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Pandemic-Pedagogy: Provocative Rumination on Sociology of Teaching Practices in Contemporary India

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Abstract
The debates on the issues of higher education are fraught with dead-ends and rhetorical questions. Naming the structural anomalies, regimes of power, and technocratic interference, we seldom hear about the pedagogic peculiarities, problems, and possibilities. The onerous fact that teaching and learning are merely structural cogs became more palpable in the academic years during the COVID-19 pandemic. This dominant mode, method and meaning did not change much even in the anxious deliberations on education during pandemic. This paper provokes to find suitable departure from the veritable jigsaw puzzle. Rather than considering the teachers and students as docile pawns, the point is to reflect on them as actors with agencies. To do so, the paper returns to the pedagogic question in the time of the ongoing pandemic. The key question is, what does it mean to do teaching and learning in the online mode? This is toward exploring the possibility of sociology of teaching practices in contemporary India.

Key words: Pandemic, Pedagogy, Practice, Teaching, Sociology in India

In the sea of pleasure's, Billowing roll,
In the ether waves', Knelling and toll,
In the world-breath's, Wavering whole-
To drown in, go down in-
Lost in swoon- greatest boon!

- Friedrich Nietzsche

Introduction
The larger body of discussions on teaching practices in higher education renders the pedagogic question as secondary, or a non-issue, a mere red herring. The first imperative is to depart from the discursive dead-ends and rhetorical lamentation
on the state of affairs vis-à-vis doing sociology. The two dominant motifs in the discursive landscape, seemingly, are, ‘indigenising’ and ‘pluralising’, invariably in a mode of lament, submission to the Eurocentric knowledge and the decline of quality in the practice of sociology, respectively. In a phenomenology of pedagogic practices, teachers and students are the key stakeholders in doing sociology. Especially with reference to a class, which is South Asian not only in the sense of representation but also in academic orientation, it surfaces that the pedagogic question assumes greater significance and poses a daunting challenge. It is not easily available for a romantic conclusion, nor could it be summarily dismissed as a non-issue in the practice of teaching and learning. This paper discusses the case of teaching and learning, in the manner of auto-ethnography routed through phenomenology of pedagogic experiences, during the years of Covid-19 pandemic, i.e. 2020-2021. As an instructor of two courses, namely *Methodologies in Social Sciences* and *Sociology of South Asia* for postgraduate students at South Asian University, one was left without much systemic wherewithal to deal with the challenges of ‘online-teaching’. What shall be the course-curriculum, pedagogical practices, and nature and scope of teaching and learning in the wake of the precarious uncertainties of the pandemic and haphazardly imposed online model? This is also to depart from a popular notion of ‘pandemic-pedagogy’ in which technologisation of education qua online-education has been a central issue without much eye at the details of experiences.

The question solicits a phenomenology of everyday experience of teacher and student informed by the interjections in public sphere. The idea of work-from-home is far more loaded than segregated spaces of work and home in which the teaching and learning have conventionally happened. With the outbreak of pandemic the distance between work and home shrunk, and the spatial distinction of working and living somewhat collapsed. In spite of the arrangements at home to conduct professional meetings without the interference of ‘home’, it was never absolutely segregated. If a toddler barged in the middle of an online meeting, it is not a crime for which one can get reprimanded unless the ‘boss’ was too rude and insensitive. This is not different for the teachers. The teachers giving the classes with well-prepared notes on the table and eyes on the screen had to cast a furtive glance towards ‘someone’ who came in between to say ‘something’. No matter how attentive the mind, taking care of the points of the discussion, the teacher had to mute (turn off the mic) and answer a query about household matters. More often than not, the classroom on the computer screen is a dead board with dots showing only the first alphabet of each attendee’s name. Even the teacher has to
turn the camera off, or keep switching between on and off, in order to ensure longer hours of smooth internet connectivity. Students have errands or other things to ensure while attending, or seemingly be attending the classes. Many female students informed that they have to help in the household chores, including the kitchen-work, sweeping-swabbing. Moreover, the banality of internet surfaces in the middle of class. They have to log in and log out, almost like students used to excuse themselves for attending to ‘nature’s call’ during the lectures in the physical classrooms. Quite a few of them log in right in the beginning of the class, keep the camera and mic off throughout, and stay on in this ‘unheard-invisible’ mode even at the end of the class. Some of them return to the class toward the end, turning on their mics to say a few things so as to register their presence. Many teachers have tried out recording their lectures and putting them up on a platform like YouTube, or even sharing the recorded lectures with the students through emails. On the other hand, some of the discerning students also search for YouTube based lectures by various scholars, and impress the course teachers with updated ideas. Meanwhile quite a few of the digital version of erstwhile kunji (guidebooks) have been discovered for easier and quicker ways through courses. All such newly discovered course-related materials are duly marshaled to write essays for examinations in the online mode. Many teachers who care to read students’ examination papers, essays and assignments, figure out a great chunk of online materials informing and influencing the students.

