

Undertaking Research-Related Activities in India During the COVID-19 Pandemic

This is a text transcript for the recorded webinar “Undertaking Research-related Activities in India during the COVID-19 Pandemic” presented by the Canada India Research Centre for Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) at the University of Guelph. This session was recorded on June 2, 2021, and was moderated by Prof. Craig Johnson. The guest speakers were Divya Kannan, Elisa Cooper, Juhi Tyagi, Seema Mundoli, Swarna Rajagopalan, and Anandini Dar.

Transcript:

Craig Johnson:

All right, well welcome everyone. My name is Craig Johnson and I'm the director of the Guelph Institute of Development Studies here at the University of Guelph in Canada. On behalf of CIRCLE, it's my pleasure to be moderating today's panel on the challenges of undertaking research in India during the COVID-19 pandemic.

We have an outstanding panel of experts lined up for today's discussion and I'll be introducing them momentarily. First though I'd like to start with a land acknowledgement and acknowledge that we reside on the ancestral lands of the Attawandaron people and more recently the treaty lands and territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit.

We recognize the significance of the Dish with One Spoon Covenant and offer our respect to our Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee, and Métis neighbours as we strive to strengthen our relationships. I'd also like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the memory of the 215 Indigenous children whose remains were discovered only last week on the grounds of a former residential school in Kamloops, British Columbia.

Now, on to CIRCLE, established in February 2020 at the University of Guelph, CIRCLE - the Canada India Research Centre for Learning and Engagement - aims to be in an interdisciplinary nucleus in Canada for cutting-edge research on India and Indian diaspora; to showcase, advocate, catalyze, and foster an equitable, respectful and sustained exchange of knowledge between Canadian and Indian scholars on complex and emerging and unexplored topics relating to sustainability and social and economic well-being.

As for today's webinar then, we have a large panel of participants and we're going to start with a general question that I'll get to in a few minutes around the impact of COVID-19 on people's research. As you can see there's a chat box enabled on Zoom that you can use to ask your questions, you can also raise your hand.

I'll go through some of the etiquette in a few minutes. Before doing so though, I'd first like to introduce our panel. First, we have Dr. Divya Kannan, who's an Assistant Professor in the

Department of History at Shiv Nadar University. Next is Dr. Anandini Dar, Assistant Professor in the School of Education Studies at Embedkar University in Delhi.

Next is Elisa Cooper, who is a master's candidate in Capacity Development and Extension and also a research assistant with CIRCLE here at the University of Guelph. Next, we have Dr. Juhi Tyagi, Assistant Professor in the School of Development at Azim Premji University in Bengaluru.

Next, we have Seema Mundoli, Assistant Professor at Azim Premji University and finally, we have Dr. Swarna Rajagopalan, a political scientist and writer based in Chennai. She's also the founder of Prajnya, a feminist NGO working on women's history women in politics and gender-based violence, so welcome everyone to today's webinar finally before proceeding a few words on etiquette and logistics I'll remind you to please keep your settings on mute and to avoid using video so as to free up some of the bandwidth for our participants and as I mentioned if you have a question you can either wave your hand by clicking on the icon on the Zoom platform or you can enter a question into the chat box and I'll serve as a moderator to relay those questions.

I'll remind everyone too that today's event is being recorded and will be made available via the CIRCLE website. Okay, now on to today's discussion the impact of COVID-19 on research in India. I should start by saying that given the current situation we were actually hesitating about holding today's discussion at all and at one point, Sharada reached out to the panelists to see if people were okay with participating given what's going on right now in India and everyone agreed that it would be good to participate and also possibly even a little therapeutic to have this very important conversation.

It's scarcely worth repeating but the official figures on the impact of COVID-19 are absolutely devastating. At the end of May, the official death toll from COVID-19 in India had passed 300,000 with daily fatalities exceeding 4,500. Although numbers are now starting to decline, experts agree that the official figures are well below the real case counts, reflecting the sorry state of testing for the virus in India, something that's not unique certainly to India or to south Asia but it certainly has been a factor.

Concerns have also been raised about the longer-term social, economic, and psychological impacts of the pandemic and looking at the background of today's participants, I think we have a lot of expertise on the panel to reflect carefully and deeply about what those impacts might be; so with these questions and concerns in mind we now turn to our panel of experts.

So, for the first round I'm going to go in reverse order of the names that I introduced at the beginning and ask each panelist to say a brief word about the central focus of your research and particularly about the ways in which the pandemic has affected your research moving forward. So, we'll start then in reverse order with Swarna.

Swarna Rajagopalan:

Thank you for inviting me to be part of this. Webinars are where you get to meet people that you wouldn't otherwise meet because living in different cities we don't really travel as much as we'd like to pretend that we do, so it's a pleasure to meet all of you this evening and to be here.

I said yes to Sharada and then I've had this imposter feeling about what I would say because what would be my research agenda and I suppose confessions are well got out of the way right at the beginning, I wear two sorts of research hats so there's the political scientist person who continues to do research that's broadly in the area of the things I did for my dissertation, things I studied in grad school, and then there's the activist who does a different kind of research.

In terms of pandemic impact, I think quite simply any projects that I was involved with and I will say that at the moment most of them seem to centre around gender-based violence though this is not my primary area of research interest. Anything that involved field work has just been impossible, I mean no way we could go out interview people and so on and so forth or hire new researchers, guarantee that they would be safe or that the project would be done on time.

So, we've seen a lot of delays but on the other hand what has become possible is that through my NGO we've been able to pilot an experiment with short, informal research projects so in thinking about this webinar actually I've been thinking what does it mean to say research during the pandemic and what kind of research are we talking about?

If we're looking at the formal - sorry, my phone never rings unless I'm on a webinar - if we're looking at that sort of western style, formal grant, big project, big field work, perfect research design model then I think that's actually harder to pull off, but if you look at the spunky little bits of things that people are trying to do to find out what the reality is around them and to document what is going on, then there's an efflorescence of those efforts in all their imperfections. I'll leave it at that.

Craig Johnson:

Okay, thank you Swarna. Next then is Seema. How has COVID affected your area of research?

Seema Mundoli:

Good evening and thank you also for having me here. I had mentioned to Juhi that probably it would be a little bit - she had asked me if I would be interested and then introduce me to Sharada -- I said that what we are doing right now seems to be a little off from what traditional research that we do because I am here as a part of the Standard Workers Action Network which is actually an organization that started trying to help workers, migrant workers by providing them immediate relief.

Immediate relief in the sense of providing rations and cash transfers, coordinating all that. But, along the way that converted into something like action research because while we didn't have

a sample, we didn't collect any information, specifically for research, whatever information we got we tried to use that.

So, every time a worker reached out to any of us - so, all our phone numbers are helplines essentially - if a worker reached out to us we would use that number, we would collect some information about the worker like how many days do you have rations, how many days of money do you have left, just to get a sense of the crisis and we used to allocate help based on the SOS calls; how much was the crisis.

So, during the course of doing all this we realized that we had some information that we should use beyond relief and that's when actually our action research first one started and we do four try to do four things - and I'll be very brief here and later maybe we can look at it in detail.

One is advocacy. We are collecting information real time, so this is not information that is collected and then you are analyzing it later. So, as the crisis is unfolding we are getting information about it so we use that to provide that information to the cases that were being filed in the courts here demanding for the right to wages, right to rations and these were produced as numbers, you know reports submitted by NGOs in the cases that were being produced, so advocacy was one part of using the data that we had.

The second was if we found that a particular city there was evidence of crisis, for example two weeks ago we began to receive a very large number of calls which we couldn't handle from Delhi. So, then we immediately wrote a letter to the chief minister and said look these are the 80 locations we are getting the calls from, can you please set up kitchens there.

So, immediate engagement with the government sometimes they respond depending upon which who you're contacting. The third thing is we also constantly do these press releases where we put up the information that we are collecting about the workers without revealing names everything to show the level of distress and the kind of distress, and we send it out to the people in the media we know and they are able to write about it in different articles and that has been able to get some mileage and interest about the issue of migrant workers.

We also write, I mean the group is very varied the kind of people who are - I have nothing to do with labor and employment, my field is ecology, environment, climate change, more recently - but we have architects, we have people who work in an oil company, so these are just people who have just come together to volunteer because they feel that it is a -- and they have all written - everyone has written different kinds of articles about what they feel about it.

