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Guest Editorial

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Deepening Fault Lines and New Precarities in Education After the COVID-19 Pandemic

Five years after the pandemic ravaged lives and livelihoods across the world, there appears to be a general consensus to forget what transpired. Despite its sociological implications and severe impact on education, it is telling that since 2020, academia has missed out on considering the pandemic as a research category in itself. The imagination of the pandemic as a short-lived event that demands that we return to the past or the "old normal" without raising questions on its consequences tends to overlook fault lines in education's present and past (Selwyn, 2023). Despite the pandemic exposing "long-festering educational tensions" and expectations that the sociology of education could be "reframed through the lens of the pandemic", why has there been a rush to push it "to the back of our collective consciousness" (pp. 1216–17)? Should we not ask what damages the education system suffered after schools and colleges reopened?

A case in point is institutionalising online education despite studies suggesting that teachers and students from deprived backgrounds neither had the means nor had a grasp on this method. From a sociology of education perspective, should newer structures of exclusion created by latest realities such as digital markets in education not be studied? Were migrant children returning home from urban to rural areas only a temporary disruption—and are they back in schools? With reopened institutions attempting to bridge what was popularly (and reductively) termed during the pandemic as a "learning loss", what structural forces have led us to anticipate that the new precarities in education have been addressed?

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This issue inquires into the COVID-19 pandemic's consequences on students and young academics in different settings. Empirical explorations spread over five years since the pandemic in 2020 explore the academic outcomes, livelihood crises, and negotiations forced by the pandemic. The vulnerable groups that these studies cover—young girls, women in academia, tribal students, and those on social and economic margins—are not often foregrounded in education studies. Their experiences during the pandemic show the challenges they faced, the devastating impact of institutional closures, and the lack of policy and its targeted implementation. The sheer retreat of the Indian state during the first two phases of the pandemic coincided with the dominance of neoliberal practices in education, as seen in the spread of educational markets, shadow education providers, the near-collapse of the state-run education system, and the intense pressure on teachers in schools and universities. Underneath these are harsh practices that perceive education as a transactional service in an economic market. This was also a critical time for the role of technology in education. While digital mediums have enabled teachers to reach students in unprecedented settings, the ways in which we are moving forward with technology and the mediums of digital education need attention. The aim of this issue is to remind readers to not overlook the pandemic—a calamity that has forced students, academics, and other stakeholders in education to anticipate a more precarious future than ever before.

The concern of deepening fault lines and new precarities underline all the articles in this issue. Developed in the context of the labour market and the escalating insecurities within, the term "precarity" has also been employed to capture instabilities and vulnerabilities in education, especially since the 1990s with the unprecedented growth of educational markets and the diminishing role and responsibilities of the state. If precarity is a state of uncertainty, Guy Standing identifies a "precariat" as a group with an "unstable labour arrangement, lack of identity, and erosion of rights" (2018). The "erosion of rights" of the vulnerable and marginalised during the pandemic helps capture the nature of this precarity and further disintegration of those who are not valued in the system. Standing further underscores that the precariat exceeds the level of education required for the labour that they finally obtain (p. 5). Today, education is steadily being associated with work which is also becoming increasingly informal, i.e., riddled with meagre opportunities and increased insecurity (Dovemark & Beach, 2016). Education provides no guarantee of work. In turn, work is both scarce and often undervalues the education that one has received.

However, neoliberal capitalist economies need the precariat to be educated, to work, and to live on minimal support (Standing, 2018). We see these trends emerging simultaneously in education as well as in the labour market. Today's complex market economies have also influenced structural changes in institutional arrangements and educational pedagogy which overlooks the rights, demands, and aspirations of the deprived classes. New precarities are reflected even among those in positions of power, the academics, who increasingly find themselves amid contractualisation and casualisation of work. Analysed in this way, is it possible to reimagine post-pandemic education in newer ways or to think of the pedagogy and strategies to resist neoliberal university practices and policies. The forced normalisation of precarity in education needs to be challenged by development paradigms that recognise the struggles and oppression in the present times.

The empirical studies presented in this issue highlight some of the concerns in sociology of education. Pushpam Kumar's paper, *Renegotiating with Dreams: COVID-19 and Shifting Educational Aspirations in Rural Bastar* focuses on the vulnerable but aspirational educational journey of an Adivasi student, Sunher. Before the pandemic, Sunher had aligned his goals of education towards acquiring an "office job" with the facilities available around him. As these limited opportunities became unavailable, he was forced to let go of his dreams. He found himself renegotiating his aspirations within the same structures that he had aimed to resist. Manasi Thapliyal Navani and Shivani Nag's paper, *Women's Experiences in Academia during the Pandemic: A Narrative Inquiry* draws attention to how gender mediated the challenges faced by academics as the boundaries between home and work collapsed during the pandemic. Their narratives draw attention to the patriarchal structures inside homes and institutions that sought to invisibilise their struggles and constrain their intellectual pursuits. The academics' reflections on working from home further highlights the tensions that women face when balancing personal and professional identities in a system that is not designed to support them. Yamini Agarwal's paper, *"This is Not What I Thought my Life Would be": Impact of the Pandemic on Girls' Education in an Unauthorised Colony in Delhi* follows the educational journeys of 25 girls from 2021 to 2023. The paper captures the educational challenges in their lives from before 2020 which worsened in the face of the pandemic and little help from home or schools. Quitting schools and early marriages—as well as newer uncertainties post the pandemic in education and in the labour market—put people on the urban margins at further risk of neglect and exploitation.

