* [children from *basti*]. Pronouns like *yahan ke* [from there] and *ye* [they] were often used pejoratively to address them. The differences of caste, class and religion are obfuscated as they are seen as homogeneous. This is similar to findings by similar studies on the sociology of education in India (Dalal, 2014, 2015; Iyer, 2013; Rajan, 2022; Sharma, 2021; Yunus, 2022). This dissolution of the differences amongst the children is not neutral, as space emerges as an important category that calls for examination. The physical markers of space are attributed to the children. They are seen as the carriers of the filth, mess and chaos associated with the *basti*. Dissociation from it becomes difficult, giving rise to the marker of the spatial identity.

The *basti* is the site of numerous NGO activities and tuition centres. For instance, MA Social Work students, at the time of their internships, spend a few hours teaching children outside the park adjacent to the *basti* a few days a week. Additionally, many NGOs operate at some distance from the *basti* where children go after school. Schoolteachers and social workers generally maintain a certain distance from the children, as cultural and class differences between the teachers and the children are evident through remarks about hygiene, beauty, order and behaviour. The teachers are largely unconscious of the caste, class and spatial distinctions they are making, and the blame for any shortcomings is often placed on the child, their cultural background or parents. Consequently, the differences between the middle-class values of the teachers and the cultural background of the child are perceived as a lack on the child's part. Furthermore, caste, class and religious distinctions are obfuscated by the marker of space. Space emerges as a seemingly neutral marker, which becomes the starting point for other forms of exclusion. For example, one can see caste and class translating into spatial markers in the language of the teachers: '*ye toh suar ke saath rehte hain*' [they (children) live with the pigs], '*pura parivar ek hi kamre mein rehta hai*' [the whole family lives in one room] or '*inke sab kuch government se free milta hai fir bhi nahin padte*' [they get everything free from the government but still they don't study]. These remarks hide the teachers' caste and class bias behind language that signifies the spatial identity of the child. The representation of a slum and its location in the city has legitimacy in the discourse of teachers, and often spatial markers replace caste and class markers as a result. The city functions on this discourse of spatiality, which also intersects with the legal–illegal continuum and is used to maintain a precarious urban order. Emerging from the work of urban sociologists like Amita Baviskar (2020), Asher Ghertner (2015), Sanjay Srivastava (2014), and Gautam Bhan (2016), one can understand how space has become the marker with which the city maintains its inequalities.

Instead of identifying with the school or the educational space, children are negatively identified with the spaces that they live in (Reay, 2007). These spaces form the ecosystems that are interwoven with the lives of children and are explicitly referred to by the teachers, NGO workers or tutors as the marker of

an undesirable identity—one that must be denigrated and tamed at the site of education. This shows how caste, class and religion are strongly anchored on the spatial demarcations of the city.

The ‘bourgeois gaze’ (Baviskar, 2020) that pushes the working class to the peripheries by using the categories of order, hygiene and beauty is active in the space of the school and has found its way in the language of the *basti* too. Teachers with their middle-class sensibilities described the lives of the children as crowded, dirty and unhygienic. At school, children are constantly reminded of their failing backgrounds. This identification based on place image translates into spatial illegality where the spaces children come from are considered unwanted and are even blamed for marring the beautiful, formal, clean and orderly world of the school and, as an extension, of the city. The spaces of the city these children come from are considered illegal in the larger sensibilities of the dominant middle class. These sensibilities are anchored in the informal category of appearance. Hence, this aesthetic rationality of ‘how things appear’ governs the rationality with which schools discipline their children, and through them bring order among the larger population.

This aesthetic governmentality is so deeply entrenched in the psyche that the children of the *basti* also identify with the sensibilities that demarcate the boundaries between the city and the slum. Children themselves exhibit discriminatory attitudes, often citing poor hygiene and sanitation practices of their peers. For instance, they might say that someone in their group does not take a bath or that they spend time in drains or with animals, using phrases such as ‘*ye toh naale mein pada rehta haii*’ [he spends time in the drain] or ‘*ye toh suar ke saath khelta hai*’ [he plays with the pigs]. In one case, we observed discrimination against a child whose father was responsible for cleaning the community toilet located within the *basti*. His family lived within the complex of the community toilets, and the other children refused to interact with them, making disparaging comments about his background and hygiene. When we spoke to the child’s father, he explained that even within the Dalit community, there was discrimination against those who cleaned toilets, and the rest of the community did not want his child to mingle with them. The father had to leave his job at a petrol pump during the pandemic. His Dalit identity made it difficult for him to find jobs easily, and eventually, he had to take up toilet cleaning. He also struggled with alcohol addiction, from which he recovered with the help of his wife. He saw education as a means for his son to overcome their caste and class background. However, he also recognised that the claims of equality in education were often unrealistic and that his son would need to find alternative ways to integrate into the community.

The next section will demonstrate how this identification and fusion with the place image translates into illegality. The informal nature of the space takes the shape of illegality, and it is this illegality within which inhabitants of the slum are seen by the formal spaces of education, and by other actors from the formal spaces of the city.