This is a generic synopsis of the practices during the pandemic characterised by a ‘new normal’ of higher education, i.e. online teaching and learning. Framed in another context relevant for India too, the ‘new normal’ in education is akin to a ‘technological order’. It entails a ‘passive technologisation’, without much contestation, during the pandemic. Experience from the online class rooms in India may indeed suggest that it is no longer passive, as everyone has actively resorted to it. Despite the prefix ‘new’, it is very old, since it hardly makes difference in the curriculum or the available structure of transactions. Mere technologisation flourishes due to the fact that some of those who can work ‘remotely’ exercise their privilege. The workers in this wake have their subjectivities digitalised. And therefore, every teacher in the new normal operates with a ‘curriculum of things’ (Pacheco, 2020), rather than curriculum of knowledge, experience, and of life.

This generic story can be made more muscular with reference to several ruminations by scholars of education, or by those who may be in any disciplinary
field and yet are concerned about the question of pedagogy. The purpose is to curate a background rather than presenting a perusal of the public-discourse. In this backdrop, we shall take note of some of the old issues that have resurfaced in graver forms with the debatable prefix ‘new’. It is mostly about the objective of higher education. Pandemic is the context in which there is an evident imperative of asking a few fundamental questions, viz. why does a teacher teach, or why does a student attend a course or a program? It takes us back to the old debate on vocation of teaching and learning’. Are the teachers merely service-providers in the larger machinery which is meant to deliver certification to the students? Or there is a larger purpose in the vocation that solicits innovations, experimentations and playful engagement, intellectual risk-taking and will to step out of the comfort zones, in the context of everyday life within which the teachers and students are situated?

This paper does not answer these and other related questions in a manner acceptable to the community of scholars. With humility it admits to merely show that the realm of teaching sociology and anthropology is pregnant with possibilities, which can aid in making course-content a source of refreshing imagination and intellectual courage in everyday life. After all, this was an expected outcome after Alvin Gouldner (1971) aggressively proposed the outlines of sociology, in which we were persuaded to see who we are, what we do, and where we are headed as teachers and students of sociology. It adequately radicalised us to almost perceive ourselves naked in the bathtub of our practices. We had to analyse ourselves with as much earnestness and honesty as we tend to cast our critical glances on the others. This was Gouldner’s brand of reflexivity without which, it was clear, we would be only brute, dishonest, cunning and crooked, ‘split personalities’. The sociologist with such split would be one thing in personal life and another in the professional practices. One can seldom hide this split in spite of the euphemisms such as scholar, sociologist, ethnographer, anthropologist, writers, and lastly celebrities. Pandemic is the time to return to the radical reflexivity of Gouldner, even though we know how to criticise and move ahead by revisiting Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992).

In such an act of reflexivity, teachers and students had to become collaborators in the pedagogic practices or co-travellers in the topsy-turvy ride of teaching and learning. Pedagogy, however, is not a source of an unstinted romance in our times. We ought to be also accepting the existence of this pedagogic enterprise as an interstitial reality with uncertainty of consequences. In agreement with a notion
of ‘pedagogy of hope’\textsuperscript{vi}, however, this paper indicates a way forward from the dead ends of debates on doing sociology in the South Asian context.

**Academic Brahmanism in Higher Education**

Pandemic years expressed it more dramatically that teachers and tragedies, causally determined by neoliberal logic, coincided in the contemporary milieu. The delimiting effects of neoliberal logic, operationalised in the state and economy, has altered the character of the universities where we hear only ranting on the rhetoric of freedom\textsuperscript{vii}. Those who rant loudest are the academic Brahmins and those who teach are reduced into mere cogs, ordinary pedagogues, or academic Shudras in the context of India\textsuperscript{viii}. Let alone sociality, relations of teachers and the taught, and pedagogy, the structures of universities leave little scope for the basics of intellectual progress and emotional sustenance. Irrespective of the pandemic, the tragedies pertain to the interplay between the structure (norms, conditions, rules and regulations) and agency of teachers and students. There is a scheme of analysis that mostly shifts the blame, in a sort of endless blame-game. The regimes of power, the technocratic administration of universities and colleges, the market forces, are some of the well-known villains in the dominant discourses against whom there is a never-ending shadowboxing. More paradoxically, many of the boxers, sworn critics of neoliberal policies and regimes of powers are themselves rivaling to occupy the position of technocratic power in the institutions of higher education. Most of the shadowboxing is indeed coloured by the vested interests. Hence, there was hardly an organised war cry when the online mode of teaching, learning, evaluation, and everything that is part of administrative chores became an overnight reality with the announcement of the lockdown in several parts of India on March 24, 2020, to begin with for 21 days and gradually extended into phases. Even after the phased unlocking, the government notifications announced the observance of the ‘new normal’ according to which the campuses were not open for the physical classes. Teachers toed the line, though there were critical whimpers, op-eds, and exchange of messages and emails about the idea of online teaching. Universities and colleges, schools and institutions of education, conducted meetings and pledged full conformity to the ‘new normal’\textsuperscript{ix}.

There was however hardly any news of teachers and administrators interacting about the fundamental questions, how to do online education? What should be the objectives, curriculum, methods, and pedagogy in teaching online? Instead, the
same courses which a teacher was supposed to teach offline, in physical spaces, were put across as the courses in the online mode. It seemed nothing had happened as far as higher education was concerned. Ironically, it seemed that COVID-19 may be dangerous for the humans, but higher education was immune to the threats and challenges of the virus. At least, this is what appeared from the announcement and execution of online teaching and learning. By and large, everyone in the institutions of higher education was expected to continue doing everything online, as if nothing had happened! The structures of hierarchy, power and privilege associated with professorial and administrative positions had to be intact. All teachers and students had to comply.