It is undeniable that the pandemic laid bare disparities across socio-economic parameters whether in education, health, development, or policy. What needs acknowledgement is that these disparities were lived by the marginalised, who were not only more likely to be exposed to health challenges but also suffered disadvantages in employment, education, and in future life chances. In overlooking their experiences, we risk normalising inequalities that instead need evolved vocabularies in order to think of the pandemic in complex, intersectional ways rather than in the simplistic, deterministic language of loss and recovery. The books included in this issue challenge the language of pandemic analysis—of "inclusiveness" and "growth" and "development"—and push us to think of newer ways to frame the future instead.

Divya Kannan's deliberations on the book, *Contextualising the COVID Pandemic in India: A Development Perspective* (eds. Indrani Gupta and Mausumi Das) foreground the limitations of thinking within the box and not drawing on global social and economic responses to the pandemic inequalities. The book itself brings together perspectives from various disciplines to assess the disruption of the pandemic in different sectors and the structural challenges that went unaddressed, and instead, were mired in the immediate focus on recovery, the silent bearing of losses, and "the future ahead". The volume shows the unique challenges that the pandemic posed to India towards managing a crisis with its diverse population and the fact that in order to address systemic economic and developmental inequalities in the future, it would need to pursue a reimagined inclusive growth.

Debarati Bagchi's review of the book, *Rethinking Education in the Context of Post-Pandemic South Asia: Challenges and Possibilities* (eds. Uma Pradhan, Karen Valentin, and Mohini Gupta) offers a critique of the pandemic's impact particularly on educational institutions and its structures from different South Asian contexts. The book offers readers the possibility to "rethink" education after the pandemic by reflecting on the crisis as it unfolded, or as the authors argue (p. 3), "the crisis-induced uncertainty could be generative, rather than unproductive, to introspect the existing systems and to rethink the possibilities for the future". This opportunity also means finding ways to draw on conceptual frameworks and critical thinking that can aptly represent diverse contexts.

One conceptual framework is offered by Henry Giroux in what he terms as "pandemic pedagogy". Radhika Menon's review of Giroux's *Race, Politics and Pandemic Pedagogy: Education in a Time of Crisis* examines his proposition to study the intersections between the

pandemic and neo-fascism during Donald Trump's first term as the US president. Giroux argues that employing the "pandemic pedagogy" can enable us to see beyond the normalised humdrum of the crisis into unveiling the "elements of the fascist state" (p. 38) and its politics that legitimises further deprivation of those on the margins, such as labourers, asylum seekers, migrants, minorities, and so on. Given the new fragilities of political and economic systems post the pandemic—concerns that transcend boundaries—Giroux's book urges readers to see the deepening intersections between neoliberalism and inequalities and, drawing on his critical pedagogy thesis (Giroux, 2020), to develop tools that can enable transformative learning, questioning, and human agency.

The possibility of "seizing the moment", i.e., learning from the experience of the pandemic is offered by Prachi Srivastava in her commentary, *Reimagining Our Futures: Education and the Promise of Possibility* where she proposes a re-examination of education systems that privilege only selective knowledge structures. Srivastava argues that reimagining our education systems will mean including previously ignored knowledges and methodologies as well as forging collaborative partnerships to not only tackle pandemic-fuelled inequalities but also to enable policy choices that will frame educational futures. Unbridled growth of markets in education—as we saw in the proliferation of ed-tech companies during the pandemic—is one such area that needs critical and urgent re-examination. Sebastian Schwecke's commentary *Reading Rand and Rowling: Education Markets in Modern India,* explores the entanglements between market structures and education which are shaping access, success and valuation. He argues that as markets continue to translate intangible educational goals into tangible credentials, one would need to pay greater attention to and develop new paradigms towards studying their role in education in contemporary India.

As each article in this issue shows, the fallout of school closures, insufficient policy measures, unequal resources, and patriarchal structures intersect with and compound the inequalities in education. The articles bring out a deeper sense of insecurity that prevails. The pandemic should inevitably lead us to think of education's old concerns in newer ways. When considering the inequalities created by the pandemic and the policies drafted to address them, one must also consider the question of inclusion and social justice—in particular, how they intersect with the gender, class, and caste of disadvantaged groups.

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