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Research Article

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"This is not what I thought my life would be": Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Girls' Education in an Unauthorised Colony in Delhi

Abstract

This paper engages with the multiple and myriad consequences of school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic on the education of girls in an unauthorised neighbourhood in Delhi. Mostly first-generation learners in their families, these girls have already had precarious educational journeys given their location in a neighbourhood with structural disadvantages in education and their own poor economic and social capital. This paper shows the various negative impacts on their education following the first school closure in 2020 until 2023, when the study that this paper is drawn from was concluded. Apart from what is largely being looked at as learning loss, this paper shows the many ramifications of school closures—quitting education, early marriages, and shifting of aspirations—for these young girls. I argue that the pandemic has once again raised concerns for the growing disparities in education for the disadvantaged, especially girls, and created new forms of marginalities in education that can be addressed by strengthening the public education system on which they largely depend.

Keywords: Gender, school education, urban marginality, aspirations, pandemic

Introduction

This paper is based on a study that was carried out between 2021 and 2023 to explore the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the education of girls between 14–18 years in one of the largest unauthorised neighbourhoods in Delhi. The pandemic-induced lockdowns and subsequent closure of schools over 600 days in the national capital created multiple forms of

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exclusions within education and exacerbated existing ones.[1] Specific to this is the education of girls from disadvantaged backgrounds for who access to schools has historically been a challenge, mediated by social factors such as caste, class, and religion. Besides access, studies on gender and education in India have focused on the absence on girls from schools, the challenges they face inside classrooms, and other inequities (Manjrekar, 2021; Nambissan, 2005; Ramachandran, 2003). Scholarly interest in the field mostly emerged from affirmative action policies designed by the government in the light of girls' historical exclusion from school. In this context, studies have highlighted male-dominated classrooms, curricular biases, and practices within schools that constrained girls' opportunities despite rising enrolment (see also Manjrekar, 2003; Balagopalan, 2010). Scholars point to how girls were considered passive subjects within schools, reproducing the inequalities and patriarchal constraints that they faced in the larger society (Nambissan, 2005). A common concern has underlined these studies: both young girls and their education remain vulnerable to forces within and outside schools.

Research on gender and the COVID-19 pandemic beginning 2020 has underscored the varied yet profound consequences of school closures on young girls and women, not just in India but also across the world. Developing nations, already reeling under the social and economic repercussions of the pandemic, have reported teaching and learning gaps, dropouts of girls from schools, early marriages and pregnancies, and a wider gender pay gap (see Kundu & Ngalim, 2021; Banerjee, 2020; Alon et al., 2020). A consistent, long-term engagement with girls and their education is lacking within the scholarship on gender, the pandemic, and education, and this paper seeks to fill that gap.

Gender, Crisis, and Education

Limited scholarship on the education of girls in the aftermath of a crisis has pointed to the vulnerabilities they face. Research in this area of enquiry—where a crisis may be social, political, or health-related—highlights that the education of young girls, especially from low-income families, is at a grave risk in such situations. Such investigations rest on theories and empirical studies that demonstrate the multiple ways in which a crisis exacerbates existing gender inequalities and patriarchal norms. My earlier research on the impact of communal violence on the educational lives of adolescent girls reveals that they were the most vulnerable and hidden faces of the crisis. After the 1984 anti-Sikh violence in Delhi, many

[1] Schools were closed for almost 82 weeks in New Delhi starting March 2020 (UN, 2022).

young Sikh girls left schools as they struggled with the loss of home, migration, the death of family members, and increased economic vulnerability. Others faced sexual violence and were forced into early marriages. Within a year or two of the 1984 violence, all girls who were part of the study had quit school. Their lack of education translated into further deprivation—more than 30 years later, they were found to be living in highly vulnerable conditions, facing broken marriages and poverty (Agarwal, 2017).

Demands such as feeding one's family, taking care of siblings, and general gender-centric beliefs means that girls are at a greater risk of losing access to schooling. In otherwise traditionally conservative households or those with financial constraints, research has underscored that parents tend to prefer the education of their sons over their daughters in crisis situations (Sheth & Haeems, 2006). Continuous research has made this point, signalling the vulnerabilities of girls when it comes to education, higher education, and marriage. Budgets are stretched for boys, but girls lack equal opportunities when compared to their siblings.

Other studies that have mapped the immediate impact of crises have highlighted gender as a rarely acknowledged category of structuring and differentiation, especially in the experiences of people belonging to different socio-economic classes (Davies, 2004; Gómez, 2017). In the case of health emergencies, which this paper explores, reports and research point to worsening disparities and discrimination against women. We have been told in the past that young girls, especially in developing economies, have been the worst-affected in terms of literacy. For instance, during and post the Ebola crisis in 2014, a report by Bandiera et al. in Sierra Leone, Africa revealed that out-of-wedlock pregnancy rates for girls aged 12–17 increased by 7.2 per cent. Most of them quit education at the onset of Ebola and nearly all the girls covered in the study never returned to school. It further estimated that 10 million secondary school-aged girls could be out of school following the Ebola pandemic (see Villegas et al., 2021).

