



German
Historical
Institute
London

German Historical Institute London Bulletin

Conference Report: *Education and Urban Transformations: Marginalities
and Intersections*

by Yamini Agarwal and Debarati Bagchi

German Historical Institute London Bulletin
Vol. XLIV, No. 2 (Nov. 2022), 178–83

ISSN 0269-8552

Education and Urban Transformations: Marginalities and Intersections. Conference held at the German Historical Institute London, 9–11 June 2022. Conveners: Indra Sengupta (GHIL), Nandini Manjrekar (Tata Institute of Social Sciences, TISS), Geetha B. Nambissan (Jawaharlal Nehru University, JNU), Shivali Tukdeo (National Institute of Advanced Studies, NIAS), and Sebastian Schwecke (Max Weber Forum for South Asian Studies, MWFSAS).

This conference marked the culmination of the current research phase of the project ‘Education and the Urban in India since the Nineteenth Century’, co-ordinated jointly by the GHIL, MWFSAS, JNU, TISS, and NIAS. The project was an inquiry into a range of issues intersecting with education and urban studies, and several questions that had emerged from it through workshops and academic exchanges were taken forward in this conference. Participant presentations foregrounded a research agenda connecting questions in education, the historical development of urban forms, urban and social restructuring, and marginalization, among others. Participants interrogated the urban–education dynamic and identified historical, social, and political factors as essential anchors around which the changes on urban and educational terrain can be understood.

The first session, ‘Nation, Citizenship, and Urban Education’, began with a paper by Margrit Pernau (Max Planck Institute for Human Development) on ‘Gandhians in the City: The Jamia Millia Islamia 1920–1947’. She looked at ways in which the nationalist imagination of education and learning in colonial India was deeply connected to different notions of urban and rural life. Pernau elaborated this through her historical research on the making of the Jamia Millia Islamia university. Founded in 1920, Jamia was conceptualized as a model of nationalist education, subscribing to a Gandhian philosophy rooted in an idealized vision of country life and the ‘traditional’ village. Using maps, Pernau illustrated how Jamia moved from Aligarh to Delhi’s Karol Bagh in 1926, and from there to its present location in Okhla in 1935. She argued that while it remained within the urban environment of the new capital of India, it was deliberately located in an area close to nature. Nandini Manjrekar’s paper, ‘Schooling and the Industrial City: Free and Compulsory Education in Girangaon, Bombay, 1900–1940’, focused on

a textile mill district in colonial Bombay. She pointed out that the period covered by her research was a time when a steep increase in the city's industrial workforce converged with a strong impetus towards public education for the working class. It is through the works of Dalit writers rather than material from the official archive, she suggested, that we learn about the role of education in the lives of mill workers in Bombay. Manjrekar observed that mapping public education in a working-class neighbourhood truly reflected Bombay's character and later growth as a migrant city.

Silvia Grinberg (Universidad Nacional de San Martín) carried forward the conversations on urban space and educational opportunities from the past to the present by shifting focus to schools in the city of Buenos Aires. Her paper, 'Urban Cartographies of Educational Inequalities: The School/Subjects/Slums Series in Buenos Aires, Argentina', reflected on the everyday production of educational inequality and school segregation. She highlighted a contradiction in urban schooling practices: school enrolments in urban Buenos Aires have increased since the early twentieth century, while at the same time education has become more exclusionary. Grinberg deployed a nuanced understanding of cartography as a theoretical tool for mapping the processes of segregation produced by schools and their neighbourhoods.

The keynote lecture held that evening was given by William T. Pink (Marquette University). Entitled 'Reimagining Education for the Common Good: Interrogating Key Intersectionalities in Pursuit of a Twenty-First Century Praxis', it presented a data-driven analysis of inequalities in education in the USA and other countries that deepened further during the Covid-19 pandemic. Pink discussed five factors—merit and the limitations of the concept of meritocracy; education and credentialism as the route to success in society; the school as an incubator for reform; rethinking the place and value of work; and out-of-school factors impacting educational reform—and drew attention to the ways in which they function and how they limit the process of education. He suggested that investigating the intersectionality of these factors can help to unravel a complex web of education and educational practice that continues to impact on students differently, depending on the intersections of other factors such as class, race, gender, and ethnicity.

The second session was headed 'Urban Restructuring and New Marginalities' and opened with a paper on 'Changing Urban Landscapes, Poverty and Education: A Perspective from the Margins of Delhi'. In it, Geetha B. Nambissan explored the implications of Delhi's changing urban landscape for the education of children from underprivileged backgrounds. She drew on urban and educational scholarship in Delhi and her fieldwork in Bawana, a resettlement colony on the city's fringes, to explore how the transformation of the city led to exclusion and educational inequalities, and impacted on the agency of the poor. She argued that education is implicated in the changing urban environment and showed that as Delhi became a megacity, children from the lower socio-economic classes faced severe spatial polarization and educational injustice as schools and colleges were segregated, leaving them with few or no educational opportunities at all. In the next presentation, 'Education Hub in Delhi-National Capital Region (NCR): Exploring the Entanglements between Higher Education and Urbanization in Early 2000s', Debarati Bagchi (MFWSAS) considered the relationship between land acquisition, higher education, and educational markets. Her paper focused on the land-university nexus on the northern, agrarian fringes of Delhi. Bagchi examined the acquisition of land on which to build an elite education hub, the Rajiv Gandhi Education City (RGEC) and explored this as a site for studying 'frontier urbanism' and the entanglements of the agrarian and the urban in South Asia. She traced the envisioning of this region as a multifunctional urban complex, and examined the government regulations and legislation that facilitated private investment in higher education and paved the way for enclosed elite private education zones such as the RGEC. Bagchi also critically analysed the role of the state in positing private education as a public good and using these educational hubs to provide urban growth. Shivali Tukdeo's presentation on 'Relentless Stretching: Urban Transformation and Educational Inequality' examined the restructuring of Bengaluru between 2010 and 2020 and looked at connections between urban megaprojects, the creation of new margins, and education. Focusing on the Metro Rail project in Bengaluru that was driven largely by capital and private agencies, she explored the process by which the project required two