It could be about the travel fiasco last time, so that's another way of engagement but mainly what we also wanted to do is through this process is build an archive, build a voice of the workers as the crisis is unfolding.

Not in the terms of an oral history like 10 years from now somebody talks to the workers, we collect testimonials from the workers and we have kept all this in an archive. We're very careful about who gets the data, who gets to access it so that's broadly what we have been doing, so,

it's not like research -- even I was saying a lot of my research is stopped because there is just no way of doing field work in this thing and we've shifted to online; doing several things online but yes what I'm talking about today is swan and that's a completely relief-based work converted to action research with these broad aims so I'll stop here for now and maybe later begin.

Craig Johnson:

Okay, thank you Seema. There's a number of points in there that I think will come up in a little while so that certainly the government responses to. your advocacy efforts and the shift to online research I think is something that I think we've all been experiencing in one way or another. Juhi, what would you like to add to the observations?

Juhi Tyagi:

You know, like Swarna and Seema I want to say thank you. I think this is an important forum because it also helps to hear the sort of work other people are doing right. I mean Seema's work, for instance, is really inspiring as well and I know that one of the things that I've had to do as well is stop the regular research that I did. I'm trained as a sociologist, my work focuses on understanding radical movements on the ground, so field work for me is being in the villages, it's spending lots of careful, extended periods of time in the villages and of course with COVID this came to a grinding halt.

But with COVID I also started to realize that I was surrounded by a lot of people - students and their families, your own family, your neighbours, people that you come across, workers, people who deliver -- who are all going through some kind of distress and it really started to make me think about what is our role as universities? What is our role as teachers?

Should we go back to doing our research as usual or is this a moment of rapture? Is this a time when we really need to rethink what research should mean; the kind of questions we ask, when we ask them, who we ask these questions to and also what this research can do for you and do for any sort of aspect of the sort of change that we're hoping that our research make and so one of the things that we started to do is - a couple of faculty have been talking about this, so this is something that's sort of being developed at the moment as we speak -- but, one of the things that we really started to think about is the fact that we as faculty want to we also want to sort of get an insight into the world, the students want to do the same and we all feel quite helpless at the moment.

So, the idea that we're sort of trying to grapple with is can we think of some sort of collaborative research that students and faculty undertake together and this brings in a couple of very important aspects that I think we sort of leave behind when we think of the ways in which we do regular research, but actually building bridges; using sort of our own life conditions, not questioning someone out there but thinking of your own sort of structures you're surrounded with and sort of asking meaningful sort of responsive questions that can actually change something in real time and so what we wanted to find out was with students

and faculty together developing these questions from what they've seen and what they've heard, how people have survived over the past year, especially the last few months emotionally but also materially right; how did they get information on medication and beds, hospital beds, how and where did they voice their concerns right.

So, think of these sort of other democratic institutions still functional in some way if you're unhappy, if you don't get something, if you don't have access to entitlement is there a place to go especially when you're in a mode of crisis and at the same time you wanted to also think about looking at what is the secondary data saying?

Around you in your district what is it that the disaster agency budgets say in terms of their spending? What is it that the construction workers boards spending looks like? So, this is sort of how we're thinking about actually getting systems to be more accountable, maybe filing for RTIs as well to kind of get more and more information that we really hope it will make us feel less helpless, but also to listen to people around us in ways that we hope will actually matter because these voices as Seema said in real time you're generating some but they aren't enough at all and these do matter, these will matter in the long run as well. So, that is something that we're along the lines of which we're thinking and I'll leave it at that for the moment.

Craig Johnson:

I forgot to unmute myself. Thank you, Juhi. I'm really struck by your comment too on the role of universities and the role of researchers that I think it's raising all sorts of questions here in Canada too about what role international travel and even regional travel for research is playing in academia and concerns about exposure to the virus and the necessity of travel and I think it's fair to say there's a deep questioning going on within the academy about the role that research might play moving forward yet at the same time as I alluded to earlier there are some major data gaps that exist in India but certainly in many countries right now on just basic things like incomes, infection rates, socio-psychological well-being but I'll leave that for now.

Next, I'll turn to a student's perspective so, Elisa it'll be really interesting to hear kind of how the pandemic has affected your journey through the master's program.

Elisa Cooper:

Hi, I just want to echo the gratitude that the other panelists have expressed as well it's a privilege to be on a panel with such experienced and excellent researchers so, thank you for this opportunity. I guess from my perspective I'm just at the beginning of building my research career and my area of research is in organizational learning and I'm particularly interested in the dynamics of learning within small organizations operating in resource-constrained settings.

So, I've been working for several years with networks of organizations in Africa, Asia and the Pacific and for my master's I wanted to do work that would be relevant to this network of organizations I've been working with and so initially my plan was to do an eight-week trip to India and to work with two organizations to understand their experience with learning and also

to engage in a participatory action research project to follow a process of learning – an instance of learning within the organization – and so COVID hit just before I was getting ready to prepare my research ethics application and finalize my plans and so then I had to adjust my thinking.

Obviously, I wasn't going to be able to travel to India and do this eight-week trip anymore and so I thought about how I could still do this research remotely and because my unit of analysis is organizations themselves it was actually pretty feasible to think about how I could do it remotely because the organizations that I was thinking of had access to internet and smartphones and so we I was able to shift to doing it remotely.

I narrowed the scope so I went from two organizations to one just to reduce uncertainty and I decided to focus on one organization that I already had a close relationship with that I've been working with to just make that relationship building piece much more straightforward and easier and so I shifted to using Zoom rather than going in person and of course there were many challenges that came with this – just not being able to be in person with people, in the focus group discussions of course facilitating is very different when you're in person and you see body language and you hear voice cues and I was using simultaneous interpretation as well, so that was another sort of barrier between myself and the participants and so there are all these challenges that that are expected, but then one real benefit of doing this research remotely was that it wasn't time bound by a research trip.

So, I was able to actually integrate the research much more into the pattern of functioning of the organization and it felt to me as though it was more responsive to the needs of the organization and less constrained by my own research time frame, so rather than carrying out an eight-week trip the research extended from November until March and we're still planning to do a couple of follow-up sessions. So, it's been interesting to see both the challenges that have come with changing to remote research but also some of the benefits that have come as well for my particular area of interest.

Craig Johnson:

Thanks Elisa, it's encouraging to hear that you've been able to kind of adapt and shift your research methodology and approach without too much disruption to your program. My heart goes out to so many of the graduate students whose entire research agendas have been severely disrupted let's say by both the pandemic itself and the lockdown but good to hear that you've been able to kind of adjust with this new universe of Zoom technology and kind of online communication. Next then we have Anandini. Can you say a word or two about how the pandemic has affected your ability to do research in the current context.

Anandini Dar:

Sure, thanks Craig, first of all for having me here and Sharada as well. Really appreciated listening to all the panelists so far and just as sort of an introduction in terms of research, I am primarily an interdisciplinary scholar focused in childhood studies, education, sociology, but my

mode of getting at data has primarily been through ethnography and some of the things that I've been sort of thinking of as this panel discussion was coming up was about primarily a research project which started in 2019 and was funded till 2021.

It's an international, cross-country, collaborative, cross-disciplinary project looking at questions of displacement, placemaking and well-being in cities. So, it's a sort of a project where we're focused on in Delhi we're looking at how in informal settlements young people and families make sense of place, how they use place, and how is that related to their own sense of well-being and while thinking about the project and how of course it's directly been impacted because the global pandemic has happened right in the middle of the project timeline; I was thinking of three things that I don't know if I'll get the time to speak on all of those three things but I'll go into the details of why I'm thinking about these three based on the project.

One, how the global pandemic while it's global I think it has impacted different ways of doing international and collaborative research. The second I've been thinking about is the inequalities in knowledge production, particularly when for instance, even our project partners are very comfortable to moving towards things like 'netnography' that have become very popular.

The World Council on Anthropological Association in 2020 May actually had a webinar on alternatives to field work and as an ethnographer working with marginalized communities I was completely flabbergasted by the ways in which there was this very convenient move and shift to phones and the internet and all these other alternatives, but working with children especially how do we access children living in busties – informal settlements - when their parents have single mobile phones, they're not able to access school education because of the lockdown because of the continued shutting down of schools and so it's been troubling me to think about what is going to happen to what kind of research is being produced, who are we going to talk about, what research will get valued again and so I really appreciate that we're having this conversation and despite the pandemic that we're in -- continued pandemic that we are in -- we've come together to discuss this.

