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Re-imaging everyday routines and educational aspirations under COVID-19 lockdown: Narratives of urban middle-class children in Punjab, India

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Abstract

Based on in-depth interviews with 24 middle-class Indian child participants, this is the first exploratory qualitative study, in India, to demonstrate the ways in which children as reflexive social actors re-negotiated everyday schedules, drew on classed resources at their disposal and made sense of the impact of the pandemic on their educational pathways and future aspirations. These narratives offer a unique lens on the politics of middle-classness and its constitutive relation to constructions of normative childhoods in contemporary India. Study findings contribute to the sociology of Indian childhood and more generally help enrich our understanding of southern childhoods and the reproduction of inequalities in contemporary India.

KEYWORDS
children's everyday life, COVID-19, education, India, middle-class childhood

INTRODUCTION

Drawing on interview narratives of 24 children (aged 16–17 years) living in a major city in the northern Indian state of Punjab, this article analyses the ways in which study participants made sense of the changes to their daily routines, combated the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and negotiated a new order of everyday life by drawing on a range of classed and community-based resources. Existing scholarship demonstrates how urban middle-class homes in India are caught up in the macro-level changes in economic and political structures, consumer cultures and inter-community relations currently afoot in India (Banaji, 2017; Donner, 2006; Sen, 2014). Through a focus on urban middle-class children's experiences of the pandemic, our study contributes to this literature by casting fresh light into the reproduction of social and economic inequality and the cultural politics of middle-classness in contemporary India. The Indian middle class is not a homogeneous entity, and in this study, we focus on urban middle-class children in Punjab who attend private fee-paying schools and share relatively similar patterns of consumption and lifestyle as each other. The relational approach to the class that we adopt in this study enables us to grapple with the way other forms of social division, such as geography and gender inflect class, and how class privileges and disadvantages are produced and reproduced through unequal relations between classes. Moreover, the privileges enjoyed by urban middle-class families in India are relative in nature and not absolute. Indeed, a window into their lived realities exposes their ambivalences and anxieties of not being able to reproduce class advantages down the generation and of falling down the class ladder in a country with infrastructural problems and no state welfare support (see Kumar, 2011). Consequently, our study highlights the challenges faced by Indian middle-class children as they coped with everyday life during the COVID-19 lockdown amidst technological glitches and continuing and significant pressure to perform. Further, the empirical insights presented here prompt us to rethink the conceptual apparatuses for studying children's everyday geographies developed in the global North and contribute to the growing call for diversifying the theorisation of childhood inequalities (Barn, 2021).

This article proceeds as follows. First, a background section provides the broader context to help understand COVID-19 and children in India. Second, the theoretical framework underpinning our study is introduced by highlighting the scholarly debate on class and childhood inequalities that the article builds on and contributes to. Third, the methodology section outlines the aims and methods including ethics and analysis. In particular, we discuss the multi-linguistic online and in-person data collection approaches utilised in our study to help contribute to the literature on diverse methodological and cross-cultural approaches to social research involving children. Subsequent sections focus on our key findings and discussion. We conclude by defining the key significance of our contribution to future research and policy.

COVID-19 AND CHILDREN IN INDIA

Since the emergence of the global pandemic, several commentators and scholars working in India have drawn attention to existing social and health inequalities and how these have been exposed and exacerbated by the COVID-19 outbreak (Hasan, 2020; Lee et al., 2020). However, these writings rarely represent child perspectives. The emergent literature that has focused on the impact of COVID-19 on Indian children, has concentrated on a few areas of concern and adopted mostly adult-centric and largely quantitative perspectives (Alvi & Gupta, 2020; Chaturvedi et al., 2021; Sama et al., 2021). Indeed, at the height of the national lockdown, approximately