Teachers’ tragedies unfold in such a melodramatic background. What could teachers and students do in this milieu while they could seldom bring about a radical transformation in the fundamental structure? What pedagogy could evolve in such a situation whereby everyone expected, pretended, and acted as if nothing happened? They arguably deal with ‘tragedy’, following Nietzsche (1956) to find Dionysius (creatively radical departures) responses to the Apollonian orders (status quo). The poorly thought out mode of online education becomes a possibility of novel exploration leading to both, benediction and curse. In a tragedy, Dionysius’ spirit propels toward spontaneously cultivated ordinary artifacts of experiential knowledge.

This tragedy unfolds at broadly two levels for teachers and students. One is in relation with the subject of study, in the epistemic domain governed by the logic of Apollo, the Greek god of order. Teachers and students both could ask, ‘what to study under a course in such a time when the planning, vision, objectives are not in place?’ By asking such a question, despite the fact that there is a course structure that one is supposed to follow, teachers and students are geared towards making changes to the given structure. It unfolds an art, transformative and triumphant, in such a situation. The tragedy manifests as the students and teachers worship Dionysius, the Greek deity of creative energy. Secondly, tragedy refers to an over-determining structure. Ironically, within such a seemingly rigid structure, teachers and students play with their ‘hidden script’ under the aegis of ‘public transcripts”. It is all official, hence a public transcript. But, the details that verbs entailed in such an official script suggest the enactment of the hidden ideas.

Let’s ponder upon the first level of tragedy, underlining the dialectic between art and science, experience and technical instrumentality. Let’s return to the fettered
cavemen in Plato’s *Republic*. So tightly tethered to their position, location, pride, prejudices, and privileges, they could only see shadows cast by sun on the wall. They indulged in the art of interpretation until one of them endeavoured and beheld the beaming sun, metaphorical representation of unleashed knowledge. Thus ensued, as Max Weber helped us discern, an engagement in the realm of disenchantment. The teacher and students in the vocation of teaching and learning have to deal with the constant dialectics of shadows and sunlight, chained qua disciplined existence and wild curiosity blended in even the most wayward activities. Thereby rational structure in the vocation of teaching is not bereft of ‘experience’, ‘feelings’, and ‘sentiments’. The perfectly planned course-curriculum too summons a sort of ‘monkey business’ from both, teachers and students. Since science and art have certain common features, the vocation of science, or teaching science, presupposes an ability to deal with the components of art. Considering it a necessity for a teacher, in the vocation of science, Weber argues that a teacher ‘must qualify not only as a scholar but also as a teacher. And the two do not at all coincide. One can be a preeminent scholar and at the same time an abominably poor teacher’ (Mills & Gerth, 1958, p. 133). In the pandemic years, every scholarly teacher yearning for clarity of structure, length and breadth of a course-curriculum, and patterns of examinations and criteria of evaluation reminded us that Weber’s suggestion holds water even after such a long time, at this moment of modernity characterised by enhanced risk and precarity.

The vocation of teaching, often also termed as a profession with a stress on the rational structure and instrumentality attached to it, demands a teacher to deal with the complexity of experiences. If the courses taught during the pandemic years did not reflect a teacher’s and her students’ engagement with the everyday experiences of existential threats, would it not be equal to an intellectual sham? Moreover, it was these experiences in which Weber and many others perceived a possibility of growth for scientific knowledge. Stressing on the necessity to engage with the learners’ perspectives, and thereof experiential components, Gramsci noted,

*In the teaching of philosophy which is aimed not at giving the student historical information about the development of past philosophy, but at giving him a cultural formation and helping him to elaborate his own thought critically so as to be able to participate in an ideological and cultural community, it is necessary to take as one’s starting point what the student already*
knows and his philosophical experience (having first demonstrated to him precisely that he has such an experience, that he is a philosopher without knowing it). (Boggs, 1976, pp. 424-425)

Such profound insights were restrictively applied only in thinking about pedagogy in school education\textsuperscript{xiii}, and seldom in the domain of higher education. It has been almost a taboo, in the domain of higher education to deliberate on pedagogy. Several scholars take offense when they are addressed to as teachers, and retort, ‘we are scholars, researchers, and not teachers’\textsuperscript{xiii}. Is it to do with the reproduction of the customary hierarchy whereby school education is inferior or secondary to higher education\textsuperscript{xiv}? The ‘Brahmins’ are the scholars in the universities and the ‘Shudras’ are the teachers in school, in this scheme of thinking\textsuperscript{xv}. In other words, in the domain of higher education only the content of study matters and ‘how to teach’ does not. This hierarchy of thinking-talking and doing is deeply engrained in the structures of higher education. To maintain collegial bonhomie, ignoring the potential curricular and pedagogic anomalies in a university, academic Brahmanism flourishes.