And the third thing that has emerged as a result of a little bit of an opening window in Jan and Feb of this year, we were able to -- I'm working with two research assistants who have been on and off part of the project team in India with me and one of them is a very, very strong PhD student who's also an activist, who's been working with [indiscernible] and other kinds of migrant labor movements and another student of design and innovation, so part of the project is also working with architects and designers, so she's coming in from that space.

And we went back into the field in Feb and more recently, of course last year when the pandemic came about I've been thinking about the role and the responsibilities of researchers; not wanting to abandon research entirely, we already built a certain kind of rapport in 2019. We did some preliminary work but we were going to begin our interviews in March of 2020 and unfortunately we did go in, we started some activity-based interviews with young children but we couldn't go on further because the lockdown happened; some of the families left and went to their homes and we were more concerned about like what Seema has also shared about relief work.

Offering ration and offering... try to raise some funds because how fund grant money works is another challenge of what you can spend money on and what you can't despite this pandemic coming in. What we ended up doing was after some relief work this year when we started conducting interviews again we, of course, we wanted to go back to the communities because we had a rapport with them, some of them would call us and we went back to start doing interviews with due precaution and more recently because we made some connections with the youth in the community there, we're beginning to -- and this is very initial so we'll see how it goes - but we're beginning to get some of the youth from the communities to do interviews.

So, one of the young RAs has been able to make contact with the other young people there and we're trying to figure out ways in which we can work with them as co-researchers and this is not new, of course, doing collaborative research with research participants in the field of anthropology has existed previously as well, it's considered as more innovative and empowering young people.

In childhood studies we've been talking about how we can have young people as co-researchers. Michelle Fine has done some very interesting work around young people even writing research outputs, so we're exploring this possibility at the moment of being able to get some of the people from the community to be participants and interviewees, interviewers, as well as being interviewees.

So, of course the pandemic has affected us in all these ways and we're still figuring out where to go from here and yeah I'll stop here for now and then I'm sure there'll be opportunities to speak about the other concerns I raised.

Craig Johnson:

Thank you, Anandini. I love that term 'netnography,' I hadn't heard that before and for me it raises all sorts of questions again about what are the implications for research ethics, for the role and responsibilities of researchers as you highlighted and I think we'll have a chance to get into that in a little while too. Finally, then I'll turn the floor to Divya. Any kind of initial thoughts and reflections on research challenges during the pandemic?

Divya Kannan:

I think I'm going to sound the most cynical of the lot also as the sole historian of the group. It might seem easy for us -- for people on the outside -- thinking that historians after all don't deal with people who are alive and you're just dependent on institutions and archives, but in a country like India I would say things have become really bad for us in the profession as well.

So, while it's not lucrative to pursue history as a discipline, we unfortunately find ourselves in the middle of all kinds of emotional and political storms -- everybody has an opinion on history. And what the pandemic personally has done is I have had to now literally look at my professional life as pre-pandemic and post-pandemic like everyone but with very very concrete consequences, because the archives and libraries that we are so dependent on are all shut

down and with the borders closing -- and I can see many of my colleagues here are from the same profession - we unfortunately depend on the British library so much, on the libraries abroad, so now we can neither travel abroad nor can we go to the institutions in the country and what this has done is -- and maybe that's why I sound very cynical - I've had to now rethink completely the future of my research trajectory because unlike in the global North, 99 percent, almost 100 percent of archives -- historical archives in India -- is not digitized.

So, there is no saying in terms of a net history. You can get probably a tiny fraction of the material online and even when they are online all the digital archives are under the control of Ivy league universities. So, either you should belong to a university in India that can shell out millions to subscribe to these archives, which as my colleagues here know is almost an impossibility, or we should be able to find a fellowship or a grant and go abroad which we can't.

And the truth is we already couldn't go abroad easily because any researcher, especially for those of us in the university system, cannot be divorced from teaching responsibilities. For example, to find a sabbatical or to be able to apply for a sabbatical or a period off to do research was already a big challenge before the pandemic and now with the acute emotional distress that both teachers and students are facing it seems even more difficult for existing faculty to apply for these kind of small privileges of taking off from their teaching responsibilities and pursuing research as well.

So, I'm a social historian focusing on histories of education, gender, and youth and before the pandemic I had moved away from my PhD research which was on 19th century education and poverty. To look at the oral history of people in my home state in Kerala who had been through different schools till about 1960s and I was visiting elderly people in their homes directly to take views, to talk to them; with the pandemic I've been completely banned from these houses.

Nobody was going to entertain a young researcher in their homes, shaking hands or even coming five feet within their room. So, now my project literally has shut shop because despite my appeals, a lot of families are not able to get the elderly parents or relatives online and I completely get it.

It took me multiple visits to the neighbourhoods in order to get them to talk to me and now getting them to sit through hours of conversation, talking about their childhood and youth again seems very difficult. So, in order to find the silver lining in these dark clouds, what I have done now is I have turned to my own students in the university and with the group of 30 students we are now documenting the impact of COVID on their lives.

So, I moved a bit away from history and now borrowed heavily from sociology and anthropology in order to be able to ascertain what does this mean for students of my own university because I cannot reach out to students elsewhere very easy.

That is, of course, one project on the side. The other one has been again to plow through existing archives. Whatever little archive is now available to me online I have been now trying

to question and a new project that is slowly taking place is looking at questions of women's mobility.

So, I am now interested in the history of women and cycling in 20th century India. I know, unfortunately, this is circumscribed by class and caste locations because before the 1970s cycled in India and that has become another ethical dilemma for me. I did my PhD on lower caste education and poverty and six years down the line I am now going back to only looking at upper caste and that is a dilemma that I constantly face and I, of course, don't want to be circumscribed by that situation.

And lastly like everybody said, while in the global North people have been semi-successfully been able to make the shift, the inequalities in knowledge production have just sky-rocketed. And you can see that in journal publications, you can see the number of grants that are still being offered to people in the global North, while those in the global South are continuing to fall behind.

The gap was already there and in a field like history the gap has become bigger, and while collaborative research is -- I'm all for it and I welcome it thoroughly - what it has done is it has relegated historians in the global south always as co-PIs. We have all now become only subsidiary or secondary researchers in the project.

Only those based in the global North are able to apply for grants or for digital ethnographical history and my concern for the pandemic is that even post the pandemic situation dying down, in India the crisis is going to continue for historians and as I speak the central government of India is digging up the national -- we are losing the building that is currently the national archives of India -- and it is going to be completely pulled down.

The annex building which houses millions of document is going to be pulled down in a few months and we have no idea how long it's going to be shut down. So, it's not just me but I'm looking at a younger generation of scholars whose careers probably might never take off if they are dependent on the national archives. On the other hand, there is a slight possibility that if not on the national archives, we can go back to our regions and because India is such a diverse country and we can draw upon our regional language collections and archives.

There is a wealth of information waiting to be unearthed in the regional archives and regional libraries and I'm hoping that will be the way to go instead of being so reliant on the national archives. There will be a bit of decentralization in historical research. So, I'm striking more words of caution than optimism but unfortunately that's been the situation for historians.

Craig Johnson:

Thank you, Divya. Your comments really kind of strike a chord too with sort of the larger, more long-term implications for the inequities that long preceded I think the pandemic, in scholarship and academia, and the ways in which those are being replicated and even exacerbated during and moving forward hopefully beyond the pandemic.

And also I think there are questions in there around sort of the ways in which research and scholarship are funded and organized in the global South as you say, but also in India in particular and I guess as a way of kind of opening the conversation up now -- and I'd be happy to sort of just kind of open it up to panelists -- I'd be interested in hearing people's thoughts about these bigger implications on the quality of knowledge and the state of knowledge in relation to your particular fields more generally in India.

It's tempting to put a large asterisk next to kind of the last year or so and probably the next two or three years at least reflecting upon all of these challenges that we've been talking about and I mean questions have been raised about sort of the ethical and analytical limitations of shifting to online interviews; it creates some opportunities but it also creates a very different kind of research relationship and encounter.

