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Book Review

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Rethinking Education in the Context of Post-Pandemic South Asia: Challenges and Possibilities, Uma Pradhan, Karen Valentin, and Mohini Gupta (Eds.), Routledge, 2024, UK.

Part of the Routledge series on *Research in International and Comparative Education*, this edited volume brings together scholars from the different countries of South Asia and facilitates a conversation on the diverse ways in which the pandemic impacted educational structures. The 14 chapters focus on wide-ranging educational contexts in India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Pakistan, and Bhutan. The chapters have been divided into three distinct themes around which the "rethinking" is done—*Rethinking Learning*, *Rethinking Education Inequalities*, and *Rethinking Technologies of Education*. There are certain overlaps across the themes, particularly on the issue of online teaching and learning which recurs in many chapters.

Apart from the diversity in context, the papers also use a variety of methods and sources. Since the volume deals with a time that was largely characterised by physical distancing, lockdowns, and the lack of mobility, many authors have deployed varied ways of gathering data. Chase Podsakoff and Karen Valentin have collected epistolary interviews in the form of text messages and digitally transferred handwritten notes from young girls who had to move out of their hostels during the lockdown and live with their families. Manjula Vithanapathirana and Sakunthala Ekanayake have conducted interviews of teachers in Sri Lanka over email and telephone. Also, for some contributors, autoethnography has proven to be effective as they were stuck at one place. Krea University teacher Sameer Thomas's study is based on his own experience of teaching in a virtual classroom. Similarly, Pushpa Palanchoke, a musician, participated in a music apprenticeship programme and documented her experiences.

One of the most important contributions of the book is to unpack some of the pandemic-induced terms that are as much part of policy and scholarly discourse, as they are worryingly overused

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as common sense. One such term is "learning loss". Abhinav Ghosh's chapter deals with the inherent problems with the discourse of measuring and calculating learning loss—how it uses parameters that make the conclusions reductionist. Also, he shows how the deficit-oriented discourse has been used and abused by edtech companies, private educational organisations, and global financial institutions like the World Bank for their own gain. Podsakoff and Valentin's study on Nepal also exposes how development organisations, think tanks and scholars have conflated learning loss with schooling loss and refused to consider how students were exposed to various kinds of non-institutionalised, locally embedded learning practices that unsettle the hegemony of school-based learning. Young girls who had to live with their families in the hill district of Mustang revealed how they got some time to "learn" work related to farming, tending animals, and cooking. Palanchoke and Pranab Singh reflect how the Newa community based in Tahnani of Kathmandu Valley used the time of the lockdown to revive *Taḥnani Dāphā Khalaḥ*, traditional ways of "learning" music. However, this chapter relies on a simplistic opposition between "Western" and "traditional", implying that the traditional/indigenous could only be revived when the formal/Western was shut. The separation seems further problematic since the group themselves used various kinds of so-called "modern" networks and digital platforms for such a revival.

Another overused expression that has been addressed from multiple angles is the "digital divide". Amanda Gilbertson and Joyeeta Dey use the context of the COVID-19 pandemic to probe into the implementation of Section 12(1)(c) of the Right to Education Act, 2009 (a section that mandates private schools to function as neighbourhood schools and reserve seats for marginal students from the locality) in four private schools. The article illustrates that despite the schools' good intentions, online classrooms disrupted their efforts towards integration. While affluent students could access video classes, more disadvantaged students relied on WhatsApp messages, private tutors, and *mohalla* schools.

The editors declare in the introduction that the book anchors itself on "crisis" literature. Apart from the direct reference to pandemic as a time of crisis, some chapters add further layers to both the idea of crisis and the digital divide. Khan's chapter argues that the pandemic was not a sudden crisis in Kashmir, it was an added crisis amid an already crisis-ridden society. Kashmir was already under continuous lockdowns and curfews when the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns were imposed. For Kashmiri students, digital education became a farce as Kashmir saw the highest number of days of the internet ban. Dalsie Gangmei's study of the harsh

realities of digital education in the remote district of Tamenglong in Manipur argues that it is not adequate to explain the situation in terms of digital haves and have-nots. Geographical and climatic conditions, cultural proximity, or distance from the so-called "mainland" of India determines the hierarchy of digital access. Tamenglong has harsh rainfall and underdeveloped power infrastructure added with continuous political turmoil. People are often seen trying to "catch network" from trees and hilltops. No wonder, the shift to digital learning has only gravely exacerbated their existing inequalities.

The divide and the challenges were not just about unequal access. In some cases, it was more about awareness. Laraib Niaz, Camilla Chaudhary, and Kusha Anand's chapter highlights the Pakistan government's prompt response to address educational difficulties by using the medium of television. Two telelearning programmes—Teleschool and Taleem Ghar—were initiated to impart education, particularly for disadvantaged and marginal students. Although the initiative was based on data that television was the most widely used medium, it was noticed that viewership was greater among children from affluent households and educated parents, compared to children with less educated parents. In Sri Lanka, on the other hand, the government failed to ensure access to effective learning for other reasons. Arosha Adikaram and Neelangie Nanayakkara's study tells us that in state-run higher education institutions offering management courses, access to internet was very high. Yet, the severe economic crisis that followed the pandemic made power cuts and the lack of connectivity a recurrent problem. Also, both students and teachers badly felt the absence of physical classroom. While teachers found it difficult to develop students' skills, students found online learning passive and eventually monotonous.

A couple of chapters delve deeper into the psychological impact of online classrooms. Dishari Chattaraj and Arya Vijayaraghavan reflect on the intense dissonance in learning experiences created because of the sudden transition to remote learning. Many learner-initiated efforts like creating groups to communicate and share trauma and learning difficulties which were based on empathy and support created some sense of consonance. Thomas' chapter begins with a teacher's discomfort with teaching a "grid of black squares" with names of his students. But his perceptions of Zoom classrooms gradually transformed when he learnt how students turned off their videos as a gesture of solidarity with classmates who had weaker internet connections.

The chapter emphasises the importance of “caring and sharing” to deal with mental health challenges posed by the pandemic.

Although the book covers a range of issues that are crucial to understanding the subject, at times the themes appear repetitive. Let me cite a couple of instances. Vithanapathirana and Ekanayake’s survey of teachers in Sri Lanka and Mythili Ramchand, Meera Chandran, Reeta Rai, and Vithanapathirana’s comparative study of teacher education in India, Sri Lanka, and Bhutan talk about the difficulties faced by teachers due to the suddenness of the disruptions in teaching modalities. It often seems like the problems acquired very similar forms in the different empirical contexts. Nilesh G. and Nikhil Walde study the worsening of the precarious and unfair conditions of women teachers at low-cost private schools in Hyderabad. Prem Phyak, Peshal Khanal, and Sushan Acharya also speak about teacher well-being in private schools in Nepal. Both talk about the problems of privatised education, underpaid jobs, work-related stress, and layoffs. They sound so similar at times that the reader is left wondering what is, then, the specificity of Hyderabad and Nepal? If structural issues appear so similar, then how do the different contexts add to the larger conceptual questions? The similarities in the ways of addressing issues like power cuts, the lack of internet connectivity, and the difficulties resulting from the spatial convergence of home and work also often obfuscates the specificities of their contexts across chapters.

Despite the limitations pointed out above, there is no doubt that the edited volume is a valuable contribution to the field of sociology of education and would be immensely useful for students, teachers, researchers, and policymakers alike.