122 million Indians lost their jobs (Inamdar, 2020) and 0.32 billion students had their education disrupted (UNESCO, 2020) which had a deleterious impact on children's right to education which is now enshrined in the law in India[1] (Ghosh et al., 2020). However, the sudden declaration of national lockdown on 16 March 2020, and its impacts were not evenly felt across Indian society. As Zoya Hasan (2020: n.p) noted during the first wave of infections: 'Nobody is safe from the virus, but some classes are more protected than others… In India, the lockdown favours the "balcony classes", with no regard of its consequences for others.' The 'balcony classes' here refer to the middle and upper classes of Indian society who have the luxury of having relative job security and a permanent accommodation that they can retreat into to ride out the lockdown. Meanwhile, the idea of a home as a place of comfort and security remains outside the reach of countless Indians (Baviskar & Ray, 2020). In terms of education too, only one-third of all school-going children had access to some form of online learning with only 32.5% of this cohort doing synchronous online classes (Nanda, 2020) which demonstrates the extent of educational and digital inequalities in contemporary India.

To fully gauge the extent of the inequalities that were exposed during the lockdown in India, it is important to explore the interior lives of those that Hasan (2020) describes as the 'balcony classes'. Children are important stakeholders in these processes, both as participant-consumers and as social actors inhabiting these unequal social landscapes. Our decision, therefore, to focus on middle-class children's experiences of lockdown in this study is informed by a relational view of class inequalities (Ball, 2003; Pattenden, 2016). As Reay (2017: 186) points out 'no class is an island' and therefore to understand the nature and extent of inequalities in a society, it is crucial to illuminate the way those with class privilege behave and hoard scarce resources in different ways. Therefore, our empirical study into middle-class childhoods in India contributes to the wider sociological literature on the relational dynamics of class inequalities in India.

Given the dearth of child perspectives on lockdown, there is much need for in-depth and critical understanding of how children in relatively privileged sections of Indian society—whose education did not stop with the lockdown but continued in an altered format online and who had access to a secure home—made sense of the unprecedented changes to their daily routines and spaces. We ask: How do urban middle-class children in India negotiate the changes to their everyday geographies brought about by the pandemic? Further, what resources did they draw upon in the process, and what are the ways in which they navigate the uncertainties created by the pandemic? Exploring these questions, we argue, can offer a unique lens on the politics of middle-classness and its constitutive relation to constructions of normative childhoods in pandemic India. Such an analysis calls for conceptual frameworks grounded in the sociology of middle-class childhood in India which, in turn, can offer valuable lessons and correctives to the dominant approaches to the study of childhoods developed in the global north.

UNPACKING MIDDLE-CLASS CHILDHOODS IN INDIA: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In this article, we embrace a relational, sociological framework for studying middle-class childhoods in India that focuses on the interaction between spatial boundaries, social relationships and consumption practices. In what follows, we conceptualise class inequalities and processes in contemporary India and how they shape middle-class childhoods.

Contemporary Indian society is stratified along multiple lines of inequalities. However, in the relative anonymity of the Indian city, class stratification is particularly significant insofar as

children's life chances, access to resources and everyday experiences are concerned (Banaji, 2017). Urban middle-class children in India today live pedagogised and domesticated lives, circulating within designated 'children's spaces' of home, school and leisure (Sen, 2014; Sur, 2019). At the same time, more than 32 million children aged 6–13 years across India have never had any experience of formal education (Oxfam India, 2015) and do not live their daily lives in the institutional settings of education and organised leisure (Nieuwenhuys, 2003). Pedagogised middle-class childhood, which first emerged in colonial India through the introduction of school-based education, has been cemented as the normative image of the child (Basu, 2019). Middle-class children in Indian cities live 'media-rich' lives with ready access to media technologies, educational spaces and consumption outlets which have grown in lockstep with the expanding middle classes in post-liberalisation India (Banaji, 2017). The child is central to these articulations of middle-class consumption practices and status claims. Indeed, Kumar (2011, 220) argues that in contemporary India middle-classness is 'defined and supported by the success of the child, and destroyed by the child's failure'. Notably, with a large population and a stunted welfare state, the middle class in India occupies a precarious social space where class standing is never guaranteed unless social advantages can be reproduced across generations. Middle-class families, therefore, invest heavily in education as a means to ensure that their class standing is retained under external pressures of population growth, widespread unemployment and poverty.