So, I'd be really interested in hearing people's thoughts about sort of what the bigger implications are for the state of knowledge and the inequities that you've just described Divya in the Indian context. And while panelists are responding to I'll encourage other audience members to type their questions into the chat room and I'll do my best to relay them to the panelists. I'll open that up then to the participants, so what are these bigger implications for the state of knowledge and research in India? Maybe I'll start with you Divya and we can go in reverse order again if we need to but panelists do feel free to raise your hands if you want to chime in.

Divya Kannan:

Thank you, Craig for that insightful question. See the discipline of history in India has a very active political life and what I mean by that is that while the profession is being academically practiced in the what we call the hallowed corridors of the university system, the popular domain also has a very rich life centered around various historical narratives and that has to be read alongside political narratives.

And in the last 20, 25 years with many marginalized communities asserting themselves. A lot of, unfortunately, violent counter resistance to that state becoming increasingly centralized and so on and so forth. History in India has taken on multiple tragedies, so one really cannot talk about the state of knowledge in India only in this very small domain of academic history; well of course that is also thriving on the side there is no doubt about it.

There is also this wide gap between academic and popular history and in India that is deeply felt and you can engage it from the nature of the panel itself. Those of us who are in the professional field in the universities come from very particular privileged communities in India because pursuing history is sort of -- I wouldn't say leisure activity -- but it means dropping out of the labor market for a very long time, and especially for female students in the long run it's very difficult to pursue the humanities beyond the master's level.

So, there is a gender-caste class intersectional question there but on the other hand, we have failed -- and I see this as a self-critical point -- academic historians have failed to convey their

scholarship in a substantial way to popular audiences. So, in India you have movies, you have the radio and you have, of course, serials on TV that talk about history which unfortunately is very distorted, but academic historians have engaged the fight in very small eco chambers and I would say a fraction of historians have made a deep impact.

So, somebody like Romila Thapar, Irfan Habib, of course, have done a bigger service by taking their research beyond the university spaces and going into classrooms. So, writing textbooks in India that is where it has become a major source of confidence because different communities contend with academic historians on what should go into school history books and this is not unique to India of course; we know that in many countries school textbooks are the centre of a lot of storm, but I would say the state of knowledge is also an exciting one.

In the last 15 years it has opened up new subfields, something that Anandini already pointed out. For instance, when I was doing my PhD, it was extremely unheard of or unfashionable to talk about childhood and when I was doing something like labor history it was considered unfashionable because that's something that historians in the 70s and 80s did, and I went to a very well-known public university but something like childhood was seen as a very niche topic; something irrelevant and everybody dismissed, but in the last 10 years there has been a definite shift to these kind of fields.

There has been more of a dialogue -- sustained dialogue -- with other fields which was already there, but more and more students are now taking up interdisciplinary studies, university programs are also responding to it and history writing is also being free from certain vocabularies and I see that as a great change only because of the composition of historians have shifted.

And in India the running joke is that the modern Indian history is so dominated by the Bengali history. The counter to the Bengali historian of Akash Bengal historian has now come from historians across the country and that has led to very very interesting kind of narratives coming out. So, I see the field in a very exciting position but, of course, like I said before the concern is how does one adapt to changing circumstances and what does it mean in the long run.

Craig Johnson:

Right, it's fascinating to think about the ways in which the pandemic is leading to sort of this churning of ideas and quite a lot of instability I think among some of the more settled assumptions within economics, for instance, about the value of social welfare policies, and debt financing, and other things like quantitative easing that would have been absolute taboo subjects a number of years ago are suddenly entering the mainstream.

So, I think there is sort of reason to be optimistic but interesting to reflect on what kinds of openings and opportunities might exist in this current context. We've had a few questions from the floor now and I'll just start with one from Rajinder and they're asking whether the process for official permissions to do community-based research in India has changed as a result of the pandemic, and they add a little bit further down what did the process look like before and then

I guess what I infer from the question is whether it's become more difficult now as a result of the permissions that are required to undertake community-based research. So, I'll open that to the floor and please feel free to raise your hand or wave your hand if you'd like to address that question.

Anandini Dar:

I can go ahead.

Craig Johnson:

Sure.

Anandini Dar:

I'm not sure if I'll be addressing precisely this question, I'm not sure if I follow it for my context but also just thinking of what you asked earlier to the panel about implications of state of knowledge and knowledge production, apart from thinking of younger researchers and scholars who are emerging I'm thinking of some of our own students, our M.A. and PhD students in our school of education, who are expected to do research components, so dissertation components like even what Elisa was saying; planning a first research project and then a pandemic hits, how do you co-opt and alter your processes?

In mentoring some of these students in education I see a challenge that they're facing in envisioning what kinds of research they can do; so if they think about how to collect data first they tend to then look at privileged communities or contexts that can be easily accessible, so who can I call and conduct research? Can I call my friend? Can I call my relatives? So, it does two things, of course, it affects the nature of knowledge production but it also affects the quality of knowledge that's getting produced.

So, are we being able to rigorously use methods that would result in certain kinds of quality research or are we just sort of encouraging them to do research for the sake of completing course components? And that is something that I see almost in everyday basis with students who are just for the past year they thought things would open up in January, they'll be able to go to certain spaces and conduct interviews but they haven't been able to do that, and now it's sort of the end moment they're deciding that they're going to just do an essay at the end of it.

So, we're disadvantaging a lot of -- I mean we as in the situation at large -- has disadvantaged a lot of younger scholars from being able to produce quality and necessary research and when I say necessary, I'm also, of course, talking about those who are the most marginalized, that's primarily been my location of research.

My earlier doctoral research was a multi-sited ethnography which meant that I had to be in multiple spaces. I was working with teenagers at a youth center and I followed them around. I went to workshops with them, I went to different cities with them, so, I can't even imagine

were I conducting that research at this moment it would be impossible for me to complete the kind of research that I did and the rich data that I would be able to get because ethnography itself as we know requires invested, long-term time with communities and what has become more and more important and more recent writings and even earlier work have talked about engaged ethnography or reflexive research, drawing upon from feminist ethnographers which requires that we sensitize ourselves to the nature of the lives of where these communities are.

If students are not even able to go to these locations and sites while we're trying to be innovative and empowering researchers and they will share research, what we lose out on and one of the things that ethnography offers us is to become more sensitive or empathetic humans as well and I say this in my class and I used to say this jokingly to my colleagues and friends when I was a younger scholar, that I don't think everyone should do ethnography because you need a certain kind of disposition as a human to be able to conduct ethnography and that requires a certain kind of training, of course, I don't know at least in the global North lots of American anthropologists tend to and in Canada as well I believe, they'll be trained in language, they'll be sent for a year, you go live in those sites and locations and of course with it comes what people like classic anthropologists like Nancy Howell etc., have talked about the dangers and hazards of ethnographic research as part and parcel of who you are.

So, you have to sort of, of course figure out what that role will be but ethnography meant that it would be risky. There would be risk to perhaps your health; a study came out in the late 80s on how a lot of ethnographers working in challenging circumstances at least around 60 percent of them that were interviewed had contracted certain kinds of diseases.

The challenge with the pandemic for me I find is that it's not about just locating ourselves in those risky situations or the hazard and I was having this conversation while thinking about how do we do our research, it's one thing to put ourselves in that risk but it's another when, because of the nature of the disease, that we might be a causing harm or risk to the communities; that we may be carrying the virus with us when we interact with the participants and our community members.

So, the kind of, sort of challenge of what will happen to ethnography itself in India, in the global South, and what kinds of research students will be able to conduct is definitely going to get impacted and at least for -- and I agree with Divya, while in history of course there are other reasons for why it will extend beyond the pandemic perhaps, in fields like ethnography, it will extend far more because we know that to do engaged ethnography it takes time; it takes years to first spend time with your communities and then you end up writing up and conducting analysis and then publishing.

So, it's several years kind of ahead that you do this, but the PhDs that we'll produce then will not be engaged ethnographies. It will be the state of knowledge that will eventually get produced will be further impacted and we're already struggling with producing good PhD researchers in India and there are several reasons for that including financial; ways in which we disperse finances.