These concerns were reflected during the COVID-19 pandemic as well, both in its immediate aftermath and in the months that followed when schools remained closed. I discuss some issues underscored within the enquiries on the pandemic and education. When the pandemic hit, schools and colleges were the first institutions to bear the brunt of unplanned closures. Educational institutions were shut down a couple of weeks before the national lockdown.

Exams were cancelled even as institutions scrambled to find new ways to keep students engaged. The pandemic covered the entire academic session of 2020 and much of 2021 as schools and other educational institutions the world over shifted to an online medium of instruction. Access to technology and the digital divide became the starting point of exclusion from regular education for many. An estimated 60 per cent of students in India go to government schools and belong to the lower and lower-middle classes. Majority of these students are girls. Access to computers, smartphones, and an internet connection is a rarity for them. As classes moved online, numerous reports suggested that many students did not have any internet sources to attend classes. In families with one smartphone, for instance, it was boys' education that was prioritised while many did not have the right living conditions to attend online classes (EPW, 2021; Mishra, 2020; Sinha, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic was experienced differently by people across the social hierarchy (Tilak, 2021). Where parents had better socio-economic capital, their children were able to adapt to online classes and even took private tuition to support their education. For parents from lower and working classes, many of who lost their jobs to the pandemic, the regular education of children could not be accessed. Reports underscore that parents of these social classes shifted their children in large numbers from low-cost or private schools to government institutions and later, to back private or low-fee schools, as they could not continuously afford the fees of private schools (Iftikhar, 2022a; Sharma, 2020; The Wire, 2023). The shifting of students from one school to another within a short period of three years points towards increased educational uncertainty and instability in the lives of disadvantaged students (ASER, 2021). It is also likely that a majority of those students who suffered extensive disadvantages were girls (Pandit, 2022).

Low-cost private schools—the majority of which cater to the lower and working classes—shut shop as an outcome of the COVID-19 pandemic (Baruah, 2020; Iftikhar, 2022b). These schools—largely unrecognised by state education boards—are mostly in neighbourhoods that are categorised as unauthorised. Such schools cater to parents from the working classes who seek better educational and occupational opportunities for their children. Migrants to cities like Delhi, for instance, often make their home in unauthorised neighbourhoods where the rents are cheap. These colonies have increased manifold in the last two decades but remain bereft of any development. Government schools in other areas remain overpopulated. Further, lower- and working-class families are a negligible priority for private enterprises. Hence,

students here mostly have access to low-cost private schools, for whom such colonies are a lucrative market. Bereft of funds and staff even before the pandemic, these schools could not provide online classes to their students or support their teachers, leading to numerous shutdowns and affecting learners whose futures remained unknown.

While the loss of regular schools puts girls at the risk of early marriage and unplanned pregnancy, it also means the loss of the mid-day meal which, in many cases, is the only meal that children from poor families have in a day. School closures have also had tragic consequences. For instance, in June 2020 a 14-year-old girl from a Scheduled Caste (SC) in Kerala died by suicide as she could not attend online classes due to the lack of access to technology. Her father, a daily-wage labourer, could not buy her a mobile phone for her classes (The Wire, 2020; Kumar, 2021). Despite these on-ground realities, school closures continued in India for 19 months. According to a United Nations Children's Fund report citing data from UNESCO, global shutdowns have pushed about 1.5 billion students out of school since March 2020, including 111 million girls in the world's least developed countries (UNESCO, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic lasted three academic sessions. Numerous reports have documented the vulnerability of girls in crisis. There is a need for sustained attention to ascertain the long-drawn impacts of the pandemic on their education.

Participants' Profile

To map the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education, interviews were conducted with 25 female participants aged between 14 and 18 years (see Annexure 1). In 2021 when the first round of interviews was held, the participants were students of Class VIII (6), Class IX (13), Class X (4), and Class XI (2). Most of the girls (19) were studying at the only senior secondary, English medium school in Sompur (name changed), while five among them studied in its Hindi medium section. Three girls were students at government schools located within a radius of four kilometres of Sompur while the three remaining participants studied in private schools within Sompur. These schools were recognised by the CBSE.[2] Among the 25, six belonged to the General Caste category, nine identified as Muslim, and the remaining were from the SC category. The families of all the participants had migrated from either Uttar Pradesh (13) or Bihar (12).

[2] CBSE stands for the Central Board of Secondary Education. See https://www.cbse.gov.in/.

The fathers of the participants largely had low levels of education, with most having studied till middle school (9), secondary school (7), or until the senior secondary level (1). Three fathers were graduates, of which two had studied for a diploma in teacher training and management respectively. The remaining five fathers were non-literate. The mothers of the participants had significantly lower literacy levels with most of them comprising non-literates (10). The remaining mothers had studied until middle school (7), secondary school (5), senior secondary school (2), and graduation (1). There were 44 siblings among the 25 participants, of which three were deceased and four were toddlers. Seven had completed school and were working. Twenty-nine of them were in schools—nine siblings were in private schools (all male) and the remaining 20 were in government schools (13 sisters and 7 brothers). The remaining sibling—the sister of a participant—had married after Class X and dropped out of school.