Some of the potential anomalies are: an unduly long reading list with quantified numbers of pages to be read every week, a method of presentations by students from the beginning to the end of a semester and the teacher assuming the role of a mere moderator or facilitator, a heavy reliance on the modes of evaluation at every step in the classroom to generate a paranoid interest in the course, an undue stress on the reward and punishment governing the execution of a course. This is furthermore exacerbated by the bureaucratic dead-ends in a university space whereby teachers and students are left with limited roles to perform. The teachers, as far as the job of teaching is concerned, is reduced to a category of an ‘academic clerk’. An ‘academic clerk’ is a teacher who formulates an impressive course-curriculum, executes it, evaluates students, in a manner quite ‘measurable’. Everything from prescribed readings to students’ assignments have to become calculable digits in this scheme. And hence a teacher’s performance is eventually judged in terms of work-hours. Students also inform about their lower status in the hierarchy of practices. They are judged on what they have read, and how much. ‘It doesn’t matter how deeply a student has reflected, or felt the pain of people suffering around, or what lessons, philosophical realisations, a student gained from such encounters’\textsuperscript{xvi}. It is an academic Brahmanism inherent in the structures that make teachers and students in sociology, as well as in other academic disciplines, oblivious of pain and suffering commonplace in the
surrounding. ‘A student is expected to have a critical mind, yet the structural apathy inbuilt in our disciplines give little time or the space to dwell on such philosophical reflections xviii. The pandemic has more brutally disclosed that our discipline, and our academic practices, alienate students from their experiences and reflections, everyday encounters of suffering and pain, and even hope and despair.

This is the context, attuned to the neoliberal educational scenario and accentuated in the time of pandemic, in which a creative contest unfolds. In short, it is akin to a vacillation between cavemen’s engagement with shadows and sun, interpretative-reflexive and rational-science, emotion and reason, intuition and intellect.

**Recalling the Forgotten**

As stated at the onset, there is an impressive ream of deliberations on the structural constraints in higher education in India xviii. They highlight the delimiting impact of the academic bureaucracy, stultified institutional and intellectual growth among other things. It aids in understanding an unreflective, and to a great extent anti-teacher and anti-student bureaucracy, and hence non-regenerative social science. The bureaucratic authorities, institutional structure, and governing bodies are key actors and driving factors. In such a scheme, we can easily decipher an allegedly disembodied category of teacher as an unproductive or incompetent scholar. Also, there is a narrative of victimhood in which teachers are victim of market, state, and bureaucracy and the students are victims of a bad system and bad teachers, as it were. It is, however, erroneous to mistake the pawns, the teachers and students, as docile bodies.

Likewise, there is a strong liturgy of lament about the practice of sociology in the region of South Asia xix. Emphasis is placed on the decline in the quality and standard in sociological researches, teaching and learning. A glorified notion of ‘rigour’ underpins the two other attributes, quality and standard. Paradoxically, there has been a contemporary call for pluralising sociology xx, without a concrete plan or exemplars on ‘how to pluralise’. It thus is mere hobby-horse in intellectual deliberations detached from the practitioners, teachers and learners. There are many ways of doing sociology, intellectually as well as emotionally, vocationally as well as professionally, experientially as well as textually. This is where it is imperative to juxtapose the ‘diagnostic deliberations’ with ‘pedagogical pursuits’.
In addition to comprehending the issues of structural impediments, arguably, it is imperative to explore the micro-issues involved in teaching and learning. After all, sociological focus on inequalities out-there (social structure) cannot be separated from that on inequalities in-here (practices in the institutes of higher education). This divide between looking at self and the world is certainly as much a bottleneck as is the obsession with ‘buzzwords’xiii. This simple idea may not persuade the disciplinary orthodoxy, and hence the preponderance of perpetual divide between self and the other plagues the sociological attention to any issue, question, and idea on the anvil of sociological analyses.

Thinking of pedagogy in the time of pandemic requires steering clear of the dominant modes and means of analysis, and returning to the reasons why scholars resist the invitation to become pedagogues. This need not amount to falling back on the famous ‘call for indigenisation’. Much water has flown over the call for indigenisation. But behind such a call there were significant intellectual-polemical stimulus that ought to be retrieved. One such insightful observation is about ‘captive mind’ (Alatas, 1972) that was aimed at revealing the intellectual laziness of those who seldom question the content and methods of knowledge-transaction. The calling out of captive mind also aimed at incorporating the local-contextual social thoughts in the curricular and pedagogic practices of teaching and thus responded to ‘academic dependency’ (Alatas, 1993). This was not to debunk theories, which emerged in the European context; this was however to debunk the uncritical emulation of European theories. These issues, of epistemological significance, are crucial for a context-sensitive disciplinary scholarship (research, curriculum, knowledge-production and dissemination).

In this light, the backdrop of pandemic compels for a rethinking about the course-curriculum and pedagogy. Perhaps it has been much easier to talk about these and other such issues in a manner of intellectual deliberation than perform it through a curriculum, let alone pedagogy. The task becomes much more challenging when skepticism about the engagement with the contextual particularities is expressed through the phrase of ‘methodological nationalism’, an intellectual apprehension that sociology of particularities will be a compromise on the ‘universal-cosmopolitan’ characteristics of the discipline. It takes the notion of indigenous with a pinch of salt to suggest that it is a discursive product loaded with colonial legacy, orientalist approach, and idealism of nation-building in post independent countries xxii. The students along with teachers spontaneously resort to the local/contextual while engaging with the textual, in a pedagogical plan to render
teaching and learning into a context sensitive endeavour. A life-threatening situation of pandemic makes this endeavour even more like an existential necessity. And hence, the following section elucidates a possible phenomenology of pedagogic pursuits in the context of pandemic. It is not merely about online education, instead, it is about how playfully teachers and students alter the given.