As a graduate student in the US, I had the privilege of getting grants every year for conferences. I could get funds if I wanted to travel but that kind of context is just impossible for students here, that's with the UGC restrictions, just getting 7000 rupees a month, I mean that's menial kind of sustenance for producing quality knowledge.

So, I'm often hesitant of thinking of a pre and post-pandemic world because there are so many continuities also that are going to impact - so it's not that the state of knowledge was not - the kinds of knowledge that was getting produced was at the same level as elsewhere. There were issues of finances, there were issues of funds, training; the kind of rigorous training we could provide was being impacted by the teaching load faculty have so, it's going to be extended far longer perhaps and I think what the pandemic has done is exacerbated the kinds of inequalities in the state of knowledge production that is in front of us.

So, I think these challenges will continue for a while and I hope there'll be ways through which we can think through alternatives, but I'm not so sure entirely what they will be for now but I'm not stopping from teaching engaged ethnography to these researchers.

Craig Johnson:

These points are just so important, Anandini. Thank you for making them and I mean the concerns about sort of the impacts on communities of researchers inadvertently carrying the virus into communities, exposing communities to the virus I think is something that is only just now being touched upon. I think most universities have kind of gone into this lockdown mentality and the main preoccupation has been about the safety of staff and employees of universities, but your comments sort of raised the very real concern about the responsibility of the researcher in relation to the people with whom we're working, certainly in an ethnographic context.

There's also I think a really interesting kind of research ethics dimension to the comments you're making about sort of the expectations that we have for researchers in kind of establishing contact and even maintaining relationships with research participants and whether this can and should go forward. The last thing I'll say is that in my own field in development studies I share your concern.

I think that ethnographic research -- certainly when I did my PhD, which is a million years ago -- there was a very strong expectation that you got your hands dirty so to speak; you did learn a language, you went into the field. And nowadays, I think there's a lot of my colleagues, younger colleagues, are working with big data sets and analytics and using our software and they don't really do a lot of kind of ethnographic or field-based research.

So, I worry that the field itself will undergo this transformation in ways that might not be positive for kind of the field of study. Swarna, I see your hand is up. I just want to give the floor very briefly to Elisa because this question of research ethics I think is really interesting to me and I'm wondering Elisa whether you've experienced that.

So you will have, I think you mentioned you've done your research ethics protocol with the university; you've gone through that process. Did COVID come up at all? Did the sort of impact either direct and real or virtual and distanced, did that impact come up in your research ethics evaluation?

Elisa Cooper:

No, not really. I, of course, had to change my research; I wasn't allowed to travel for research so I had to change my proposal but yeah I don't want to be too harsh but I don't know to what extent the research ethics process is equipped to deal with some of these more nuanced questions around ethics.

So, I think it addresses sort of like major red flags maybe and also issues of liability for the university but yeah, there weren't any questions about whether the research is a priority for communities at this time; whether this is going to be a burden on the organization I was working with and that's something I was thinking about and conversing with the organization about and trying to understand myself, but it's not something that the research ethics process I feel is really well equipped to capture.

And it's not, I wouldn't say it's a particularly agile process that really responds to changing circumstances from my own personal experience. And then in India, my understanding and others can correct me if I'm wrong, is there actually not a centralized research ethics process for social science research. There's a medical research ethics procedure but I didn't have to go through anything -- I was working with a university in India as well and working with a professor there to make sure that the research was being conducted in a way that was as appropriate and respectful and ethical as possible but there was no standardized procedure to go through to get approval for it which in some ways provides agility and freedom, but then also raises questions like about how are we thinking about ethics and I think it's quite easy for researchers from the global North to just go to India and they check all of the boxes in the global north institution, but that doesn't guarantee that it's actually beneficial for the community where the research is taking place and so one thing I was considering was should I actually do research at all or should I just switch to using secondary data and do a major research paper instead of a thesis and so that was something I was open to but as I was talking with the organization they shared that they felt like it would actually be beneficial for them and I tried to orient my research around their needs and have them guide the research process and because my methodology was participatory action research it was very much in line with what I had been intending anyway, but yeah from the ethics perspective I think allowing the organization to take the lead in the research both in terms of the questions we were exploring; the way in which we were exploring in the time frame I think was one way that I thought about that.

Craig Johnson:

Your comments raised for me too the huge variations that you see in institutional capacity to oversee research ethics across countries and even I think within India across states. So, through

the course of my career I've worked in places like Thailand where like the government barely knows that you're there and it's very easy to go to a village and do research to Vietnam where the space for doing research -- at least it used to be very tightly controlled and more to the point I now do work in Ecuador where you can't travel to parts of the Amazon without having proof that you've been vaccinated for yellow fever, encephalitis, and other infectious diseases. So, again, I think it reflects sort of the underlying inequities that exist across institutional capacity. Swarna you've been very patient, you've got your head up.

Swarna Rajagopalan:

Well, I've been patient because I'm not sure. Well, let's see, I don't know which previous comments my comments are appropriate of, but I will offer them anyway and I think I agree very much with Divya and Anandini's comments about the pre and post-pandemic or pre pandemic and down the line post-pandemic condition of research, research universities, not necessarily being very different.

Some of the things we are talking about today were also true three years ago, have also been true for 20 years and they have deep structural issues that come from a variety of reasons. So, I think that we need to address them anyway pandemic or not.

But, you know something that I've sort of said at the beginning that I want to come back to after listening to everybody is what do we mean by research because I come from political science and international relations particularly, and our research is not any of the things that people are describing.

Typically when someone says they're going to do field work in the area of security studies we're talking to elite opinion makers for the most part. In security studies you're not going to get permission in any country, in any society to walk around interviewing soldiers on the border; this is not happening.

But, what I am seeing -- also something I mentioned earlier - is how many small community-based organizations locally, who may not have masters, who may not even have bachelor's, are trying to initiate research projects based on WhatsApp polls or calling people or having them call a particular number and answer a series of questions and the quality of information produced, the conditions in which the information is collected, the reports that are written will not pass muster in -- and I've learned these terms very recently because I'm quite a fossil, global North conditions - but they are research, they are knowledge that we would not otherwise have and given the huge data gap even on the impact of COVID, given that everything we are saying is anecdotal at this point, this is the only way we're going to be able to begin to plug in the holes, so what does it mean to do research?

In my organization we've done a lot of reflective, symposia, discussions and conversations and our eyes are actually on the policy in the post-pandemic, we're not talking about policy now. We will not be ready to talk about it then, so that is the relief effort, there is the documentation of suffering but there is also what we need to do thereafter.

Now, is this research? Some of it is because we are pressing people to reflect on things they don't have the time to do otherwise. We're aggregating, we're pulling together, we're curating information that nobody else seems to be bothered to do but is it research?

When someone writes a reflective piece on how the government dealt with the pandemic vis-a-vis all the things they have learned through 30 years of disaster mitigation work is that research? Is documentation of an organization's work in the field research?

I'm beginning to wonder simply because none of this would make the cut of what we would teach in a western style classroom or in even when we simulate that classroom or those research methods courses, but are these forms of documentation or research or thinking or reflection knowledge production?

I don't know the answer to any of these things. I've had the singular privilege of not belonging to a formal academic institution for a very long time so I can think whatever I please. The other thing that I've thought about a great deal partly because some of my own research is in areas that are not central to the COVID discourse, disarmament, for example, arms control.

What happens to those questions when we put them on pause; put them on the back burner for two or three years? At the beginning everyone talked about the shadow pandemic but what happens when you don't continue to press for more women to be nominated for elections?

So, one of the things I've been concerned about is what becomes the flavor of the season in a crisis and in the season after the crisis, and what happens to the questions that we don't talk about? We've had 20 years of the firearms protocol, the anniversary was two days ago.

Nobody talked about it because none of us can think past COVID and vaccination so these are some of the things that I mean I come to this webinar with absolutely no answers, but these are some questions that keep coming up in my mind as I think about and as I listen to all of you.

Craig Johnson:

These are - I love webinars like this by the way, the ones where you encounter new questions that you hadn't thought about and recognize the fact that we're not even near having all of the answers, but yeah your comments raised for me too the opportunity cost certainly of the current, very strong focus on COVID and its impacts.

But also the changes going on in relation to research practices that are resulting from the lockdown and from the pandemic. Elisa, you've got your hand up and then I'm gonna come back to some of the questions from the floor after Elisa you make your comment.