Most fathers (21) had unfixed-term occupations such as contractors, tailors, masons, electricians, and daily wage workers. Where fathers were graduates (3), two of them held low-level managerial jobs in private companies while the other one took tuition classes from home. Another father had a clerical job in a private company. Most mothers were homemakers (22) and three were self-employed. Of the seven siblings who were working, three were working in private offices, three were electricians, and one was interning as a teacher in a local school.

This paper draws from an intersectional framework of social exclusion, gender, and urban marginality. Social exclusion helps us enquire into issues interconnected with poverty that further leads to other forms of deprivation. Amartya Sen (2000) suggests that the social exclusion framework encompasses other aspects of deprivation—such as in the labour market, education, gender, and in the access to resources—that are available to others who are in a better socio-economic group. An analysis of education that ‘privileges’ the gender lens helps to see the inequalities faced by girls not just in a patriarchal society but also in schools which are part of the larger societal framework (Manjrekar, 2021: 13). This paper further draws from the urban marginality framework that prioritises the privileges or the disadvantages that come with being a part of a certain space (Nambissan, 2017: 301). Urban spaces are highly complex, diversified, and segregated, which further impacts and informs structures of disadvantages and privileges. Its intersection with education leads to the possibility of exploring the heterogeneity in education systems in an urban space and how

differing educational opportunities are available to people in different urban spaces (2017: 299-318). The method that this paper draws from is ethnography which encompasses a range of methods including observation and interviews. Apart from the main participants, interviews were conducted with local NGO members and residents to explore the neighbourhood. The interviews were conducted in Hindi and transcribed to English for analysis. This was a longitudinal study of almost three years wherein I kept returning to the neighbourhood. My observations form a part of the neighbourhood ethnography.

Exploring Sompur: A World Unto Itself

Located on the southern fringes of Delhi, Sompur is a bustling colony of nearly ten lakh people. It is divided into 11 blocks and is spread across an area of roughly nine kilometers. One-fifth of Sompur's population was Muslim at the time of the study, with specific blocks occupied by Muslim residents. Others mainly belonged to the SC category, belonging to states such as Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. While officially categorised as an unauthorised settlement, Sompur is surrounded by some of the most expensive neighbourhoods of the national capital, lined with malls, metro stations, private schools, and hospitals.

Sompur was established around the 1970s in Delhi, although there was no official area designated for this neighbourhood at the time. Agricultural lands of the villages surrounding Sompur were converted into informal homes for migrants who were constructing the infrastructure for the 1982 Asian Games in Delhi. Many stayed on and Sompur grew by at least 50 per cent of its original capacity by 1990. Even then, these homes or Sompur itself were never made a part of Delhi's master plan. In the ensuing decade, with the development of industrial areas around Sompur and extension of the national capital region, Sompur grew spatially but without a formal land plan or recognition by consecutive governments. This is despite the fact that Sompur's population reached around 0.7 million by 2010.

In 2010, the residents formed an association seeking regularisation of the neighbourhood which meant that they sought land ownership rights and the right to approach the municipal corporation of Delhi (MCD) for regular maintenance activities such as water and sewer connections, civic amenities, and road works in the area. Regularisation was yet to be given in 2021, but it had become a poll promise as every party contesting the elections in the national capital promised to bring unauthorised colonies like Sompur under the master plan and grant money for the development of infrastructure. Even the Aam Aadmi Party which

was in power in Delhi from 2015-2025 had promised regularisation to Sompur but in the Delhi Master Plan 2021, the neighbourhood remained excluded from regular water supply and laying additional sewage lines. Despite being an urban settlement that continues to see large-scale migration and countless unregulated construction activities, colonies like Sompur are a far cry from Delhi's planned residential pockets.

Observations from Sompur and interviews with locals and NGOs workers in the area present a grave and complex picture of this neighbourhood. As compared to recognised neighbourhoods around it, the built-up area in Sompur had high density and each lane had haphazardly constructed houses, sometimes raised even beyond the permitted state limit i.e. three floors. Encroachment was common and no action was taken on encroachers whether it was on the only main road that led to the neighbourhood, or within it. Sompur lacked a centralised drainage system that was adequate to meet the needs of the colony. Its houses were lined with open sewage, creating a range of health and environmental issues in the area. Due to its spatial growth, even the natural drains or small water bodies (some of which were marked on the Master Plan of Delhi 2021) no longer existed or had been encroached upon. Garbage, solid waste, and construction material was dumped casually on roads and even in and around the remaining small water bodies. Monsoon brought havoc every year. This is despite the fact that residents struggled for clean water supply every year and had to largely rely on private water providers. Not surprisingly then, Sompur was prone to waterlogging even during non-monsoon months, as any drainage overflow caused near flooding in the area. Residents also pointed to the lack of coordination between the MCD and the forest body—that held some areas in the neighbourhood under its control—leaving them at the mercy of private players, especially where garbage management and sewage cleaning were concerned.