In broad terms, there are two categories of schools in India: government schools which are either run directly by the state or through grant-in-aid and private schools. Whilst the government schools provide free education and teach largely in regional languages, in most fee-charging private schools, English is the medium of instruction. Moreover, it is this English-language education which has come to be regarded as a distinct status marker for the middle class and a crucial vehicle for upward social mobility (Jayadeva, 2018). The home–school relationship in India today fractures along class and caste lines. Children from poorer and marginalised communities are undervalued, and their home environment is seen as inconducive to educational success (Kumar & Kumar, 2016), whilst in the case of middle-class children, the home and the school align in pushing for scholastic success with parents overseeing children's educational pathways (Donner, 2006; Kumar, 2011).

The national lockdown in India in early 2020 disrupted the geographies of pedagogised middle-class childhood with its designated spaces such as school, tuition centres and leisure spaces becoming out of bounds. Since the home and the school are the principal sites for the construction of middle-class childhood in India (Kumar, 2011), then how did this reconfiguration of space inflect pedagogised childhoods in urban India? By putting to work the sociological framework developed in this section, we argue that children's subjective experiences and meaning-making under lockdown offer a window into the politics of middle-class childhoods in pandemic India.

METHODOLOGY

An in-depth one-to-one interview approach was employed to elicit children's accounts of their everyday life in the COVID-19 lockdown period between March 2020 and September 2020. Interviews were open ended and focused on a number of topics including children's daily routine during the lockdown, their experiences of online schooling, life at home and their sense of the impact of COVID-19 on their current and future situation. The general interview duration was between 30 and 45 min each. Ethics permission was obtained from the second author's university in India, and access to the schools was secured by the same

author. The study adhered to the UNICEF guidelines of collecting data from children during the COVID-19 crisis (Berman, 2020). Informed consent forms were sent to the parents of children to help recruit volunteer participants for the study. An informed consent form was also administered to the children whose parents had granted permission to help ensure they were taking part in the study of their own volition. Care was taken to ensure the children were aware of their rights regarding participation in the study. Interviews were conducted within the school setting within the requisite COVID-19 regulatory framework. All names used are pseudonyms. The one-to-one in-depth interview method proved to be useful since it created opportunities for children to reflect on their experiences of the lockdown and to expand on key issues that came up during the interview.

All interviews were conducted in English, Hindi and Punjabi by the first author (via zoom) and the second author (in person) together, at the same time. The on-site fieldwork was conducted within appropriate COVID-19 safety protocols including wearing of face coverings and maintenance of social distancing. The school staff acted as gatekeepers in informing the students about the study. An informal group conversation with participants helped build rapport ahead of the interviews. Child participants embraced research engagement with great interest and reported it as a welcome break from the monotony of their lockdown routines.

Both researchers who conducted the interviews are of Punjabi background and have lived experience and long-term association with urban middle-class life in Punjab. The second author is currently based in Punjab and has been working with this population for over 20 years, thus facilitating the appropriate interpretation of the participants' experiences of lockdown. Although the interviews were conducted primarily in English, the participants freely used Punjabi and Hindi words or switched between languages. The researchers' ability to speak all three languages was, therefore, an asset during data collection and whilst interpreting the data, and the shared ethnic and class background also played a key role in building rapport in the research setting and making sense of the children's narratives. Data collection in multi-language contexts such as India has much to offer in understanding the processes of social research and child empowerment through language and expression.

The one-to-one interview transcripts were subjected to a thematic analysis to help understand the meanings the children attached to their new social and relational context (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Each member of the research team independently coded the interview transcripts 'openly'. Such open coding involved the use of both 'apriori codes' from the literature and 'empirical codes' generated from the data (Gibson & Brown, 2009). We, then, deleted duplicate codes, collapsed similar codes and created code families that group similar codes together. At this stage, we compared code logs with each other, and there was substantial coverage across the research team. Then, we worked collaboratively to distil the code families and develop themes that capture patterns and relationships. The major themes that developed from this thematic data analysis reveal children's subjectivities about the unforeseen disruption in their everyday geographies caused by the lockdown. Specifically, the children identified four key concerns: the impact of the pandemic lockdown on their education, personal and social relationships, general anxiety and uncertainty, and future aspirations. Here, we focus largely on the re-scheduling of their daily life and educational anxieties.