Elisa Cooper:

Yeah just building on what Swarna mentioned and I think also echoing some of the questions that Juhi had raised earlier about what's the purpose of research and who are we conducting it

for, who's involved in conducting research. I think when thinking about the state of knowledge production I think it's important to recognize that a lot of knowledge is being produced and just thinking about this one organization that I was working with they work in education in rural Bihar, community-based education and very quickly they pivoted from helping communities, supporting communities that were trying to run their own schools to helping young people to offer tutorials for students at a hyper local level recognizing that the students in their schools aren't going to be able to do online schooling and they can't just go two years with no education at all and so they started learning about how to from a distance help young people to organize classes of small kids in their compounds or in their neighbourhoods where they could gather in small groups and they're learning a lot about adopting education and making it accessible.

But then they're not writing about it in English, they're not going to publish it anywhere, there's no one who could go and read about it but they're producing a lot of knowledge that's very relevant to the communities that they work in.

So, I think also this pandemic is raising the question about like what counts as knowledge and whose knowledge matters and is it only the audience of academics who read English academic journals that we care about or are we concerned about knowledge that actually serves the needs of communities that are facing the brunt of the impact of COVID?

Craig Johnson:

That's a really key question and it relates a little bit I think to a question that Sharada posted in the chat about how people are doing in relation to writing and not just what kind of writing but almost how much writing are you able to get done during this pandemic and I think here too it's fair to say that certainly within the university sector we're under enormous pressure all the time to be publishing, to be writing, but your comments Elisa really point to sort of that key question about the audiences to whom we're writing the kind of contributions and goals that we have in our writing. Juhi, I think you've raised your virtual hand through the chat.

Juhi Tyagi:

Yeah, I've been trying to but yeah, I seem to have some difficulty. I wanted to address a couple of questions that were in the chat but also go back to the previous question we had asked, and thank you Elisa you've set the ball rolling to something that I've been meaning to bring up and the question really is we talked a lot about knowledge production; what we think it's going to look like, who are the subjects that are going to be chosen?

Who's going to be doing it, what methods they're going to be using. But I think something that we should realize is this is a really great moment for us. These moments of disruption and rapture really good moments for us to really think about what the fault lines are and how they're showing up. These have always been there right, who enters these universities?

What sort of -- again like Elisa said, what languages do they write in? Who do they write for? And the fact that most of your students will only do research with their community which is mostly going to be not the marginalized should make you question how are people coming into universities, who is being chosen?

Are you giving enough scholarship? And I think our path is laid out; these are the struggles and these are the fights that we should be fighting indeed. We need to have more scholarships; we need to have some of these things fixed in some ways or at least attempted to be fixed in some ways. But I think what is also really interesting for me is the sort of questions that I've been hearing and Seema will probably attest to this, but we have a great diversity of students from all sorts of classes and backgrounds in geographical areas and what I find fascinating is the kind of questions they're asking and I think the kind of questions they're asking in some sense refreshing and they're not new, but I think we haven't gotten to them for a long time.

I know with vaccines for instance, in India and IPEs they're asking questions about global inequalities, like okay how is it that we're not getting this; what's going on here? So, their curiosity is going into places and directions that I think are really really nice to see because I feel like it is a moment where you don't have to go to the field and be a researcher in that way. A lot of what is happening around you is actually giving you I think delivering a lot of the learning objectives that I think you would imagine you'd want to do in a classroom space.

And I think what's also interesting is that perhaps, this is -- so, I guess I'm not as pessimistic as Divya is and I feel like these are going to be moments where you will ask these questions and push for your institutions to also do things hopefully; a push for some things to be slightly different. But, I think what's also really interesting is when people have seen the state fail, when they've seen nothing actually work, there has been a lot of networks that have been built; a lot of understanding and by collaboration I wasn't -- I guess in my mind -- I wasn't thinking of the global North/South, but I was also thinking of collaboration between equals.

For instance, I know some students are like oh, we all live in the same area, what is it that we're finding? What is it that we can get together and these are pretty empowering experiences in some way and I think we need to start thinking like Swarna said, we need to start thinking of all of this as being research that can be enabled and should be and ought to be in these circumstances.

And I just wanted to get to one last question that Derek asked which I think also was a really great question; that is also indeed a struggle that I think one needs to be thinking about. These are times when you can have space a shrink or you can have ones where you actually do keep pushing at the edges and with academic freedom this is something that obviously these are times when we should be pushing against some of these things.

And as far as writing is concerned I guess well I'm not producing very much but then the question is if you are producing like I mean Seema has been writing and I think she's been writing and producing in ways that I think are meaningful so yeah I'll leave it at that.

Craig Johnson:

I'm so glad you raised the optimistic side of kind of the equation Juhi and also the question of relationships with students and I mean here in Canada it's not comparable at all to India right now, but I think there are a lot of people who are concerned about the mental health and well-being of young people particularly those in kind of secondary education, but also post-secondary education, so that's I think a point that we might want to kind of reflect on in a little while.

Seema you've got your hand up as well though, I don't know if you want to comment on sort of the challenges of publishing or indeed about the well-being of the communities with whom you're working and the students that you're working with at the university.

Seema Mundoli:

Okay, so I actually wanted to go back to that question of knowledge generation, knowledge creation that you talked about but I do agree that in the context of the work we are doing now with the migrant, the relief work that we're doing, we were very surprised that after the first wave of the pandemic last year once it was over, three, four months after it was over we began to get a lot of requests at SWAN from academics not just in India, but outside asking us for another database.

So, they had seen our reports, they had seen the press releases and things and so how this whole thing works just to give a very brief background is it began in the first phase of the pandemic with a single call to somebody who was working in the Right to Food and Right to Wages campaign and from there it just blew up into this large network of volunteers from across the country.

We just took calls, we tried to find local resources, arrange donors to transfer money, so that's how this all emerged. In the process of it when a worker called we would take some basic information, like I said to assess what is the kind of need. Now, we did not see it as data, we just saw it as a needs assessment.

We didn't realize that there were actually people interested in that. So, even before the pandemic was over we actually got a lot of requests saying can you share your data because that was really fascinating data for people who were working in this area of the migrant crisis and labor and we had not thought of it and if you remember I told you we were just a hodgepodge group of people who just felt that we had to do something. So, the whole question came about how do we share this data?

So, then we came up with a protocol – a document, an ethics document – which is still used where we said that we will not give it for publication like an academic research publication, but we will give it if somebody wants to use the data to intervene in the community.

So, if they want to take up some kind of an intervention project or those who are supporting intervention, so this was just because many of the people who were a part of this group with themselves not in the academic community and they felt that look it will be wrong of us to have taken this -- we took this information trying to help them, now we can't just use that information whatever way we want.

So, even now when somebody asks us for information we send them this form, there's an ethics thing that we ask them; What is the purpose of you want this information for? If you want to call the workers we'll give you the numbers, these are the workers you can call. So, we didn't realize that for them this was knowledge right, I mean all this information that we have learned but we didn't realize it.

Even now, so what we still see that's when we also started thinking about it; what is it that we are doing? And that's when we realized that yes, we are doing relief and our focus is always going to be relief, but this has to serve - so, what is knowledge, is trying to create an understanding about something, about a particular we all know what that is right – so, at this point of time we are creating a kind of knowledge about the distress that people have felt.

And maybe we don't know how useful or what it will be but we know there is extreme levels of distress -- I mean we get phone calls from people who are crying literally saying we haven't had food for three days, so can you give us food. Many of you who've been doing this kind of work will know that it can get very tiring, so we know that we've captured some of the distress and we want to ensure that it is not forgotten; not in the near future but specifically by 2024 is what we are hoping for.

We need to remind people also that this is what it is about. So, we feel that yes, it may not be knowledge creation in a traditional way, but it is in a way some level of knowledge relation that we hope to use for a particular purpose later. Maybe this is the part I should say cut out from the recording but that's okay.

Craig Johnson:

So, I have a specific question as a political scientist who's worked on India, I'm interested in kind of the social welfare responses of the state. How would you assess I guess the existing kind of social welfare architecture in India, so something like the NREGA, has that been sufficient; does it sound like it to meet the unusual demand now from vulnerable communities in rural areas?

