

Access, Privacy, and Gender Divides in Teaching Online: Reflections from India

Abstract

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The entry of the COVID-19 pandemic into our lives meant that the process of teaching and learning shifted online. While issues of digital divide have been in the limelight, some other problems related to online teaching have remained under the radar. For instance, are there any privacy concerns associated with online teaching and learning? How does one discuss sensitive matters like gender, religion and caste in an online class? Also, most importantly, how does one 'teach' and/or 'learn' during a crisis? In this piece, I wish to explore some of these issues drawing from my teaching experiences in New Delhi – India's capital city, in the past year.

Keywords: Online teaching, privacy, ethics of teaching, India, Gender

Introduction

As the novel coronavirus entered India in January 2020 (Chakrabarti 2021), a national lockdown was announced on 25th March 2020 (BBC 2020). The process of teaching and learning moved online. Digital classrooms and technology suddenly became the way to continue this process. However, even before we could get used to online teaching and learning, reports started emerging of how it was exclusionary and accelerating the pre-existing digital divide. The transition from physical classrooms to online teaching and learning was rough, as there is unequal access to resources like electricity, computers, laptops, phones and the internet. There are gender, caste, class and regional gaps (Modi and Postaria 2020).

According to the Mission Antyodaya survey conducted by the Ministry of Rural Development in 2017-18, only 47 per cent of households in India receive regular electricity (Scroll 2020). Only 24 per cent of Indian households have an internet connection, and the number is even lower for rural areas – 15 per cent (NSS 2018). There is also a huge gender gap – according to the report by the Internet and Mobile Association of India, as opposed to 67 per cent of men having access to the internet, the number was only 33 per cent for women (IAMAL 2019). The digital divide has also taken lives. Students from socio-economically marginalised backgrounds in different parts of the country have committed suicide, unable to cope with the structural inequalities (Chandhoke 2020).

However, while issues of digital divide have been in the limelight, some other problems related to online teaching have remained under the radar. For instance, are there any privacy concerns associated with online teaching and learning? How does one discuss sensitive matters like gender, religion and caste in an online class? Also, most importantly, how does one ‘teach’ and/or ‘learn’ during a crisis? In this piece, I wish to explore some of those issues drawing from my teaching experiences in the past year.ⁱ I had also attended the webinar Teaching and Learning Anthropology during the Pandemic: Dilemmas, Challenges and Opportunities organised by the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA) Teaching Anthropology Network (TAN) on 17th March 2021. The discussions from the webinar have also contributed to my piece.

Almost every introductory Sociology/Social Anthropology in India class tells us about the disciplinary history of the subject – that it emerged as a response to the crises caused by the French and Industrial revolutions in the West (Chaudhuri 2021). Amongst other things, the discipline emerged as a reaction to growing forms of modernity, capitalism, urbanisation and industrialisation. While I was not around when the discipline emerged, I have experienced and seen the global health pandemic called COVID 19 since March 2019. Thus, I attempt to combine the personal with the social (Mills 1959) and the knowledge of the self with that of society (Chaudhuri in Tandon et al. 2021). This reflexivity and self-introspection are, of course, critical to the discipline of Sociology/Anthropology (Chaudhuri 2019).

Sociology in India is closely connected with Social Anthropology. In its early years of development in India – in the 1940s and 1950s, most Indian sociologists were trained in Social Anthropology. They were advocates of field work as a viable method that could look at issues of social reality from a sociological lens (Mukherjee 1977). The boundaries between the two disciplines are blurred – with practitioners treating Sociology and Social Anthropology as one and the same (Palackal 2015). Sociological inquiry in India is concerned with studying both the questions of tradition and modernity (Beteille in Das 2013). They frequently study ‘social anthropological topics’ like kinship, religion, caste, village, etc. (Deshpande, Sundar and Uberoi 2000). Thus, both in terms of research methods and content, the boundaries between Sociology and Social Anthropology are blurred in India. This close relationship between the two is seen as a source of strength. Prestigious journals like *Sociological Bulletin*, *Contributions to Indian Sociology* and *Economic and Political Weekly* publish works by sociologists and social anthropologists interchangeably (ibid). In fact, some of the papers that I have taught as a Sociology teacher include *Sociology of Religion*, *Sociology of Kinship* and *Gender and Violence*. Thus, the experiences of teaching Sociology in India can also be helpful in teaching Social Anthropology.