Sample

The children in our sample come from middle-class families and attend fee-paying schools. These middle-class families include parents who are either salaried professionals, self-employed

or small business owners. Our data were collected from two urban, co-educational, English-medium schools in one large city, in Punjab (India), catering to middle-class families. Both schools have a good reputation in the city for academic performance and they follow the curriculum of the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE), the largest national school education board in India. There were around 1200 students in one school and the other had around 800 enrolled pupils. During the COVID-19 pandemic, both schools were in regular contact with the students either through live online classes or through the posting of online study materials and recorded video lectures.

Rescheduling daily life

The urban middle-class children who took part in our study had established routines of daily life before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Pre-pandemic, they lived their everyday lives across demarcated spaces—such as school, home, neighbourhood and playground—and within defined temporal boundaries—school time, bedtime and weekday/weekend—which ordered their social interactions. The national lockdown in 2020 rearranged these times and spaces, since school and leisure centres shut their doors, social interactions amongst people from different households were barred and everyone with the exception of essential workers was urged to stay at home. The children reflected on these changes, and drew on multiple temporal registers to compare the now (pandemic times) with the then (pre-pandemic life), and underscore the shifts in their time-use patterns. The way children negotiated new routines and 'rescheduled' life depended upon a range of structural issues concerning household composition and familial resources.

In their interviews, the children spoke about the apparent compression of time and how the lack of spatial variation—on account of being confined to their homes—simultaneously produced a sense of tedium, frenzy and boredom. Rajdeep, 15, explained this to us:

> It was a completely different experience before. Now, we sit almost 8 to 10 h in front of the computer, and eyes also sometimes gets strained. And it is almost boring, monotonous work. Like, [during lockdown] I used to wake up 15 to 20 min before classes and then do everything in a rush.

Vikram, one of Rajdeep's peers, reflected a similar sentiment as he told us: 'We used to have proper schedule. Now, it is more of a burden—now we spend our school time then we have tuition, online coaching ... and do self-study'. Pre-pandemic, these children moved across multiple spaces and each space had a different role. Under lockdown, the home became the sole site for every aspect of life. This lack of spatial mobility and variance is responsible for the reported sense of monotony and boredom outlined above which goes on to illustrate how middle-class childhoods in India are constructed and lived out in relation to demarcated spaces. As these spatial coordinates of daily life are flattened due to stay-at-home orders, subjective experiences of time changed drastically. However, these experiences of temporal compression and boredom varied according to the resources children had access to and also by family composition.

The reported sense of boredom was often buffered in the case of those who lived in multigenerational households, often called 'joint family' in India. One of the boys we spoke to, Navsher, recounted how he banded together with his cousins who lived with him in a multigenerational household to fill the void created by domestic confinement:

> When the lockdown started, we [cousins and I] challenged each other, say we will do yoga for 30 days, we will do something else for 30 days. We used to do these after the online classes were over.

Much like other urban middle-class households, the children in our study came from homes where hired domestic help, mostly women, performed the household chores such as cooking and cleaning. During the strict lockdown when fears about hygiene and the spread of the virus were heightened, many middle-class homes dispensed with their cooks and cleaners. Whilst confined to their homes, some of children—girls more often than boys—contributed to social reproductive work at home by trying their hands at cooking or helping their mothers with household tasks. Needless to say, these activities were performed as one-off leisurely tasks and the families were in no way dependent on these contributions alone for the smooth functioning of the household. One of the boys said during the interview:

> We try to help our mothers, but we can't help them as much, like all the girls. They are more skilled and better at doing certain things [housework]

Interestingly, the gendered nature of housework (albeit by external female workers) is reflected in the boys' assumptions around housework and the extent to which they are 'skilled' at performing social reproductive work at home. Notably, however, such confinement to the home space did reportedly result in some boys developing their culinary skills. Golguppas/Pani Puri is a popular Indian snack sold as street food as well as in restaurants in India. Dinesh who lives with his parents and his younger brother listed 'playing cricket' and 'cooking' as his hobbies. In the absence of cricket during lockdown, and whilst being confined to the home space, he reported that he had 'searched recipes' on YouTube to make golguppas.