Seema Mundoli:

So, the problem, what has happened is NREGA they increased it to 200 days of work but it was not sufficient. The population that moved to the villages was so massive; there is only so much work that you can do. Plus, if you look at the budget last time they reduced actually the spending on NREGA.

So, if you're talking about the government, central government measures, union government measures to address the scale of the distress -- pathetic. I mean we've sat with meetings with the labor -- so, there was this very bizarre meeting where they said we had collected all this information, they set up this central website for travel; for bookings which is the one place where they should have centralized, they decentralized it; states do the trouble.

And then we started collecting information about trains and then one day we get a call from the central labor office in Delhi saying can you please come for a meeting because we want to know how to address this travel fiasco. So, we went for this meeting and we were thinking that the meeting is going to be about helping the workers get back home.

They wanted to know how to build a software system where they can bring workers back from the villages to the city; that was their only concern and it was very bizarre. So, they wanted to use what we had learned to do the opposite literally. So, they did not respond when needed, they did not respond in the time, they did not respond in the manner that is needed and the sad part is it continues in the second wave as well.

There are some good officers whom we relied on like Karnataka has one good officer we rely on her massively, but at the government scale maybe some states have done better but pathetic. I mean we can't even say there is a government that even cares about its people right now. NREGA was very very helpful for many who went back and were able to get that work but that is not enough to sustain a family for the whole year in the absence of no employment and wages.

They should have said 365 days of NREGA work. It's an excuse, I mean it's like an apology for not even an apology for what they have done. I'm sorry but it's been too much of one year of this nonsense is more than what any of us can take.

Craig Johnson:

Yeah, no it's interesting to hear and it sounds absolutely tragic for the people being affected directly by it. I want to come back to a question, it might relate for anyone on the panel who wants to address it and it was about -- I'm just scrolling back up here, it's from Gabriella and it's about the impact of the pandemic on religious gatherings in India.

And I know there was something in the news, I read something in the news about a large Mela that had happened around the beginning of the last outbreak and some of the infections were being attributed to that, but also I find it curious too that here in Canada, the United States, Latin America religious gatherings, not wearing masks, defying the science of COVID has become part of what some people call the culture wars and I'm wondering too whether you're seeing that in India.

Religious gatherings obviously serve an important spiritual purpose in people's lives but also are they being politicized I guess to a degree and what's the effect of that moving forward. Maybe I'll throw that in the first instance to Divya, to our historian just to put you on the spot.

Divya Kannan:

I mean the answer is self-evident. I think the panel shook their heads together on this. So, the immediate context religious gatherings have been the bane of this country in the last few months, there is no denying. A few months ago two to three million people did gather in one of the largest states and it's not a surprise it turned out to be a super spreader, but to be honest I wouldn't only pinpoint on that gathering alone because you had scattered the governments and unfortunately allowed gatherings of all sorts across the country for various purposes, because here having two million people together is a sure short recipe for disaster, but smaller religious gatherings were anyway occurring like you mentioned in the chat box across states.

So, be it your small temple festival or the churches or the mosque, across religious communities and how I look at it is because religion is so integral to community identities and to political lobbies. Political parties also go along with it, it is what banks politics at the end of the day.

So, every government wants to pander to the demands of various religious communities except the minorities. And at the risk of, of course, sounding anti-national for people beyond this video for a government that is thriving on religious authoritarianism, I would say you answered your own question because in the Kumbh Mela instance now we know that the Mela was advanced by one year in order to hold it.

It was scheduled to take place next year but a very weird concoction of astrological beliefs and forecasting they said that it's best to hold it now and can you imagine when there is a pandemic of this proportion a country like India with a huge population goes ahead and that simply cannot be a coincidence.

It cannot be blamed simply on people's blind religious beliefs or emotions. It is more than that and the government of course thrives on it and what is the sad contrast is at the beginning of the pandemic in India, when the news had spread that in Wuhan the virus was increasing, there was a Muslim gathering in Delhi of a number of people, quite a small number of people who had come from east Asia, and the amount of slandering and ridicule and criticism that the gathering had to face at a time when we had just come to know what the COVID is really about and everybody was ruthless in putting the blame on them.

But here we have a huge Mela where majority region believers have come together and of course I'm not saying the criticism is muted, but the criticism has been of a very different nature in itself. And not just religious gatherings let me tell you when weddings are happening; even in progressive states governments have been forced to say okay you can hold weddings up to 20 people, as if 20 people is a magical number and they won't spread. So, any sort of communal gathering is being allowed in the garb of appeasing the electorate and that is –

Swarna Rajagopalan:

Let's not forget election rallies.

Divya Kannan:

Elections, of course, all the elections. We had elections across and this I would say has been happening forever and then the sad question that faces us is what can scientists do? Where does the scientific temper that this country claims to believe in? Clearly, there is no sustained policy on cultivating scientific.

The same people who said you can bang a vessel and COVID will go away, are the ones who are now fuming realizing that what they said is a folly but unwilling to admit it in public. But, yes, a direct question to you Gabriella, religious gatherings are happening in a very very small way and I personally see in a few months it will open up because it is a very different kind of pressure from below.

Craig Johnson:

That's such a rich answer and so my next question that I'll direct to Anandini is sort of how do we then assess the quality and the capacity of the scientific establishment in India both at the union level and across states? And again too, I think this is something that is plaguing many countries around the world.

This tension between sort of social pressures to reopen or cultural politics denying the existence of the pandemic on the one side, and then the scientific establishment, the epidemiologists, public health officials, trying to sort of create some kind of organization and order to the response and I'm wondering sort of how you would assess that situation in the current context.

Anandini Dar:

Thanks, Craig, for that question. Very different from what we've been talking about in some ways but you know I'm thinking about the new education policy just instantly as you're talking about scientific temper, of course, what's happening in the pandemic; what has also happened in this process of the pandemic and things being shut down rather than us -- the early March, April, May of last year we were trying to refigure what kind of education we want in our university systems, school systems, at least trying to think through what does it mean to go online?

What does it mean to teach in this way? I mean scientific temper in that way would mean to rethink, reflect, question the norm that we have adopted of instantly transitioning into an online mode. So, new education policy came out at the time, very little reflections on the current moment. There were several aspects from the previous NEP that were just adopted into this new one.

There have been a lot of debates already about the NEP; what does multi-disciplinarity suddenly mean? Is it just about what is being gaped from again the global North and the west;

has the colonial hangover not ended or is it about creating new ways to create new kinds of knowledge, new kinds of research enriching perhaps regional, vernacular dimensions of research, those remain absent in any bead; it remains absent in the ways in which we're continuing the education online.

So, I mean I'm not so sure in terms of what kinds of cultural wars emerge here, but definitely we've not reflected on what is going to happen to this online mode of teaching and the instant response of the state was to start SWAM courses. Just recently we've gotten a notification that okay, we've been teaching online now all the courses that for a year all faculty across all universities have had enough experience of teaching online because we've been thrown into it, so which courses can now be co-opted into the— and SWAM, for those who don't know, it's the government's initiative of sustaining education by creating videos online so anyone can access it and anyone can gain an education.

So, what kinds of now university courses should be sent to the central government's archive of courses that can then be accessed by anyone. So, we haven't had the opportunity to and being in a state government university we're being mandated to give up our courses in this way; so if students access those courses who pays for it?

Does the university charge more fee to these students so that they should also now take a SWAM course as part the curriculum? Does it stay as part of our curriculum? So, what the pandemic has also done has been to quickly move online without thinking through what it means for those who can't access education online even many of our students at Ambedkar University come from extremely challenged and marginalized backgrounds and they find it extremely difficult to connect to classes, listen to recordings, data is a challenge; students don't have phones necessarily or laptops are far cry from reality for them.

To be able to have consistent access to the classes that they have actually enrolled for and so we have had no efforts from the state or the centre to support these kinds of students to be able to access online educations, rather we're just taking material from online and just conveying it to another realm of the online and not thinking of education as any form of social transformation or possibility for social transformation even what sociologists would talk about social mobility and at Ambedkar we talk about education as a way to be rid of our own social class, caste, backgrounds is not going to be possible in this kind of environment.

We're kind of reinstating and ensuring that those who don't have access will continue to not have access. Till date, in the university where I am, students were promised that they'd get laptops many have not, we have not done anything about reducing fees for students, we're not accessing labs, we can't access computers, we can't download readings.