Spatial Illegality

The morality of governance based on the scientific rationality of Foucault (1982, 1990) is strongly anchored in the aesthetic categories. Both scientific rationality and the aestheticisation that is evoked in the space of the school, NGOs and the *basti* make the transition from the identification based on this informal place image to ‘spatial illegality’. The illegality, abnormality and aberration that seem to be associated with low-income urban settlements vis-à-vis the city, as is demonstrated in the work of urban scholars (Baviskar, 2020; Bhan, 2016; Srivastava, 2014), pass over to the children in the space of education. Bhan (2016), while tracing the evictions, notes the rising salience of the category of ‘spatial

illegality' that has obfuscated the categories of caste and class in understanding one's access to citizenship that goes beyond the simple liberal understanding of the haves and have-nots. He uses the logic of spatial illegality to demonstrate how it mediates contemporary urban citizenship. By drawing from this idea of 'spatial illegality', the present research points out how in the site of education, the 'place image' is translated into this spatial illegality, which then legitimises the discriminatory axis that maintains the urban order.

The informal 'translates' into illegal giving shape to spatial illegality, as appearance becomes predominant in the present governance. Education plays an important role in this shift as the earlier rule-based rationality is giving way to aesthetic governance, and this can be seen in education too. If the discourse of the city, as well as the legal framework, looks at the populations of the settlements as 'encroachers' or as a burden on the state and the city (Bhan, 2016), a similar pejorative attitude is passed on to children in schools and other educational spaces. Their unwanted, undesirable bodies are seen to be a burden on the state and are seen as corrupting and contaminating the space of schooling. Like the body of the encroacher, the body of the child from the margins is despised and seen to have the potential to contaminate their surroundings. There is a patronising approach towards children and their families, indicative in statements like these by the teachers at government schools and even by NGO volunteers occasionally: 'How they come to school only for food'; 'They have completely spoilt the atmosphere of the school'; 'Like their parents they have to become thieves only' and 'From the filthy basti emerges these filthy bodies'. These statements indicate a worldview in which the children and their families are seen not only as freeloaders who do not deserve the benefits of the state but also as unscrupulous elements of society. In contrast, teachers and NGO volunteers posit themselves as guardians and well-wishers of the city. Their bourgeois gaze sees themselves as honest citizens in contrast to the dirty, abominable presence of margins that have encroached their neat, orderly, formal city. To use Agamben's (1998) language, those at the margins then appear as bare bodies for the state and for the larger city, which can be disposed of (Anand & Dalal, 2022). The matrix of invisibility is such that they have to be present, yet not seen. A slum is politically abandoned, a 'part with no part' (Ghertner, 2015, p. 17), where it is a part of the city but is simultaneously perceived as not belonging to it.

The state's presence in the slum is not through its formal, legal framework but through documentation (such as PAN card and Aadhaar card) and through the decrees of various state actors, such as teachers, police officers and school administration. We encountered more than one case where a child was expelled from school without any formal, official letter and with no mechanism for listening to parents' grievances. This has been worsened by the school's refusal to even give transfer certificates to these expelled students, making it impossible for them to secure admission in another school. Schools have also violated the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (2009) by denying admission to children, citing improper documentation. There has been no formal, written procedure in which these acts unfold, making it difficult for any kind of redressal. Parents have informed us that they are aware of the incorrect rules that teachers enforce but cannot question them because teachers can make the child's life terrible at school. This teacher-parent relationship is consistent with how people in the slum interact with other state functionaries like police officers or government offices.

Children of the *basti* are fascinated with jobs like police officers, army personnel and teachers, as they represent the state's authority to them. Simultaneously, these jobs are viewed as powerful because children see their parents and other adults bend to the arbitrary demands of these officials. For instance, a child once told us that '*policewale ki baat sab sunte hain*' [everyone listens to the police officer]. The informality of the slum often takes the shape of illegality, not because people living in the slum know that what they are doing is illegal, but because they understand that they can be abandoned by the law if

they do not comply with the decrees of the state, which are given by petty officials. This blurs the distinction between legality and illegality, where illegality becomes an extension of the legal itself.

To understand the state's relationship with people at the margins of the city, Butler's (2004) notion of 'petty sovereigns' can be deployed to comprehend the relationship that people have with the state's representatives. These officials may not hold senior positions in the state's functioning, but they can come to hold sovereign-like power over the lives of people in certain contexts. What must be noticed here is that the arbitrary decrees of the school administration or other state representatives also fall within the force of law. Even though many of the decisions by these officials are entirely illegal, they come to the people of the slum with the power of the law. Agamben (2008) distinguishes between the force of law and the content of law and argues that under certain exceptional circumstances, the force of law separates itself from the content of the law. In that case, any decree from any bureaucratic official takes the form of law. In this light, one finds petty sovereigns emerging. This matrix constructs the affinity between informality and illegality, producing the category of spatial illegality.