This infrastructural lack also extended to healthcare and education. Especially in education, the colony presented a critical picture. Within Sompur, there existed only two government senior secondary schools (the second one was started in 2023) with different shifts for boys and girls. Among the other state-run schools were two primary schools run by the MCD. There were also eight recognised private schools that charged more than the unrecognised schools. Six of them offered education till Class XII while the other two were till Class VIII. Parents of children studying in the private recognised schools usually held better or regular jobs such as low-level managerial jobs, since their fee ranged between ₹3000–4500 per

month. Most of these schools offered a playground, regular water facilities, computer and science education, and had transportation services at an additional charge.

Dotting the neighbourhood, however, were several low-cost, unrecognised private schools. These schools often operated from buildings with less than five rooms and promised to provide English-medium education to children at low prices. Given the rising aspirations of parents, a large number of students had been attending these schools, leading to their mushrooming in Sompur since 2005. As per an estimate,[3] there were nearly 80 primary, middle, and secondary unrecognised schools in Sompur in 2021, each catering to a minimum of 60 or a maximum of 300 students in different classes. Interviews revealed that the children of parents whose total monthly income ranged between ₹2000–6000 studied in these schools since they charged anything between ₹100–700 as their monthly fee. There was no method that defined such a school's fee structure.

Despite the crumbling infrastructure, the dense population, and the negligible resources, what made Sompur attractive to its residents? What resulted in greater migration to the neighbourhood, as was evident from its growing construction activities and houses? The primary reason was the neighbourhood's accessibility and affordability given its location. Sompur is situated strategically between south Delhi, well-connected to not just different parts of the national capital but also to extended areas such as NOIDA, Faridabad, and Gurgaon. Given its location, the rent in Sompur was low as compared to the neighbourhoods around it, making it attractive to migrants and people from the working classes who could find a place here for as low at ₹5000 per month depending on the lane and the block within the neighbourhood. These aspirations had driven educational markets within Sompur as well, but they were neither sufficient nor enabling for those accessing them.

Life Before the Pandemic: Educational Marginalities

Precarity in education was a way of life for children in Sompur. Most participants had changed schools at least thrice in their educational journey until 2021—when the longitudinal study that this paper is based on began—irrespective of their caste or parents' occupation. Out of the 25 study participants, 15 had started as toddlers in private, informal pre-nursery schools (also called playschools) within Sompur where the fee is around ₹50–100 per month.

[3] Data gathered from www.edudel.nic.in.

Children usually spend 2–3 hours in these schools, learning basic alphabets and numbers. These schools in Sompur are largely unrecognised and do not follow a set curriculum. Hence, they are informal schools and act as initiators to formal education. The remaining ten girls started from one of the three MCD schools in Sompur at the age of around five or older and did not attend any playschool. All 25 girls had joined these MCD schools to start their primary schooling where education is offered till Class V. From Class II onwards, eight girls were admitted to private but unrecognised schools within Sompur. This is because their parents wanted a better education for them and these low-fee private schools seemed to offer an English medium education, uncongested classrooms, and a disciplined student life as compared to the municipal schools.

Interestingly, among all the eight girls who went to these low-fee private schools, either parent had found better work around the same time. It has been seen in research that income is directly linked to educational choices made for children (Gewirtz et al., 1995) and here too, once the parent had a little money to spare, the choice of a low-cost school was made. However, due to the low literacy level of the parents, they were unaware that these schools were unrecognised. After two years in these schools, six of them quit to rejoin the municipal primary school as their parents struggled with finances. The remaining two, whose fathers had better occupations, remained in their low-fee private school till Class V. Due to the precarious nature of the parents' employment in Sompur and their low literacy levels, the education of children was directly linked to these two factors. Parents continuously negotiated and strategised for the education of their children. Where income was a direct factor, parents specifically moved their daughters to the government school even as in a few families, the sons remained in private institutions.

Moreover, due to their low literacy levels and the inability to help their children in their education, parents actively sought private tuition. Shops of unregulated shadow education providers dotted Sompur, and it has been studied elsewhere as well how urban fringes are becoming lucrative zones for shadow education (Nambissan, 2017). All 25 girls, irrespective of other social factors, had been taking tuition since primary school. These were group tuition classes with minimal fees that parents saw as essential to supplement their children's daily education. What this shows is the continuously negotiated existence of students in Sompur and being part of an education and social system that does not fully correspond to their needs.

Beyond Access: Pandemic and Education

This section covers the experiences of the study's participants before and from January 2021 till schools reopened in September of the same year, before they were closed again. During this time, schools often operated in hybrid mode before reopening fully in April 2022. The lockdown was a time of uncertainty and anxiousness for the young participants. They could not grasp the seriousness of the situation until the lockdown was strictly enforced. What was an initial joy at schools being closed turned soon into fear for their future and continuation of education. Sonia[4] (15) reflected: "Our teacher said there is a virus, and schools will be closed for some time. We thought great, that would be fun." No participant heard from their schools or teachers from March 22, 2020 until about two months later as to how and when their schooling would resume. That is when the joy turned to anxiety for them. "I was scared whether school will ever open or not and what will happen next," Sumaiya, 15 years old at the time, reflected.