Besides helping with housework or learning to cook their favourite foods, the children in our study also spoke about the way they strategically used the new-found time gaps during the day for personal development and self-reflection. Aman and Upinder recounted their experiences of the temporal and spatial reality of the pandemic:

> The pandemic has affected my life a lot. Like now, you get free time very much. I use the free time to improve my skills. Like, my hobbies—I do dancing, I do calligraphy, I do painting, I have work done on my skills a lot... I have used Internet, I have seen videos for how to improve these skills.—Aman

> I found time for things I never could do before. And that has really helped me build my personality as a whole.—Upinder

The above narratives not only demonstrate some of the ways in which children utilised the time gaps created by their home confinement during the lockdown and established a new sense of rhythm, but also serve as a springboard for thinking about the constructions of urban middle-class childhoods in contemporary India. The children in our study had access to the Internet and digital technologies which they exploited during the lockdown both for online learning and leisure. Many reported watching videos, surfing websites and chatting with friends on social media as their way of spending time at home, learning new 'skills' and sustaining offline friendships, respectively. One child, Sonia, used this opportunity to browse university programmes that she hoped to apply for. The language used by Aman and Upinder (above), in particular, illuminates how middle-class childhoods in India today are being shaped in dialogue with the

wider structural features of Indian society where the lack of a welfare state, high unemployment rates and intense competition for coveted higher education places create an environment where the responsibility lies solely with individual student to cultivate a reflective entrepreneurial self that is committed to constant self-development and skills growth. Gupta (2021) has recently argued that the market-driven and performance-oriented private school education sector in India is actively shaping the identity of teachers as entrepreneurs. In extending this process, the children's use of the idioms of skills development and personality building gesture towards the impact of similar neoliberalising processes on children's lived geographies whilst also pointing to instances where critical self-reflection and caution against the relentless speed of life is called upon by children themselves. Many children also pointed to the suffering that the sudden lockdown announcement and poor government planning afflicted precariously employed migrant workers who were left without an income and had to travel back to their homes in other parts of India, often on foot (Hasan, 2020). When we asked the children what they would do if they had a magic wand, most of them spoke about curing the pandemic and 'helping the migrant labourers' many of whom lost their livelihood, overnight, due to the lockdown. These narratives, therefore, show that urban middle-class children in contemporary India inhabit a complex, ambivalent space where neoliberal ideals and processes buttressed by the lack of a welfare state are held in tension with a reflective awareness of vast social inequalities and injustices. The disruption caused by the pandemic has uncovered this ambivalence like never before.

Jovan, one of our participants described the pandemic as an 'emergency' on par with wars, and the 'great partition' of India (Khan, 2017), and recounted her interactions with her grandmother who lives with her in the same house:

> My grandmother tells me about her childhood, how she was born in Lahore and the hardships she faced when she came to India during the partition... She tells me that at that time too they stayed at home and the Army delivered food... Locked down at home, she learnt a lot of new skills such as cooking from different recipes. She now encourages me to learn things I am interested in... My grandparents have seen wars like the 71 war, the 65 war and they say that this was not the first time they have seen an emergency situation... My grandmother also tells me stories about the Gurus which I love and as a result never feel lonely.

Besides the other time registers of pre- and post-pandemic evident in previous excerpts, here, Jovan is plotting the pandemic time in the historical context of India. Jovan connects the current crisis to the mythological past contained in the legends of the Sikh Gurus and the historical past marked by the partition of the Indian sub-continent in 1947 and the India–Pakistan wars of 1965 and 1971. Living in a multi-generational household, Jovan's interactions with her grandmother illustrate the relationship between spatial and social proximity during the lockdown, and how this generated 'postmemories' (Hirsch, 2008) of these traumatic historical events in her which she now utilises to contextualise the current 'emergency' and think about resilience and ways to make the most of the opportunities it might present.

Educational anxieties

Anxieties around education were one of the most prominent themes in the interview narratives of the children in our study. Indeed, the pandemic had instigated a crisis in pedagogised

middle-class childhoods in India. When asked to relate their experiences of lockdown life, the children spoke at length about their concerns regarding online learning and the anxieties they have about their future academic and career pathways given the challenges posed by the pandemic. In doing so, they also reflected on the school as a predominant site of education and social life pre-pandemic and the meanings they ascribe to the school space.