What is hidden in the arbitrary decrees of the bureaucratic officials is the ideological fervour that makes the lives of the children illegal for the state, and by extension, the city. This becomes evident in the language used by schoolteachers and school administration. For example, we have been told by several children how schoolteachers tell them that if a child has not bathed, they will not be allowed on school trips and that they will fail. Such arbitrary requirements are often set by the teacher. Parents have been told to take their child out of school if the child is difficult to manage or has some physical or mental challenges (as perceived by the teachers). We were informed by a parent of a child coming to the learning centre who had an eye defect that the schoolteachers consistently pressured him to take his child out of school as they felt he was not fit to study there. The parent was a cleaner at the community toilet and thus faced discrimination both at the school and within the *basti*. Such decrees, even if not enforced, structure the lives in the *basti* on an everyday level, and law in these spaces takes a very different texture and form. Law comes to mean arbitrary decisions taken by certain officials that need to be negotiated on an everyday level.

Hence, the informal status of the slum translates into illegality in the everyday life of children and other inhabitants. Instead of questioning this transition, the education apparatus plays an important role in maintaining the precarious urban order. This section has also explained how state functions in the space of slum through decrees, and not formal, legal laws, which are deployed by low-rank officials exercising sovereign control over the lives of people. Their de facto authority has consequential impacts on the lives of children and their families in the slum. The next section will demonstrate how the informal lives of margins get translated into illegal lives, and in this transition, the bourgeois gaze of the city capitalises on the aesthetic dimension.

Aestheticisation of Education

Appearance has emerged as a governing factor in the way education unfolds for the children of slum. In schools, there is a constant concern around the look of schoolwork, copies, classrooms and so on. This aspect is prioritised during the frequent visits made by school inspectors. Ignoring the lived realities of children, how things appear to the external gaze is given importance.

In our research, we found that many of the binaries plaguing our education system today function as an aesthetic code that legitimises certain education practices and delegitimises others. The teaching approaches

that children at the margins encounter range from forms of rational techniques like rote memorisation to aesthetic codes that separate '*achha bacha*' [good child] from '*ganda bacha*' [bad child].

The intersection of the margins and the city in the context of education is characterised by various aesthetic categories, which is where the danger of people viewing the 'other' as uncivilised is evident. The people from marginalised areas are often labelled as unhygienic, deviant and even sexually deviant. In one interview, a teacher stated: 'These children do dirty things in the toilet. They engage with such practices because they are brought up in one room, their whole family sleeps in one room'. This information was likely shared to shock us and to elicit empathy for the biases of the teachers towards the children. The aesthetic categories of hygiene, beauty and order have already been discussed, but a new shade of this aesthetic worldview is seen when schoolteachers draw an affinity between the slum and crime. Some teachers overtly or covertly express their bias that these children from the slums are closer to a life of crime. This sentiment, often shared by teachers in our engagements with them, becomes further evident when something gets stolen in the school, and teachers blame it on the children from the *basti*, saying, 'These children are like this only'.

This aestheticisation is also internalised by children. In our learning centre, one of the distinctions that children made among themselves is handwriting. Whether a child could read what they have written becomes secondary, and the focus is on how beautifully the letters were written. In the learning centre, they asked us: 'How well have we written? Is it beautiful or not?'. The same was seen with drawing. Instead of expressing their thoughts and ideas, the attempt leaned towards beautiful drawing—'See, isn't this beautiful?' the children often asked. This led them to internalise their failure at a very young age. Many have already given up on drawing saying, 'I cannot make beautiful things; I do not know how to draw'. Children also warned us to be careful while being in *basti* and even take care of our belongings to protect them.

This also extends to the kind of body that is approved in the public sphere. In the learning centre, the children guarded each other's behaviour as well as posture. How they should sit and talk in front of us seemed to be a concern. Seeing us as legitimate members of the city, they tried to conform to the approved aesthetics. Ghertner (2015) observes how people at the margins try to become a part of the city and to feel a sense of belonging by internalising the discourse of the city and its categories. However, these are inherently exclusionary towards those living in the margins, in this case, the slums. As a result, speech is structured in a manner that excludes the speaker and creates internal divisions within the *basti* itself. For example, children feel compelled to adopt a language that allows them to distance themselves from slum life and disassociate themselves from it. They develop a sense of detachment from the slum and also feel the need to morally police each other.

Concluding Thoughts

This article contributes to the scholarship about the city–margin relationship as navigated through education within the unequal space of the city. In the educational space, the compulsion of the city to distance and to invisibilise its margins can be traced. By rendering those at the margins invisible, the statecraft works through educational practices and aesthetic governmentality in maintaining the order-making function of the state. Aesthetic rationality is sustained by 'how things appear', and the aesthetics that governs the rationality becomes the foundation through which schools discipline children and order the larger population. The education apparatus also maintains the precarious of the informal–illegal continuum and allows for arbitrary legal actions to negatively impact children from the *basti*. The case

presented in this article shows the strong need to keep the children's lives separate in the institution of schooling (in this case) when it comes into contact with the margins of the city. Education stands at an inflectional point in relation to the state where, on the one the hand, it is tied to ideals of citizenship and the becoming of a nation, and, on the other hand, it finds continuity with the disciplinary and aestheticising ends of the state.

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ORCID iD

Jyoti Dalal  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0502-3688>

Note

1. The two research projects that have facilitated our engagement with children of the *basti* are Dalal and Das (2019) and Rajan, Dalal and Anand (2023).

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