**Pedagogic Possibilities during the Pandemic**

With the announcement of closure of university campuses in March 2020, with subsequent lockdown across India, a new idea was abuzz: converting the mode of teaching from real classroom to virtual-digital space based! The online mode of education continues to be the only option in 2021 as well given the perpetuity of the pandemic. The official notifications only mentioned the shift to the online mode, almost ignoring the fundamental questions, i.e. what to teach and how! If any teacher asked it publicly, which some of them did, the answer was: it is a temporary measure to manage the teaching of the ongoing courses for the time being! Evidently the techno-managerial logic behind the decision to go online was more prevalent across various institutions. Hence, there was hardly any consultation with those who practice care for pedagogy. It was not thought out in a relational mode of decision-making. After all, this is how it has been with academic administration, passing unilateral conclusions and judgments.

A sense of liminality prevailed, in which the pre-existing structure was perpetuated with a good amount of extra-structural, if not necessarily anti-structural. The pre-existing structural logic was not only in turning everything online without much consultation with the practitioners, but it was also in the fact that the same course-structure, structure of marking and evaluating, and even attendance was still thought to be sacred. Only gradually, much later, the institutions began to think otherwise. The holy cow, a trinity of attendance, evaluation and elimination, was available for rethinking. Such was the effect of the pandemic bound changes that brought about, if not really any lasting structural transformation, a possibility to not bother about the holy trinity. Not that there was any prophetic realisation, or profound awakening behind. Like many things, this too was only ad-hoc, managerial, bureaucratic, so as the show must go on! Even though without much change in the institutional conscience, there emerged some space for those who wish to see a change. All such changes reflected the extra-structural, pertaining to the possibility in the time of utter confusion that swayed society, state and educational institutions alike. The message was loud
and clear. All must continue to be on the ‘job’ of teaching and learning, the way they have been, following the official instructions. All must also have a structure in place, in teaching and learning, the way they have been, though not much instruction was available in this regard. The absence of a clear idea about ‘how much of course-curriculum to teach’, ‘how to evaluate’, and ‘how to conduct the pedagogic practices’, however, came as a blessing in disguise. But was it an absolute blessing?

What if, freedom suddenly dawns on those habitual of a rigid technocratic system? A bagful of mixed feelings engulfed with a bit of trepidation, uncertainty about how to do, fear of trial and error, and a bit of respite that this may keep students and teachers safe. Both teachers and students began to understand that it was a piecemeal arrangement, provisional and only for the pandemic. But then, both had a challenge about what to do in the online mode. Many just continued teaching the way they did in the real space, with the same course outline, same methods of transactions, with eyes transfixed at evaluating. We heard of teachers complaining about graver form of mass-absenteeism since it was difficult to detect the present and absent students. In spite of teachers’ request to the students to keep the camera on during the classes, there was a pretext of poor internet connectivity and the digital divides. Many teachers hilariously emphasised the necessity of mandatory attendance, with the same old roll call. It was unthinkable since online mode facilitated the partial presence and absence of the students who logged on to attend classes with their cameras off. Teachers complained that we speak for forty minutes and we get questions from only one or two students. Rest of the students stay indifferent. Teachers tried the methods of evaluating the students during the classes. Those who ask questions get marks and those who don’t, don’t. Teachers asked them to read the volumes of reading materials, and based on them, send questions in email to the teachers. Quite a few of the students obliged for a while. Then, they turned silent. The greatest difficulty the teachers faced was about the manner of examination and evaluation. Even those teachers who were never in favor of open-book examinations, and quite a few of them also seem too unfamiliar with any such mode of exams, had no other choice than give questions to students who wrote answers at home referring to all possible sources. Teachers, who seem to rejoice the act of evaluating and passing judgments, had great frustration in reading those essays by students since they seem to have gone far beyond the stricture of a course.

This is the larger scenario in which I taught two courses, namely Methodologies
in Social Sciences and Sociology of South Asia in the Monsoon semester 2020 and Winter Semester 2020-2021 respectively. We knew that we were all living at home, with our families, juggling with our roles at home, worrying about the threat of virus and efforts to stay safe, and in the middle of it, we were teaching and learning. Even though we tried to segregate the parts of our jumbled existence, we knew the limits of such efforts. Admitting the complexity, I asked students to critically reflect on the existing course-structure, and think of the ways of cutting it short, with fewer topics and readings to discuss. The only criteria underlying the exercise were feasibility and interest. It triggered an intriguing excitement among students.

Methodologies in Social Sciences (henceforth Methodologies) was a course offered to the third semester postgraduate students, who had presumably already learned the classical and contemporary theories and other such basic courses in sociology. It is usually expected that after spending a year and half through the Masters in Sociology program, the students would be mature enough to deal with the philosophical, epistemological and ontological detailing in a course on Methodologies. But it turns out that the prior familiarity with the courses also comes with a-priori conditioning of the students’ minds. Hence, there is an evident challenge in pedagogic play with the materials, issues, discussions, and thinking.