As decided by the government, all students were promoted to the next class in March 2020 based on an internal evaluation. Many were in the process of taking their final exams when the lockdown was announced. As is the practice, new classes usually start immediately after the final exams in March before breaking for the summer in May for two months. However, no classes were started, as reported by the girls. Despite claims of online education giving a sense of normalcy to the students, schools in Sompur did not shift to online classes for nearly six months beginning March 2020 and none of the participants attending state-run schools had any online classes till September of the same year. Two main reasons for this were that teachers in government schools were not given training to use the digital medium and most students lacked devices to access online classes. Hence, the schools offered worksheets every ten days to all students, which had to be collected from the institution and practiced at home. The worksheets comprised a summary of a textbook chapter and included questions based on the same, which the students had to answer in writing on the same sheet. The completed sheets were not given back to the teachers for checking and students were on their own where their learning was concerned. "I barely would understand anything on the worksheets," reported Falak, a 14-year-old participant.

Online classes were seen as unhelpful by all the participants. The initial happiness on the start of classes was met with many challenges—lack of devices, signal issues, an unhelpful

[4] Names of all research participants have been changed to protect their identity.

environment at home, navigating online technology, and a realisation that they could just log on to the class but miss the teaching entirely. The girls recalled online classes as a time of "*masti*" or fun and later using online resources to clear the exams. "No, I would not understand anything, actually. Everyone was doing *masti*. We would log in and then close camera and listen to music, even chat with each other while the class was going on," reported Shaina, a 15-year-old participant.

Girls in the state-run school had also not received new textbooks and relied on the previous classes' textbooks. Similarly, as is otherwise regular practice in government schools, none of the students were provided with stationery or sanitary napkins, putting an additional financial burden on their parents. The inability to meet the basic demands of students in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic by the state system opened space for non-state actors to fill the void. Nearly a year after the first lockdown, girls in the government schools were provided tablets temporarily by Teach for India (TfI), a CSR initiative whose volunteers regularly replace formal government teachers to take classes. We have extensive literature on how such neoliberal actors are making headway and building new networks in education.[5] The tablets were provided by TfI only for a few months and then they were taken away, as mentioned by the girls. It must be mentioned here that as against the promises made by both the local and the central government to provide extra financial help to disadvantaged students so that they could continue their education during the lockdown, none of the girls received any such help. "I had a TfI tab for two months, but they took it away. TfI teachers only would recharge occasionally, other than that my mother would do the recharge," reported Bulbul, a 16-year-old participant.

The girls also mentioned doing a disproportionate burden of the housework as compared to their male or younger siblings. Lending a hand to their mother was nothing new to either of them even before the pandemic. However, all of them mentioned an increase in their share of household duties during the lockdown. It was expected of them to do this work especially as they were seen "killing time" at home since none of them were going to school. Maira, a 15-year-old participant reported that "my mother used to say school *nahi hai toh* time waste *karne se achaa hai ghar ka kaam sambhal lo*" (my mother would say that since I was not going to the school, it was better to do household chores than waste time).

[5] For more on TFI, see Subramanian (2019).

Fanaa, a 17-year-old participant shared her experience:

> Before the pandemic, *main shaam ka kaam karti thi ghar pe, phir main saare din ka kaam karne lag gayi* (before the pandemic, I used to take care of the evening household chores but afterwards, I started taking care of household chores all through the day. (personal interview, September 2022)

Negotiating with their educational lives was a constant for the girls, as mentioned above. The pandemic exacerbated these constant negotiations. All the girls had to make some sort of sacrifice or miss out on opportunities in order to continue their education. In cases where the girls' fathers lost their jobs, the impact was directly felt on their education. Suma's (15) father, who worked as an electrician, lost work for six months beginning April 2020. She shared that:

> I wanted to go to a school in UP which we call hostel *wala* school (school with a hostel) and we were planning on doing that. Girls are given education and hostel through scholarship. I wanted to go there as my aunt also passed out from that school. So just before Covid my father had taken up regular work in a shop and we were thinking I would join there in Class VIII. After lockdown he had to leave that work and I could not join that school. He only does irregular work now [in 2021] so I continued studying here only. (personal interview, 2021)

To ensure economic sustainability, some girls had to help parents in their manual labour work. Suraiya (15), whose father was a manual leather cutter and lost his job during the pandemic, recalled that her five siblings and mother had to lend a hand to her father to cut enough leather pieces to be able to sell them independently on the market throughout 2020:

> I was sitting idle as I had no means to attend classes. So, we all helped my father, and in the evening, I would go to my friend's house for an hour or so to know what was happening in the class. (personal interview, 2022)

But a difference in class position of the parents (3) shows that because these fathers did not lose their jobs or faced only a marginal hit due to the lockdown, their girls continued to sail through online education. While all three girls had to share their smartphones with their siblings, the issues of access, missing out on classes, or uncertainty about their education was not reported. Their accounts show that at no point did their parents consider cutting down on educational costs, quitting/shifting schools, or involving them in disproportionately high household labour. Anu, 16, a student at a recognised private school in Sompur said that before moving to online classes, teachers would send them recorded videos covering the syllabus. "This was useful as I could study at my own pace. Few months later we moved to regular online classes so there was no educational disruption except that I missed going to the school and meeting my friends."