The sudden and overnight disruption to their schooling and the transition to online learning was reported by the children in our study to have brought significant shifts in the learning process, creating a disorder in their academic activities. *Masti*, the popular Indian notion of fun and laughter, was invoked by the children as having evaporated from their lives, particularly the *masti* in the school setting with their peers. The children recalled missing the fun and banter they had in school, and lamented the 'burden' and monotony of online classes. Pritam, a 17-year-old, sums up this common feeling:

> 'Online classes are hectic. We're all fed-up, we want to go back to school. We want to do *masti*. Now, it is more of a burden'.

The children in our study reported that the challenges of online learning were multi-pronged and included the absence of personal relationships with peers ('we miss masti'); poor network connectivity ('Internet now has such a big role in studies and playing as well. So, there should be high network connectivity. Lots of people are facing the network problem. Internet connectivity in the area is low'); lack of personal contact with school teachers ('The school was basically the best thing in a student's life. We used to meet teachers—we had a great bond with them'); online distractions ('With our phone in our hands, we can go any app. There are too many distractions'); the tedium of online learning ('…it is boring, monotonous work. We have to do same thing every day') and the inadequacy of the content of the online classes ('My father says online class is just a formality'). There was also a worry that the fixed online classes were not challenging them intellectually and lack of regular in-person interaction with their teachers was creating gaps in their learning.

In explaining his own personal experience, Arun, below, outlines the common concerns about the disruption in routine and the consequences of this on his education:

> I had become serious at the start of the 12th class. I got a regular tuition, started getting good marks. A routine was going on. But now, no routine. Online studies don't work, it's just a formality to get fees from students. In school we have no choice, we have to do work as the teacher is in front of us. Online classes give a choice. I can switch off my camera any time. *Bacha ek dham free hai (the child is absolutely free, and without constraint).*

In addition to his apprehension about the lack of a routine, Arun is expressing his view about two additional concerns. Firstly, he points out that fee-paying schools are continuing to charge normal fees for an education that is not the same as before. Here, disquiet is expressed about the actual content of online teaching and its effectiveness. Notably, the strained relationship between parents and fee-paying schools over the poor quality of online teaching was much reported in the Indian media during this time (Kumar et al., 2020) and it is not surprising that the children in our study who attend fee-paying schools are also expressing this view. Secondly, in his account of the relationship between an 'online class' and 'choice', Arun underscores the discipline of the physical school environment

where children have little influence and where their voice is often not heard. The sentiments around online classes and choice—'I can switch off my camera any time'—suggests online learning environments create affordances for children to exercise their agency in ways that physical classrooms do not. Given the paucity of child perspectives on experiences of schooling in India, our study highlights the need to recognise children's views on matters of schooling.

As mentioned in the section above, middle-class Indian childhoods are located within a structural frame where not only formal education, but also a myriad of skills are regarded as crucial to deal with the challenges of intense competition in higher education and employment. To this end, the self as a project and the shaping of one's future self is considered vital (Sandhu & Barn, 2022). The last section demonstrated how skill development strategies were mounted by children under lockdown. Here, we explore the pressures of university entrance examinations during the lockdown, and the anxieties they precipitated.

Our study shows that the school closures were deleterious for our participants. In India, students seeking admissions into professional courses in higher education are highly dependent on private coaching classes that prepare them for entrance examinations. The delay in the dates of these examinations because of the pandemic created an elongated period of anxiety for our research participants. Every year, around 22 lakhs (2.2 million) students sit for the engineering entrance examinations alone (Gohain, 2021), the preparation for which requires exhaustive hours of studying. Most students become particularly focused on career planning in their school-leaving year (12th grade) and draw up study plans accordingly. Children in our study explained how the school closures interfered with these plans and created anxieties about their careers. Nisha, Arun and Hemant, all 17-year old, convey the concerns commonly felt by our participants:

> Our future is impacted, our exams are impacted. Our exams are being postponed after two years of hard work.—Nisha