The Education Setting

I had been teaching Sociology to a batch of undergraduate students in an open university in New Delhi – India’s capital city - since January 2020, before the lockdown was announced in March. This was not a full-time, regular undergraduate course but a part-time correspondence one in which the learning mode was self-study. The open university has numerous study centres, and the one that I taught in was an ‘all-women’s’ one. As part of this Open Bachelor in Arts (Honours) programme students could choose papers from various subjects, including Sociology, Hindi, English, Economics, Political Science, History. Prior to the lockdown in March 2020, I would meet them every Saturday for two hours in the designated counselling centre, and they would utilise that time to clarify their thoughts on the course readings. In September 2020 I shifted to a full-time role teaching regular undergraduate students enrolled on a Bachelor of Arts Sociology course in a women’s college in New Delhi. Thus, the

timespan that helps me formulate my thoughts and insights for this piece is from March 2020 to the present (May 2021) – roughly fourteen months of online teaching during which I taught both correspondence and regular undergraduate students.

Interestingly, all my students are women. While the rough size of the correspondence classroom was around 50, the approximate size of the regular class is 40. Both are three-year-long courses. While there are no attendance regulations in the correspondence course, one has to attend a minimum of 66 per cent of the total lectures to be eligible to sit for examinations in the regular BA sociology course. Most of the students pursuing their undergraduate degrees from the open university are from socially and economically marginalised families. Pursuing an undergraduate course from an open university is cheaper and gives them the chance to pursue other activities. The fee for the undergraduate course is between Rs. 3000-6000 per semester. These students are either pursuing some technical or skill-based course on the side (learning TALLY, CorelDRAW, etc.) or preparing for lower-level government jobs. For them, the undergraduate degree is a qualification that they should attain so that their path to employment becomes easier. Most of the jobs that they are aspiring for prefer candidates with an undergraduate degree. Some of these students also work in beauty parlours or shops as saleswomen to earn an income and support their families while they study. Open and distance learning also provides students who had to leave their education mid-way a chance to complete it later while working. In contrast, the students pursuing a regular undergraduate degree are from relatively better-off families and are involved in a full-time course. The fee for this course is between Rs. 25000-30000 per annum. I encountered similar and different issues with both sets of students when we shifted to online learning.

Material and Technological Issues

Let me begin by first talking about some of the technological issues students face in online learning. As stated above, most students enrolled in the correspondence course are from economically marginalised families. As such, their technical knowledge is limited. This was the first time they had engaged with online learning. After the university had instructed that all assignments had to be submitted online, most of

them struggled to set up an email account. Students were also used to submitting handwritten assignments, a widespread practice in most Indian universities. So, with the strict lockdown in place, they struggled to find open stationery shops that sold A-4 size papers on which to write these assignments. Students would then encounter difficulties scanning their handwritten assignments and submitting them electronically. In contrast, students in the regular undergraduate classroom faced much lesser technological challenges in shifting to online learning. Most of them owned a laptop, and all of them at least owned a smartphone. Thus, the challenges that the students in the correspondence classroom faced were directly connected to their socio-economic backgrounds, reflecting a class bias.

WhatsApp, Online Classes and Privacy Classrooms

However, it is not just technological and material issues alone that shaped the experiences of students differently. There were other social concerns as well. I would meet the students pursuing their undergraduate degrees from an open university every Saturday at the designated centre in regular circumstances. The students would come with questions and doubts, and I would help clarify them. But after the lockdown, there was an online shift. There was an expectation that teachers would take their counselling sessions online. However, the problem was that most of these students did not even own smartphones. Possessing a computer or a laptop was also out of the question and as was having an internet connection.