neighbourhoods to be relocated to resettlement colonies far from the city centre, and the connections between economically driven restructuring and its consequences for the working poor. Tukdeo argued that the complete absence of basic facilities in these peri-urban areas indicates that they were left for private interests to develop. While various types of educational schemes have been crucial in facilitating greater access to education and improving its quality in rural and Adivasi regions, Tukdeo said that peri-urban areas have not yet found a place in education policy.

The third session, 'Urban Transitions, Youth, and Social Aspiration', was opened by Yamini Agarwal (MFWSAS) speaking on 'Gender and Education: Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic in a Marginalized Neighbourhood in New Delhi', which reflected on how teenage girls from low-income families were impacted by school closures and the transition to online education. Agarwal presented observations based on her field research in Sompur, an unauthorized colony in New Delhi which, despite having a population of almost a million, lacks basic urban infrastructure and has only one senior secondary government school. In such a dire situation, ed-tech companies have been trying to expand their business by exploiting the educational aspirations of poor and marginalized families. Agarwal's paper explored how the two years of the pandemic deepened the educational divide as the result of over-reliance on digital education and the shrinking role of public education in general. The paper by Meg Maguire (King's College London), 'Place Matters: Spatial Dimensions of Young People's Transitions in an Urban Setting', focused on the centrality of space, place, and geography in understanding the transition to higher education – or the lack of it – among urban youth. Referring to her ethnographic research in urban localities in the UK, she drew our attention to how structural dimensions of place shape the aspirations of young adults by determining a sense of identity and belonging, while also materially constraining or enabling people's choice-making and life chances. These structural aspects include basic access to school, housing, and healthcare, as well as factors such as transport and connectivity that play a crucial role in creating hierarchies of proximity and distance.

The round table, 'Covid-19 and Education', brought together speakers who reflected on the pandemic and its impact on education

in four different contexts. Yusuf Sayyed (University of Sussex) opened the discussion by presenting data on school closures from around the world over the last two years. He explored why greater attention was paid to policy during the pandemic than at other moments of crisis. During the ongoing transition to neoliberal education, the state acted by putting emergency regulations in place and mobilizing very large amounts of money. The push for more technology-based education came largely from the middle classes, thus alienating marginalized groups even further. Laila Kadiwal (University College London) highlighted the blatant class differentiation that was reinforced by the pandemic. While the richest could afford to isolate and be vaccinated before others, very many teachers died in Uttar Pradesh in India during the second wave. She then focused on the attitudes of the people in power in the UK and the race to buy vaccines, arguing that this was nothing but White supremacy and Western imperialism in a new garb. Silvia Grinberg presented a detailed picture of how lockdowns were implemented in Buenos Aires, pointing out that the idea of social distancing proved futile in the slums. She presented data on how public and private schools functioned and explored why the pandemic only further aggravated the existing structural inequalities in urban education. Georgie Wemyss (University of East London) depicted the experiences of minority and migrant university students in London. She shared snippets from what she herself had witnessed among students at her place of work. Those who worked to pay for their education tended to be the worst hit. Lack of access to the university space was a source of great personal loss and resulted in the social alienation of students who were already marginal in UK society. The round table was followed by a vibrant question-and-answer session. Members of the audience from different corners of the world shared their own experiences and observations of the challenges faced by various sections of society during the pandemic.

The final session, 'Urban-Education Dynamics, Knowledge, and Pedagogies', started with a presentation by Akash Bhattacharya (Azim Premji University) on 'Education and "Improvement": Joykrishna Mukherjee and Nineteenth-Century Uttarpara', which connected the histories of Indian education with the long-term history of urbanization beyond the colonial metropolis. Bhattacharya focused on the

early years of Uttarpara's transformation from a cluster of hamlets into a place shaped by steady urbanization. He showed how the aspirations for urbanization of the local landholding elite, including its chief patron Joykrishna Mukherjee, led to the physical and social transformation of Uttarpara and consolidated the demographic and social power of the Bengali urban middle class in the area. Bhattacharya argued that in the process, Uttarpara remained a 'fluid space' which maintained finely calibrated relationships with the metropolis on the one hand and the rural hinterland on the other.

In the final presentation, 'Walking the Dock: Transient Pedagogy and the Urban-Education Dynamic', Georgie Wemyss engaged with the intersections of education and urban studies by exploring practices of walking and talking in urban contexts as dialogic tools in critically researching, understanding, and contesting structural inequalities and global colonialities. Wemyss drew on several decades of walking and researching the East India Docks in London to consider the ways in which unevenly paced, embodied, and transient experiences of walking and talking across space and time can challenge structures that contribute to the marginalization and feelings of (un)belonging experienced by racialized and minoritized citizens. The conference ended with Wemyss taking the participants on a walk around the East India Docks in London.

YAMINI AGARWAL AND DEBARATI BAGCHI (MWFSAS)