> All of these entrance exams like JEE and NEET[2] are totally postponed because of the pandemic. And, the aspirants for these exams are totally depressed that they have studied hard for these exams. That's why our future will be in danger. – Arun

> The future is affected as you know, many exams which many students have prepared for are being postponed. So, the students are feeling de-motivated that they have done so much hard work for two years and it's of no use. Most of the top jobs in India—like doctors and engineering college, the seats are allocated based on these exams. So, this is a stressful condition they are facing right now.—Hemant

The students reported making efforts to cope with the challenges of online schooling through perseverance, and by devising new strategies for studying including the development of new study routines and timetables. However, the difficulties in adhering to the schedules whilst being at home are also evident, as 17-year-old Amrit explains below.

> This is a very different kind of situation... So, we are not prepared for it. So, we will gradually understand that, for example, I am also thinking of changing this, making a timetable 2–3 times. It is very difficult to follow. But I think we will get used to it. We try our best to do, but what do we do?

Similarly, Rajdeep in his account below explains how compliance with these new academic schedules under lockdown lacked the deliberate practice element embedded in the physical classroom setting.

> We make a strategy to study, but it is just not possible to stick to it. In school, we know that this activity and routine is a must, and that it has to be done.

It was not uncommon to hear the children in our study propose that the government should declare the current academic year as a 'zero year'—that is, it should not count towards their final grades and academic record—and afford the students an opportunity to retake examinations. This illustrates that the students are reflexive social actors who engage with structural issues concerning the education system and have ideas of their own about how they can be addressed in ways that do not disadvantage students in these unprecedented times. At the same time, the children also shared the regret of losing a year in such a situation, and the psychological impact of this on their well-being and their aspirational future. Arun's observation below sums up the views of many of his peers:

> Even if this year is counted as a zero year, we have lost a year of our life. This loss of a year has an impact on our mind. We had such hopes for our future.

In these ways, children in our study wove various temporal registers to think about the changed landscape of their daily schedules and activities under lockdown, combated loneliness and strategised for life beyond the pandemic. These processes have wider ramifications not only for these children, but also in terms of understanding the contours of middle-class urban childhoods in contemporary India and its ambivalences which have been uncovered by the current 'crisis'. At another level, children's narratives shed further light on the ongoing debate about the spatial and temporal co-constructions of childhood within childhood studies and how it differs across geographical contexts given how the narratives presented above are embedded in the historical, political and cultural currents of India.

CONCLUSION

This is the first study into children's subjective experiences and meaning-making under lockdown to offer a window into the politics of middle-class childhoods in pandemic India which not only makes an important contribution to the sociology of Indian childhood but more generally towards our understanding of global south childhoods and the reproduction of social and economic inequalities in contemporary India.

Drawing on subjective urban childhoods, we illustrated the way the COVID-19 lockdown altered the temporality rhythm and everyday geographies of the middle-class child. In contrast to adult-centric and survey-based research into COVID-19 and children in India, our study offers a window into the lived experiences of children as social actors and gives voice to their own lockdown narratives. Whilst we report the resilience of the middle-class child in this new scenario, our findings identify the significance of familial resources and family composition to contextualise social and economic inequalities.

Our findings highlight how technology enabled the 'media-rich' middle-class child (Banaji, 2017) to stay socially connected, combat loneliness and boredom, continue their education

and help maintain social/psychological well-being. Notably, in a society where class stratification (and digital inequality) is particularly significant insofar as children's life chances, access to resources and everyday experiences are concerned; these findings shine a light on broader social and economic inequalities and the heterogeneity of childhood within India. Policy-makers and relevant stakeholders need to be aware of the implications of such findings for all children in India and explore strategies for fortification to reach adequate levels of preparedness in general and in the course of future emergencies in particular.

Given the academic pressures on middle-class childhood, we captured children's anxiety about cancelled college and university entrance examinations and their future aspirations. Our study has wider implications for research into schooling as school closures and teacher absences risk children's education and future aspirations (Muralidharan et al., 2017). Indeed, during the COVID-19 crisis, India has witnessed immensely long school-closure periods. A systematic research study involving 20 countries (including India) by Viner et al. (2021) suggests a significant impact of school closures on children's mental and physical health. Our study findings, through children's own narratives, contribute to this discussion in the context of India.