In the past decade, India has seen a substantial increase in mobile phone use – which have become the major source of information exchange. However, there are disparities in who uses these mobile phones. According to the Mobile Gender Gap Report of 2020 by GSMA - an association that represents the interests of mobile network operators worldwide, – 63 per cent of women, compared to 79 per cent of men, own mobile phones (GSMA 2020: 11). However, women are 50% less likely than men to use mobile internet, with only 21% of women and 42% of men being mobile internet users (GSMA 2020: 11). Therefore, even ‘free’ google meet classes were out of the question. The university also did not provide teachers or students with access to a paid subscription to zoom or google meet.

After some deliberation, we figured out that WhatsApp would be the best solution to our problems. A group was formed which was used to exchange information. Students would post their queries as texts or audio notes between 9-11 am Indian Standard Time (IST) on Saturday, and I would address them during this time itself. Records of class participation and attendance would have to be kept and shared with the university later. Some of them would also fix a time later on and call to clarify certain issues.

While this system of WhatsApp classes was the best possible solution to deal with the crisis, it led to certain privacy concerns. As noted above, most students do not have personal smartphones and would use their brother's or father's devices to join the WhatsApp group. They had no knowledge and/or control of how the data saved on these phones were being used later. Soon, I started hearing complaints from many students that they would get unwanted messages from their classmates' relatives (mostly men). In fact, many a time, their fathers or brothers read those messages, which lead to quarrels as the family members of students receiving these unwelcome messages assumed that it was a two-way conversation. Most of these female students live under strict parental control, and receiving texts from men can create serious familial problems. Most of these students were only able to pursue their education because this study centre was in an 'all-women zone'. Some students also mentioned that they had started getting calls from unknown numbers. It was a breach of their privacy, and there was a genuine concern about their education getting interrupted. I had also received a message that read 'Hi' from an unknown number, but I had ignored it, assuming it to be spam.

However, after these complaints were brought to my notice, I left a strongly worded message in the group that those using others' phones should tell their family members not to message anyone. But I was quite convinced that this was a half-baked solution as there was no way one could keep a check on who is messaging whom and when. Additionally, there was always an opportunity to say that the message had been sent 'by mistake'. In such situations, it is not easy to take any action without concrete evidence.

These incidents illustrate how shifting to online teaching and learning led to a serious breach of privacy for the students and threatened their education prospects.

The National Education Policy (2020) of India states that open and distance learning courses can democratise education, giving students from economically marginalised backgrounds an opportunity to complete their education without regular classes (NEP 2020). It was this very democratisation that was under threat. The digital divide that already existed (Singh and Vimalkumar 2019) was being extended in new ways.

In contrast, among the regular full-time BA Sociology students, it was possible to hold classes on google meet as the university provided teachers with paid subscription-based accounts. It was convenient to share information and reading material in the google classroom. For them, being a part of WhatsApp groups was also easier as they had their own smartphones. But there was another kind of privacy concern associated with taking classes in the digital mode in the full-time course. Teachers have to record their lectures and upload them in the classroom if requested by students. They could then download and use these recordings for further reference. But for many teachers uploading recorded lectures brought additional worries. . One is unsure of how the recordings will be circulated, particularly in the context of increasing threats to academic freedom in India (Sundar 2018). This makes teachers hesitant to record and share their lectures. These concerns are exacerbated by the student practice of leaving cameras off. There are multiple reasons why students keep their cameras and microphones switched off. The most obvious is limited data connection. Most students do not have unlimited internet data, and hence switching off the camera can help them to save data. Secondly, not everyone has a separate, private space in their homes to attend online classes. There is movement of people, and hence, students prefer to keep their cameras and microphones off to cut out the noise. Many are also not comfortable showing their homes to others as it can reveal details about their private lives. Students often also prefer to ask questions by typing in the chat box instead of switching on their microphone.

These are all genuine reasons. But for teachers, it can be challenging as well. We are not sure if the students' family members are also listening to our lectures and if it might create uncomfortable circumstances both for the students or for ourselves. Sociology as a subject challenges pre-existing stereotypes and commonsensical knowledge and can be considered 'offensive' by parents and relatives. Thus, as a teacher, one is often hyperaware of these privacy and security concerns in online

teaching. Attending to these privacy and security concerns are novel challenges that the digital mode has introduced.