Additionally, there was learning loss during the pandemic due to the lack of face-to-face teaching. There was no systematic way to assess students' learning as the exams were held online. Recalling the time of these online exams, all the girls acknowledged that they did "not take them seriously" and "copied from online sources" to get through. As teachers had no way to check on each student taking an exam online, for the girls, it was an easy way to clear the exam. "The exam was online, so I cheated using Google," recalled Shaina. "No one was looking so it was easy to cheat," added Deepali, a 15-year-old participant.

Nagma (14), Suraiya, and Suma were not so lucky. They did not have any means of information about either the start of online classes or the ensuing examinations. Nagma, who later quit school, said "*mere paas* phone *nahi that toh mujhe pata nahi chala*" (I did not have a phone, so I did not know about the exams and missed them.)

Another impact of the pandemic and its intersection with gender and urban marginality was seen in the existing dependency on private tuition and its absence for most of the time that schools were closed. Research shows that middle-class families use their economic advantage to gain an educational advantage and one of the ways to ensure this is private tutoring (Gupta, 2022). However, it has also been shown that even working-class parents who cannot choose private schooling invest in private tutoring to offset the perceived educational disadvantages of government schooling (Mousumi & Kusakabe, 2017). For working-class parents in Sompur, tutoring was seen as an important method of not just supplementing school

education but also for forming networks with other parents and tuition teachers in the area to plan their children's futures.

This network was broken during the pandemic, as 24 out of 25 girls did not attend any coaching classes for about a year beginning March 2020. Only Anu, whose father ran a coaching centre himself, continued to study as before. The lack of economic resources, closure of tuition centres, the non-availability of devices, books, and other supplementary materials were the main reasons given for not attending coaching classes. While the role of shadow education in India, the social legitimacy of tutoring services, and its role in reproduction of social and cultural capital—specifically of middle-class parents—has been discussed in academic research (Gupta, 2022), for the purpose of this paper, its role is significant in assessing the long-term impact of the pandemic on the closure of schools and the academic achievement of children.

It appears that the pandemic did not create educational inequalities but exposed existing ones and deepened them over three years. One of the important questions explored in the study that this paper is based on was the reach of private providers and expanding edtech corporations whose businesses skyrocketed during the pandemic. Online edtech platforms saw a huge surge in business both from students and teaching professionals, as schools and colleges remained closed. Edtech platforms used to provide hybrid classes (digital and physical) for competitive exams and were focused on students in tier-II and tier-III cities before the pandemic broke out. Since March 2020, students across age groups have opted to join edtech platforms to get help with their studies and competitive examinations. As per the data available, nearly 10 per cent of schoolteachers left their jobs and joined these platforms during the pandemic due to better salaries, company shares, and flexible work timings (Bansal, 2021). As one such platform registered an inflow of 10 crore students between March 2020 and August 2021, it was being iterated that such edtech platforms could effectively replace the model of the school and bring about some equality in education, at least in terms of access. However, we do not know how many of them continued their subscription. The current crisis of one such platform, BYJU, is a case in point.[6]

[6] BYJU, India's flagship edtech provider, ran into serious financial and legal complications in 2023, raising questions on the future of edtech in India despite a successful run for nearly a decade.

I corroborated these claims with the narratives of the participants from the study. None of the participants had the means to access these EdTech platforms on a regular basis. Neena, a 17-year-old Class IX student said:

> I had heard about edtech corporations providing online classes during the pandemic and was very excited about it. My cousin had told me that using these people even clear government service exams. My classes had not started for six months after the lockdown, so I downloaded one of these apps. But after a few free classes, it was paid. And the fee was ₹3.5 lakh. They used to call everyday talking about its benefits but how could my parents have afforded that? So, I deleted the app. (personal interview, January 2023)

Similar experiences were voiced by other young girls. They appeared to believe that the classes being provided by edtech corporations could supplement their educational losses, exacerbated by school closures and quitting tuition. Hence, the failure to register on these platforms or pay their fee was seen as a loss. “I wish I could see classes on one of these apps,” reflected Tarana (16), one of the study’s participants. “They seem interesting because everyone says they follow a very easy teaching method.”

I would like to tie the experiences of these underprivileged participants with edtech platforms to the discrimination they have faced since the arrival of the private education market in the early 1990s. This market has largely left out a greater section of children who are already out of reach of schools that are now considered the best (Nambissan, 2012). The discourse that the private education market would provide equal opportunity has been debunked in recent years, with a growing number of children from lower economic classes in state-run or unrecognised schools and the rising structural inequalities and new marginalities in education that impact students from vulnerable classes. More children from lower socio-economic classes and minorities in India are likely to access these schools and not private ones, which remain out of reach for them. This sounds similar to edtech corporations and their claims of being “education equalisers” during the COVID-19 pandemic (Jha, 2022). Ironically, they, too, remained out of reach for underprivileged families since they largely work on a profit motive and do not offer access to learning (Cohen, 2022; see also Bhatia, 2024). We are likely to see this deepen in the coming years as inequalities in learning outcomes begin to spiral.