We show that children's worries and concerns take place within a largely secure and comfortable home space. We learn about the middle-class child's moral concern about those on the margins of society, namely migrant workers stranded amidst the COVID-19 lockdown. Crucially, in spite of the tide of neoliberal processes, our study helps illustrate the complexity and ambivalence of the urban Indian middle-class childhood and how India's future generation exhibits a reflective awareness of vast social inequalities and injustices. There are important implications here for central and state government, the media, educational establishments and other key stakeholders about playing their part in exposing and addressing societal inequities.

In regard to children's reported social resources embedded within joint family households, our findings reveal the importance of wider familial relationships, intergenerationality and the interplay between spatial and social proximity during a period of stress and difficulty. Whilst current debates in childhood studies on the generational structures in children's lives (Alanen, 2001; Leonard, 2016) presuppose the model of parent–child nuclear households, dominant in the global north, our findings push these debates in new directions by illuminating the multi-generational households found in India wherein children share familial-generational space not only with parents and siblings but also with cohabiting cousins and grandparents.

In the absence of qualitative accounts of children's experiences of COVID-19 national lockdown in India, this article contributes original insights into children's subjective reality that can help inform wider theoretical and policy debates about childhood in contemporary India. In doing this, our findings build on extant quantitative literature into key concerns around mental health and well-being (Chaturvedi et al., 2021; Sama et al., 2021), the effects of school closures (Alvi & Gupta, 2020; Unni, 2020) and the knock-on effect of economic uncertainties and job losses on families (Banerjee, 2020; Dar, 2020). The emergent literature on children and youth's experience of COVID-19 lockdown around the world has highlighted how national differences in lockdown policies and existing inequalities have shaped these experiences (Kato et al., 2020; Mondragon et al., 2021) with students reporting educational anxieties amidst the drastic changes brought to their studies (Branquinho et al., 2021; Rotas & Cahapay, 2020). This article, therefore, develops these lines of emergent scholarship in new directions by centering the voices of Indian children and demonstrating how local spatial realities, policy frameworks and cultural codes inflect children's lived experiences of COVID-19 lockdown which are divergent and plural rather than universal around the globe.

In situating the ongoing COVID-19 outbreak in the global history of pandemics, Shapin (2020) argues that COVID-19 is simultaneously an affliction of the physical body and that of the social body in that it has deeply affected the everyday forms of social life amongst other things. Indeed, the current pandemic has instantiated 'new scripts' for how we interact and relate in daily life. Meanwhile, the suffering caused by the pandemic has laid bare the everyday structures of our collective life and its injustices which often remain concealed in 'normal' times (Baviskar & Ray, 2020). As our understanding of the sociology of everyday life amidst the COVID-19 pandemic grows, it is important that lived realities from the global south and the voices of children are not pushed to the margins. Whilst childhood studies have long recognised the diversity of childhoods across the world, its dominant conceptual categories and frameworks—such as that of the generational structure discussed above—are derived from the lived experiences of children's lives in the Euro-American context which has erected a foundational divide between the empirical global South and the theoretical global North (Balagopalan, 2018). Instead of wielding Western childhood as the referent or lapsing into forms of cultural relativism—where divergent experiences of childhood in the global South become just another example—in this article, we have centred the voices of Indian children to reflect on the politics of middle-classness in contemporary India and how it constitutes the spaces and aspirations of children and their families.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Notably, the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act or Right to Education Act (RTE), is an Act of the Parliament of India enacted on 4 August 2009, which describes the modalities of the importance of free and compulsory education for children between 6 and 14 in India under Article 21a of the Indian Constitution. India became one of the 135 countries to make education a fundamental right of every child when the Act came into force on 1 April 2010.

[2] JEE and NEET stand for Joint Entrance Examination, and National Eligibility Entrance Test, respectively. These are taken by the students after completing 12th grade. JEE provides admission into engineering colleges for undergraduate study, whilst NEET is the equivalent entry point to various medical and dental colleges. Admissions to many science stream professional courses are also conducted on the basis of ranks in JEE and NEET.

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