Teaching and Learning in a Crisis: Gender Disparities

While access to resources and privacy concerns emerge differently when teaching across the correspondence and regular full-time BA courses, there are also certain similarities in how students and teachers have experienced the digital mode. One of them is that all teachers and students are experiencing a global health crisis, which raises the question – what does teaching and learning mean in times of crises like these? Sociologists like Ulrich Beck have point to the ways risks and uncertainties can shape societal and individual responses (Beck 1986). But how does one ‘teach’ and/or ‘learn’ during a crisis?

The shift to online teaching and learning was considered as the ‘new normal’. However, this ‘new normal’ raises several challenges that remain unaddressed. How does one address questions of inequality and exclusion in the classroom when the students themselves are suffering because of these? Students complain of both physical and mental exhaustion. There is a feeling of ‘purposelessness’, loneliness, lack of motivation and fatigue, a situation not unique to students in India (Gillis and Krull 2020). Many universities and institutions lack counselling support systems.

With university campuses and colleges shutting down, students had to move back to their homes. At home, they are not just ‘students’; they are also family members – who are expected to contribute to household work. Many have thus complained about the lack of time to attend online classes. They have to juggle household and caregiving roles with their education. Students would often listen to the lectures while performing household chores like washing dishes and chopping vegetables, switching off their cameras and microphones. Some others would say that they ‘are out’ – picking up stuff from the market and so on.

The gendered nature of household and care work is not new (Oakley 1974; Hoschschild and Machung 1989; Chakravarti 2008). It is mostly women who are doing these works. However, because the pandemic increased hours of ‘staying at home’, women’s burden also rose. The same disproportional gender impact has also

been true for women in academia. More women have lost their jobs than men since the pandemic began as well as publishing lesser articles and books (Miller 2021; Skinner et al. 2021). Both students and teachers have been impacted by this. In fact, many of my female married colleagues with children have complained of feeling overburdened by online teaching. In these situations, I often felt grateful that I am unmarried and have no children.

Is it then possible to ‘teach’ and/or ‘learn’ during such uncertainty (Alexander 2017; Harp-Rushing 2017), particularly when universities do not have the infrastructure to cope with these unprecedented situations? As teachers, one is bound by structural requirements. We have to check essays and submit assignment marks by a stipulated time. How does one ask their students to submit their assignments if they say they are sick or taking care of ill family members? Is it possible to teach and talk about inequality in these circumstances? These are unaddressed questions that raise both equality and ethical issues.

Conclusion

Engaging with questions of teaching and learning during crises and times of uncertainty is critical for disciplinary development. This reflective piece, that draws from my teaching experiences in India, is an attempt to contribute to this. We need, as a discipline, to develop a pedagogy that takes account of crises and uncertainties, and also their regional variations (Tauritz 2016). As this piece shows, questions of unequal access and its associated fallouts can be shaped by very local, cultural forms. It is not easy to shift to online learning in a country like India because of pre-existing economic and gendered inequalities.

Marginalised sections of the population - such as women - face additional challenges in protecting their privacy and balancing their household work and education during crises like COVID-19. Thus, we need to discuss and think about ways of dealing with these novel challenges of access, privacy, security and gender disparities that have emerged with online teaching and learning. While continuing the teaching and learning process is important, we must reflect on how to addressing these associated concerns.

Students and teachers do not learn in a vacuum but are part of a society that is struck crisis and hence needs to be situated as such.

While the use of technology and the shift to the digital mode has been the preferred way to cope with COVID-19 related disruptions in education, we must also think about its impact on those directly involved. Teaching and learning from home is not a linear and universal experience as the Indian case illustrates.

Additional Notes

This paper expands on a blog post where I introduced some of these themes and was published in Applied Worldwide on 19th November 2020:

<https://www.appliedworldwide.com/>

This paper has also been published in Teaching Anthropology (2021):

https://www.teachinganthropology.org/ojs/index.php/teach_anth/article/view/618/619

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