Amid these social, economic, and health difficulties, four participants eventually quit school. By March 2022, they were married and one of them had also taken on work as a domestic worker to fend for her family. Parents' job loss, their own learning loss, anxieties due to the pandemic, uncertainty about the reopening of schools, exclusion from what are seen as newer and better forms of knowledge such as online learning platforms, and isolation from their social and school networks appears to have led to the four girls to drop out of school. Three of them were married within extended families. Hiti had turned 18 while she was in Class XI:

> My family needed help as there was no means of income after the second wave.[7] I had to quit (school) and work as a domestic worker. This is not how I thought my life would be (August, 2022)

In 2023, she planned to take Class XII exams from Open Schooling. The other three minor girls had quit their education, but their younger siblings had rejoined school after they reopened following prolonged closure. This shows that in underprivileged families, once the older sibling quits education and starts earning thus bringing in spare income, the younger ones can study.

Life after Reopening of Schools: Only Learning Loss?

Schools in Delhi reopened in September 2021 for senior classes and later this was followed by other classes. Except for the four girls who quit, 21 girls rejoined school by April 2022, when schools were fully operational. In this section, I discuss some of the significant effects of the pandemic on their education. Even though the girls from their own accounts acknowledged cheating during online exams, all 21 of them reported a significant fall in their grades at an approximate value of 13 per cent. This had a deep psychological impact on them, such as feeling demotivated and disappointed about their education. Nagma recalls that "my marks in 7th were 81 per cent and then in 8th they were 52 per cent. Actually, I did not have a device, so for the next 7 months I was not attending classes properly." "For a while after schools reopened, I really could not understand anything," shared Anamika (15). "I got only 47 per cent in Class X. But I am trying to pick up now."

[7] From March–May 2021, India was officially facing the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, which claimed at least 4 lakh lives officially. The unofficial number is suspected to be much higher (Mordani, 2021).

A more serious impact was felt in the choice of subjects by those who were in classes VIII to X and aspired to specifically study science at the senior secondary level. All of them opted for humanities in Class XI after seeing the fall in their grades and decided to stay in the government school in the vicinity of their home. At the senior secondary level, when students choose their stream, these students initially aspired to take admission in schools located outside Sompur that offered the option of science which was not offered by the school in Sompur. With the fall in grades, parents were also not keen to spend the extra money needed to send the girls out of Sompur, so they opted for humanities.

In the academic session of 2021–22, the Delhi government had started schools of specialised excellence: choice-based schools offering specialisation in four streams, better infrastructure, and facilities for government school students. Students must appear for an entrance test following which they could seek admission to such a school. By July 2023, there were 37 such schools with 4,400 seats in Delhi. During interviews with the participants in August–October 2022, six girls had appeared for the entrance tests but failed to make the grade, owing to what Neena termed as a "lack of preparation". Hence, these girls also chose humanities and decided to stay in the senior secondary school in Sompur. The remaining (3) were planning to take the entrance exams to these schools. Hence the girls' aspirations had taken a hit due to the pandemic, which was seen in the fall of grades, quitting education for some, and a disconnect from education for many. By the end of 2023, two more participants had quit school. Anwesha (14) left school after failing her Class X board exam while Falak's family left the city to settle in their hometown where she got married. Learning losses incurred during the pandemic and the loss of sustainable incomes were cited as the reasons for these dropouts.

Concluding Remarks

Five years since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, schools and other educational institutions have reopened. The period of lockdowns and the months following them—before schools reopened permanently—can best be described as a rude shock to the lives of the participants of the study that this paper is based on. The initial sense of fun gave way to anxieties and, over the years, reshaped their initial aspirations and prospects. Observations point to the deepening educational divide not only during the pandemic by over-reliance on digital education, but also to the shrinking role of public education in general which

worsened during this time—especially for those who were already vulnerable given their socio-economic position in marginalised spaces like Sompur. By exploring the narratives of these young girls, I wish to point towards the increased inequality in a system that was already unequal and deficient for them to begin with. Access to education was limited and at risk in Sompur and the pandemic put educational opportunities at further risk with the creation of new markets designed to exclude the educational interests of the marginalised and the vulnerable, a great proportion of who are young girls.

How do we make sense of this marginalisation in an urban but an officially unauthorised space? Schools shape aspirations. They take on a greater meaning in urban centres because here, schools are considered to be equipped to address the social and pedagogic needs of children. However, in Sompur, where schools were ill-equipped to begin with, such institutions not only struggled during the pandemic but also when dealing with new uncertainties post the pandemic. New methods will have to be found to integrate these concerns into academic research. While the sample that this paper draws from is small, it shows that the differences in socio-economic class and parental education impacted the way in which the pandemic was experienced by the young participants—even in Sompur.