In two classes back to back, while laying out the introduction of the basic ideas in Methodologies, I expected them to start talking about their preferred and shortened version of the course-structure, which only yielded silence. The message reached out to the whole class that the students are invited by the teacher to re-frame the course structure. It synergised the class and the attendance increased in the first week. In the second week, however, it began to dwindle despite several cues, ideas, and suggestions about shortening on the offer. It was obvious that the intellectual freedom is easier sought than accomplished. While I set out giving first few lectures of half an hour each, referring to various nuggets available on YouTube, I began to enquire as to why there was no decision about the course structure as yet. The two class representatives eventually admitted that they were unable to cope with the given freedom, and their sheer lack of discretion in whatever ideas about shortening the course and its reading list. And yet they suggested a shortened version without an iota of care for coherence and justification.
A month had passed and the discussions on the emergence of positivism as the most accepted methodology was already a familiar idea. The class-discussions had already referred to the contributions of Karl Popper, Alvin Gouldner, Robert Nisbet, and C Wright Mills, etc. And right on the day when we were going to talk about René Descartes’ meditations, the students requested me to shorten the course structure for them. This was an eventual surrender of the free will, in which our structures of higher education have already trained us to such an extent that we usually let go of a chance, an accidental opportunity. In a long meeting we cut short the course, retaining the fundamental texts and merging a few sections of course structure for shorter discussions. While the trajectory of methodology from Europe was shortened, we retained the exercise of exploring the methodological possibilities based on the texts from South Asia. This exercise was aimed at exploring the possibility of methodological innovations routed through the domains of experience from the socio-cultural contexts of the region. The larger objective of the course is to acquaint students with the available debates on how methodologies shaped up in social sciences, what ways of seeing emerged as dominant, and how contestation about the dominant ways of seeing in social sciences opened up the possibility for methodological innovations. With such objective, the course solicits the teacher and learners to connect the prescribed text/reading materials with the contexts, the experiential domain of students and teachers.

However, it so happens that students are as unwilling to undertake risk and refer to experiences as the teachers. Hence, most of the time any class lecture or discussions in the light of a ‘read-text’ seldom steps out of the ‘written words’. I have encountered it on usual occasion of physical classroom too. Students felt unable to relate from their life world. Instead, they either rattled from the texts, or paraphrased, or quoted, as part of the discussions. This was so in the online mode too. If they had to ask a question, it would be in the manner of asking for the basic meaning of what I said, the concept that was referred to, or the point that was raised. This was an exercise that one can summarily equate with the basic arithmetic, one plus one amounts to two! Exceptional observations in relation with the threat to life and troubled perceptions in the time of pandemic usually came from the seemingly non-metropolitan students, from cities and towns located away from Delhi. Those students usually struggle with paraphrasing from the prescribed reading materials, or texts, as much as they struggle with poor quality internet connectivity, and various kinds of scarcities in life. Such students, when encouraged, lead the discussions to acknowledge new avenues, novel
issues, and risk prone ways of seeing. Often such students do not end up writing an essay in assignment that a quality-rigour bound evaluative teacher could marvel upon. But their loud thoughts, raw ideas, nebulous interjections, bear enormous possibilities. Even though they fail to fully appreciate a text, they seem to be keen to connect everything with their contexts, a whirlpool of experiences.

When it comes to the exercise of exploring the possibility of methodological innovations, based on a text that the students have to select as per their preference, one is left with no choice other than leaving behind the basic arithmetic. Even in this exercise the students wanted to play it safe, and hence their first choices were the texts known and read in sociology. When asked to find a text usually not read in the various courses in sociology, the students had to be wanderer and explorer, like Alice in Wonderland, unsure and yet driven by the conviction to find. While they were attending classes, listening to some of the lectures available on YouTube, there were meetings about the selection of the texts. I had to once again, provide cues, ideas, hints, suggestions. It was interesting to observe that some of the students who spoke very good English, and had clarity of diction, and scored well in the written assignments, had great difficulty in finding a suitable text. Likewise, thinking about methodologies through the prism of pandemic bound experience felt like an outlandish exercise to the students. Most of the time, the teacher had to provide such connections, contestation and reconciliation.

If Methodologies was still manageable since there was a clear beginning and end to the structure despite our free-play with it, Sociology in South Asia (henceforth SSA) is structured as a seminar course, taught and learnt in workshop mode. This is offered as per the calendar of courses in the first semester when fresh lot of postgraduate students joins. The stated objective behind the course is to acquaint students about the basic characteristics of sociology, in relation with social anthropology, the disciplinary history and practices in the region of South Asia with reference to the stories from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and moreover exploring the questions and issues for taking forward the project of SSA. Ever since the advent of the Department of Sociology at South Asian University, this course has been taught as an ongoing project in the workshop mode. Hence, there have been generous changes in the course outline over the period of time too.