Research has shown that disadvantaged parents make complex educational choices for their daughters, often choosing government schools for them over their male siblings (Kaul, 2001; Azam & Kingdon, 2013). The male child is also likely to get a larger share of parental resources to ensure their quality education continues. While these trends were found in the study that this paper draws from as well, it was also seen that parents were increasingly trying to make “better” choices for their daughters. When it was possible to route their resources, parents chose low-fee private schools for them, even if for a few years, which were seen as a better option than government schools. Families appeared to recognise the importance of education, both in the marriage and in the labour market. However, with changing socio-economic conditions, newer choices and negotiations were made every few years, and educational instability was a constant in the lives of the participants. This instability was also seen in the labour market with greater informalisation of work for young girls. For example, the girls took up employment as domestic workers, tailors, etc. to assist their families while their male siblings explored newer avenues such as jobs in malls or at least outside of Sompur.

Inclusive environments that have long been a challenge for schools certainly cannot be provided by digital education. As seen in this paper, e-learning could never find roots in Sompur and remained a non-option for students. Regardless of their context, learners suffered marginalisation in education and exclusion from other opportunities to varying degrees during the pandemic and after reopening of schools. In neighbourhoods such as Sompur where poverty and uncertainty about life is endemic, this educational marginality among disadvantaged students led to their falling behind in learning. In this regard, the reduced marks of all the participants is a telling point. The creation of neoliberal, post-pandemic education markets in the increasingly privatised arena of education further points towards the continuously negotiated existence of students who live on the margins.

However, young people are not a passive, homogenised group. As a last point of enquiry, I would like to mention that despite their limited means, structural constraints, and the challenges posed by the neighbourhood, some young girls exerted their agency and tried to challenge the circumstances in order to continue their education—despite economic and social constraints which were further amplified by the pandemic. As against the general perception that the poor are not interested in education, the stories of the participants were filled with aspirations for a better future. Participants like Alam (14) and Sonam (16) chose not to quit, though their aspirations were hit because they could not opt for their preferred subject or join a school of their choice.

Some of the issues presented in this paper have only shone a spotlight, once again, on the pedagogical and political issues around education in general, and specifically in the unplanned areas of a city, such as Sompur. This micro-level, in-depth focus is essential for understanding how institutions such as schools of different kinds, families, their response to education, and even their marginality is located within the wider structure of a society. Eventually, we need to see the pandemic as another call to strengthen education systems for the poor, rather than take it as an opportunity to create new structures of exclusion.

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Annexure 1: List of participants in 2021

No.	Name	Age	Class	School	Mother's Education	Father's Education	Father's Occupation	Mother's Occupation
1.	Anu	16	IX	Private School	Graduate	Graduate	Tuition teacher	Homemaker
2.	Paro	16	X	Private School	Graduate	Class X	Manager (private company)	Homemaker
3.	Deepali	15	IX	Private School	Class XII	Class XII	Self-employed	Homemaker
4.	Yashi	17	XI	School B	Class V	Class VIII	Tailor	Homemaker
5.	Neena	17	IX	School C	Class V	Class X	Painter	Tailor
6.	Mamta	15	IX	School B	Graduate	Class XII	Private company	Homemaker
7.	Anwesha	14	VIII	School A	Class V	Class II	Painter on contract	Homemaker
8.	Sonam	16	IX	School A	Class X	Non-literate	Contractor	Homemaker
9.	Shaba	15	IX	School A	Class VIII	Class V	Self-employed	Homemaker
10.	Maira	15	VIII	School A	Class X	Class V	Unemployed	Homemaker
11.	Alam	14	VIII	School A	Non-literate	Non-literate	Unemployed	Homemaker
12.	Fanaa	17	XI	School A	Non-literate	Non-literate	Unemployed	Homemaker
13.	Hiti	17	IX	School A	Class VIII	Class IV	Tailor	Homemaker
14.	Anamika	15	IX	School A	Class V	Class X	Painter	Tailor
15.	Poonam	15	IX	School A	Class X	Non-literate	Private company	Homemaker
16.	Bulbul	16	X	School A	Class V	Class III	Daily wage worker	Homemaker
17.	Tarana	16	X	School A	Class V	Class III	Daily wage worker	Homemaker
18.	Tehseen	16	X	School A	Class VIII	Class X	Tailor	Homemaker
19.	Suma	15	IX	School A	Class IV	Non-literate	Electrician	Homemaker
20.	Sumaiya	15	VIII	School A	Non-literate	Non-literate	Daily wage worker	Shop
21.	Falak	14	VIII	School A	Non-literate	Non-literate	Daily wage worker	Homemaker
22.	Shaina	15	IX	School A	Class V	Non-literate	Daily wage worker	Homemaker
23.	Sonia	15	IX	School A	Class VIII	Class V	Self-employed	Homemaker
24.	Suraiya	15	IX	School A	Non-literate	Non-literate	Daily wage worker	Homemaker
25.	Nagma	14	VIII	School A	Class V	Non-literate	Daily wage worker	Homemaker

Note:

School A: Government school in Sompur (19 participants)

Schools B and C: Government schools outside Sompur (3 participants)

Remaining 3 participants were in private schools.

The names of all research participants have been changed to protect their identities.