It really shows yet another kind of responses from students, leading to the emergence of an uncanny relationship between teacher and taught, and pedagogic
possibility, given that the students are fresh out of their undergraduate programmes. With due excitement, keen interest, and perpetual expression of wonder, students have been willing to indulge themselves in intellectual adventures in this course. With the pandemic in the backdrop, it was even more pronounced an imperative to think of SSA as a necessarily ‘regionally routed’ enterprise rather than the one handed down from ‘somewhere’. The course revolved around the basic epistemic units, such as, society, culture, polity, knowledge, tradition, modernity, Eurocentrism, and decolonising. For each, the students had plenty to say, on the precondition – the teacher had to be a patient listener. This is pedagogy of patience in which the relation between the teacher and taught unfolds with due fluidity and allows for sincere trial-and-error. Also, in sync with the workshop mode, everyone had to enact the role of craftsmen, literally hammering down on each idea, referring to a host of thinkers, scholars, and a lot of personal-biographic experiences. In this exercise name-dropping had little space. Instead, thinking through the unit ideas and putting together sung and unsung names without privileging anyone was more crucial.

In this regard, it is important to note that the students who had done sociology in undergraduate courses had certain fixed ideas about the discipline. Gradually, they began to realise that it was a particular mode of learning in which the basic characteristics of sociology, separated from anthropology more often than not, was hardly questioned. They had also grown up thinking that sociology means a particular list of questions, a particular set of concepts and perspectives, mostly from the textbooks, which seldom invite students to think critically while learning the basics. In this regard, the sociologically informed students were rarely different from the orthodox sociologists who leave no room for thinking against the grains. On the other hand, the students who came from literature and science background were far more willing to be open to the wonders. They learnt the disciplinary categories and yet they maintained a sense of discomfort about the categories, and hence willing to question them. For them, the crucial question was not only to understand the structural inequality and the ways of transformation; it was also important as to how one understands them, why, and what to expect out of the act of understanding. It was this openness that allowed students to toy with many novel facets, which may be relatively under-explored in sociology in South Asia.

The first trigger in such exploration was the so-called buzzwords. But then, it was not about following a fad. For example, the exploration of performative in
sociology and anthropology in South Asia meant situating it across borders, societies, cultures, and politico-economic contexts. Recognising as to why performative, art, photographs, etc. are relatively neglected also led to understand that SSA hardly ever arrived at the sensorium of structural inequalities. Inequality with any name and expression is not merely word, rhetoric, or an institutional imposition in societies in South Asia. In myriad forms, inequality is registered and perpetuated through human sensory perceptions based on smell, sight, touch, sound, and taste. The students came up with diverse seemingly non-sociological texts ranging from fiction, poetry, religious treatises, socio-philosophical ruminations, as their selected texts to speak of the ideas for doing sociology in South Asia. From such texts, and students’ readings of them, there surfaced a rasa-matrix of inequality that the students were offering to add to their agenda for SSA. This rasa-matrix underscored the systemic and affective perpetuity, giving an ontological turn to some of the taken for granted categories, rhetoric, and ideas.

As evident, pandemic-pedagogy presupposes patience, perseverance, and persistence. There are many occasions when one joins in the mode of lament about the decline of interest in reading, informed debating, and writing. Also, teachers are not immune to the conditioning done by structures. On many occasions, as a teacher, I may have had second thoughts about the endeavour I had embarked upon. But, eventually a pedagogue is a die-hard optimist, we know from various philosophers of education. Hence, awaiting it to happen, one had to keep talking, or even give space to think in silence. Slices of individual biography, subjective experiences, and everything that seems personal had to become the means of doing. The ‘personal’ does not find an easy passage in the ‘public’ domain where teaching and learning unfolds. It could be also due to the training that students receive in their schools and undergraduate colleges. The training instills an undue skepticism toward one’s own experiences as a learner. And hence, articulation of experiences in relation with theoretical propositions of the texts, no matter in agreement or disagreement, is fraught with linguistic punctuations, semantic confusions, and under-confident mannerisms. There seems to be a collision between ‘hidden transcription’ and ‘public transcription’, which Scott (1987) discusses while deliberating on the potential weapons of the weak. The students’ ‘hidden transcript’ is, unlike the popular conception, not always a piece of juicy gossip. It is also inclusive of, in large part, the experiential narrations related to the socio-cultural and politico-economic context and biography. While the popular and dominant demand is, from the students, to
follow the ‘public transcript’, the prescribed texts, the curriculum, the assignments for evaluation, and the officially prescribed ways of doing the same, the hidden transcript vis-à-vis the experiential narratives are never out of the sight.

This evident tendency solicits from a teacher an alternative pedagogic plan, to let happen a fusion between textual and contextual, intellectual and experiential, rational and emotional. It solicits a necessary change in the method of execution, the course curricula had to be student-oriented, rather than a teacher-oriented curriculum with excessive display of the ‘teacher’s academic prowess’\textsuperscript{XXVI}. More often than not, a teacher feels inclined to cram a course with higher numbers of ‘readings’, with a quantifiable notion of ‘rigour’ and thus of ‘quality’. The prevalent, and questionable, commonsense is: the more the readings, the more rigorous the course. On the contrary, the above-discussed courses attempted to be selective about readings. The assumption was that a qualitative engagement with the chosen text, rather than a quantitative evaluation based on the numbers of pages read, is the prerequisite for experience to unfold with the texts. Second important step was to make sure that the texts are systematically, even though selectively, discussed in the lectures in the virtual classroom. The references to the selected texts were mostly dovetailed with the references to the slices from the biography of teacher, experiential fragments, illustrations based on the reports from newspapers, work in fiction, poetry, and cinema. The students invariably found it useful to see the analytical connections between the texts and the contexts (socio-cultural components pertaining to the everyday life of teachers and students). The lectures were often a mix of audio-visual, and oral presentations, combining the textual and contextual components.

**Conclusion**

Pandemic held the sociality as one of the culpable sources of the spread of virus. A pedagogy that seeks to generate an intellectually and emotionally exciting sociality, even though its online-education, is the need of the hour. Even in the ‘old normal’, as opposed to the so-called ‘new normal’, this was a prerequisite for a healthy academic vocation. It was always an imperative to recognise the variety of academic Brahmanism, and tackle them through the courses and pedagogic practices. With the shift to the online education, the challenges to pedagogy have increased manifold, as many of the old issues have found dramatically high decibel articulations that no academic deafness can ignore. The pedagogues do
not have easy access to the students in flesh and blood. We cannot look into their eyes, read their faces, judge their emotions, and talk to them accordingly. We have to be more prescient than ever before. Teachers as mere cogs in the unreflective machinery cannot do the wonders, let alone breaking free from the structures of strictures. By default, the online education provides that rare opportunity for the teachers and students to try out the ways that were structurally not available.

Tragedies persist, for, the world with structural thinking guided by neoliberal logic and imagination is not going to disappear in the wake of the pandemic. The technocratic administrators may interrogate, students may resist, and teachers may continue to just toe the line. But die-hard pedagogic optimism persists too, to give birth to a creative challenge to teachers and learners to rediscover their subjects of study. Responding to the levels of tragedies, with an awareness of the strictures posed by academic bureaucracy, this paper shows that the teachers and students have moved a few (perhaps baby) steps toward reconciliation between the prescribed texts and the learners’ contexts. It is not without resistance, frustration, and failures. But then, every move of a pawn on the intellectual chessboard, grappling with the stalemate, does amount to both success and failure. These pedagogic pursuits may not be revolutionary enough to alter the structural behemoth. They are very small with smaller impacts. But then, to borrow a phrase from Schumacher (1993), small is beautiful, isn’t it?

Notes:

i A metaphysical swan-song for Dionysian wisdom in praise of the tragedy-myth, which according to Nietzsche, characterises the works of art and experiences of aesthetics. See Nietzsche (1956).

ii For a similar approach and deliberation, see Schwartzman (2020).

iii A similar approach, viz. phenomenology of experience, though with a different focus (practices of research and writing) was in Pathak, D. N. (2021).

iv For more on the technologised mode of education, see Pacheco (2020). 
https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11125-020-09521-x

v This was central in a talk by a sociologist of education, namely Avijit Pathak at a public-academic space named GalpLok, see, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kt-Rw8qGt8w&t=9s

vi The diagnosis of an ailing system is merely a means and not an end. Freire (1994) aids in understanding the imperative of actions to break free from the system of banking education. That is where hope lies, in ontological sense, for the pedagogues.
On the perpetuity of neoliberal challenges to pedagogy, see Giroux (2014).

This twang is inspired by Guru (2002).

The various instructions related to new normal was also a part of the campaign during the pandemic, see https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1634328

Lately, a provocative acknowledgment of the self-assumed immunity of the universities in India appeared in a popular piece, see Apoorvanand (2021) at https://scroll.in/article/994076/indian-universities-are-pretending-everything-is-normal-as-the-world-around-them-is-collapsing

For more on hidden transcript and public/official transcript, see Scott (1987).

National Council of Educational Research and Training in India, published the National Curriculum Framework-2005, which guides schools in framing curriculum as well as pedagogical approaches. It encourages schools for a context-sensitive and experiential learning of children in schools in India.

Such remarks are heard more often than not when teaching practice is focus of discussion in various parts of India. It seems that in popular academic understanding in the institutions of higher education, a teacher is only found in the schools, not in colleges and universities.

Elsewhere Kumar (2008) questions this fabrication, which results into perceiving school teachers as non-intellectuals, lacking in self-respect, and hence butts of quotidian criticism.

Guru (2002) discussed academic Brahminism in relation with the so-called pure and higher one who would develop theories, and polluted lowly scholars who do empirical research.

A student informed in a personal communication.

A student informed in a personal communication.

See for example, Altbach (1977); Patel (2004); Beteille (2010), a few among others.

There has been a string of debate on the issue published in journals such as Economic and Political Weekly, see for example, Das (1993); Deshpande (1994); and Contributions to Indian Sociology, see for example, Vasavi (2011); Patel (2011).

I have in mind Vasavi (2011) and Chaudhury (2010).

Chaudhuri’s (2021) criticism of sociological preoccupation with fancy ‘buzzwords’ is well taken, but there is an ominous logical flaw in the separation of in-ward and out-wards interests in inequality.

See Patel (2013) in this regard.

See for a rare example, Alatas and Sinha (2001).

Students of sociology and social anthropology religiously read about the interplay of structure and anti-structure in discussion on liminal in the rite of the passage, see Turner (2011).

Rasa refers to the attributes, emotions, and accordingly enactments (bhawas) discussed in the ancient text Natyasastra by the sage Bharat. See Bharat Muni (1951).
Elsewhere this is discussed in terms of the self-indulgent superiority of the senior peers, supervisors, and teachers, see Pathak (2021).
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