Students in India are not comfortable with reading on the computers, even though I jokingly sometimes say that when they come to class they won't bring printouts and they'll read on their phone some of them, but the majority of them actually do have a challenge to take all classes online and then submit everything online.

So, that's the state at which we were prior to this moment where we've been pushed into this online mode of education and there are absolutely -- I mean I can't see any ways in which students who are not being able to access education will have any kind of social transformation.

We haven't -- I mean a year ahead, there has been no committee or no kind of constitution of any board or anything even in Delhi to rethink how to offer education at school levels, at -- I mean we've forgotten about the kids who are from EWS categories or who come from other marginalized backgrounds who will not be able to access classes online, so I'm going into a different dimension of from what you may have asked but scientific temper is far from a reality in education even at a school level.

Asking questions is kind of an impossibility even as an adult at this moment because what we're seeing is that majority -- I mean while there's been a pandemic there's been a lot of action otherwise. There have been lots of people who've been activists, people on the ground, young people who are speaking up for climate change or other kinds of concerns that plague our country and asking questions are being put into detention and I hear and read about how we need to think about even the health of people in jails and that's not happening we'd rather put them into further vulnerable positions, so there is a huge sort of a divide or tussle that we're at in terms of scientific temper because on one hand we're teaching it and we want to teach it but we're not being able to because of the reach and the outreach and the capacity of not reaching certain people and then when those who are able to ask questions they're not going to be allowed to ask questions.

Craig Johnson:

Yeah, thank you for raising those points and I think coming back to sort of the impact of COVID-19 on research your comments also raise I think the question of government support in different forms for undertaking primary research in India and perhaps I'll throw to Juhi then; how would you assess the current state of affairs like is the government doing enough to adapt to the current situation? Do you -- are you as optimistic about the future prospects for undertaking research moving forward or is the economic downturn having a negative effect also on the ability of the government to support basic research?

Juhi Tyagi:

Sorry, I know Swarna had a hand raised so before I go Swarna did you want to say anything?

Swarna Rajagopalan:

No, I just Anandini just made me think of how in the last 10 years the push has been to digitize everything, ready or not here we come - from demonetization, don't use cash, use your cards, go online. The solution to sexual agenda-based violence in society is an app, now as someone who runs an NGO that works on this issue every week I get one person writing and saying ma'am I'm creating an app and I want you to use it, now apps are not going to solve anything.

So, it seems as if and I -- my point is that we're moving into this imaginary, digital paradise where nothing -- we won't have to touch anything, we won't have to meet anyone and everything will miraculously happen somewhere in a space that most of us don't understand and then we have this pandemic which is all about contact, no contact, disease; I'm thinking how much more mutually isolated will we be at the end of this?

We will not have seen people, we will not have had the normal interactions that we would have in a society like India, how much will that push us back into our -- let's say, not pre-pandemic but into the social practices and distances - I will use that - social distances of 200 years ago as a result of all of these measures because not everyone can be digital, so all those digital heaven is only for some of us and then the rest of us we can't touch or see or hear or meet, so what will happen to us as a community of people, a community of citizens -- a world of citizens really.

I also was an activist and I wondered about the scattering of solidarities at times like this so just again. I've lowered my hand because I thought maybe this is not relevant but since Juhi was so kind --

Juhi Tyagi:

No, I know when Anandini was speaking you raised it so I figured you had something related to say. Craig, do you want me to go ahead and respond to your question?

Craig Johnson:

Sure and Sharada had a question in the chat too about how your students are doing in relation to internships and research.

Juhi Tyagi:

Right, right. So, just possibly I quickly just answer your question so Craig you had asked how we see the future of research in terms of funding, in terms of the state being able to fund some research and I do want to say I mean it depends on the kind of state you have and if you do want to be funded by that kind of state because with that funding also comes some conditionalities which are not necessarily what people are okay with accepting because it does restrict what questions you ask and what you can do.

I mean surely there has been a real pullback in terms of funding in general and the government has also pulled back funding from non-profits so they've actually removed a lot of non-profits access to more international funding already and I think that is possibly a direction the state might want to move in as a way to also control the kind of research and the kind of discourses that are coming up and so this is a double-edged sword; you do want access to funds but you do also want to be able to do what you want to do and so what you have seen emerge now is -- at least what I've seen emerge now a little bit more -- is just more -- I guess with these apps there's some good things that happen, there's been more crowdfunding of various kinds and so

as people sure of things that are happening, I know friends from all over the world who've been saying are there good pieces of work that are happening?

We'd be really interested in actually funding that kind of work and these are the kind of ways in which I guess one has to move forward with certain kinds of work anyhow. Just to go back to Sharada's question about what students are doing, so one of the sort of huge draws for the masters program that we teach at the university is they have huge field components; they have them through their two-year program.

So, they're supposed to immerse themselves in the field, they're supposed to do internships, they're supposed to go back to the field again to do their thesis and so that has obviously been a huge challenge and so the way the field immersion ended up happening is usually we work with over 70 organizations over the country and students sort of go in groups of ten.

They go live in the villages and sort of engage with all sort of structures in the villages and that obviously hasn't been possible. So, one of the ways that was actually changed during the pandemic was to say okay can you start to think about neighbourhood studies; your own neighbourhood and this is something that has I think that you do see a little bit more happening in general anyway even before the pandemic, but definitely more so now because I know a lot of the students are more than happy like I said to go elsewhere and to be like this is what's happening, then that's what happening there, that are not as reflective of their own sort of circumstances and situations.

So, things like spending a day at the local government office and it could mean anything; it could be the police station, it could be -- some of these students have never actually stepped into police stations and just sat there and just sat and watched and seen what's going on.

So, you're not just spending that sort of time doing things like that, so that's kind of what it sort of changed to. We had lesser luck with our internships which students did online but a lot of the organizations that they worked with were just -- I don't think they were able to respond to students doing online internships very well.

I mean it was very hard for them; they were already doing pandemic sort of response work on the ground and so that I mean that was a challenge we tried it didn't go very well, I guess we're constantly sort of thinking of things to do I suppose. Yeah, I don't know if Seema wants to add anything.

Seema Mundoli:

So, just very quickly one of the things which we also tried to do is at least get them to do some interviews. Do 10 interviews through the phone so that even if there is not -- sorry I can't turn on my video, my internet is a bit unstable - but so we said okay talk to 10 people and make a questionnaire, do a pilot, so they're trying to do that.

This one course I teach in the undergrad called the -- it's an interdisciplinary studies on sustainability -- and there what we've asked the students because it is in a social ecological system setting you need to have that physical -- instead we've said create your own SES; it could be a lake, it could be a park, it could be anything.

Map the users, use secondary literature, conduct telephonic interviews because that's another thing that our university said very clearly now that under no circumstances even if the student says I will go and do field work and we allow them to go into field work because the safety is is very very critical.

So, we've told them do this -- maybe administer a quantitative, online questionnaire so at least they go through some part of the process; the preparation of the questionnaire, the pilots and things but yes, it is nothing like the real field experience that they would normally get; that engagement but yeah we're just trying to make the most of the worst situation right now.

Juhi Tyagi:

And if I can just add and say they definitely went through a whole IRB process. They still went through that, that was important and also a question asked in the chat box earlier, for instance, if foreign researchers collaborate with -- I don't know about other universities but I can certainly speak for the one Seema and I work in which is Azim Premji -- that they have to also clear the IRB in our university as well.

Craig Johnson:

This is so fascinating and I wish we could keep going on but I'm conscious of the fact that it's getting later in India and I don't want to encroach on too much of your evenings, but just to round things out I wanted to thank all of the panelists and the audience members for such a fascinating discussion and my heart goes out to everyone in India right now, just how difficult the situation seems from afar and I wish you all the best.

I hope that things do turn for the better sooner than later and just thank you again for such a fantastic discussion today and hopefully one that will keep going on as these events continue. Speaking of which CIRCLE has a very busy calendar this summer and the next event that's happening is on June 17th, if you want to mark your calendars at 8 a.m. eastern standard time.

It's going to be a book presentation, a book launch. The book is called Continuity and Change in 21st Century India, very appropriate to the conversation we've been having and the authors are John Harriss, Professor Emeritus at Simon Fraser University, Craig Jeffrey, Professor of Geography at the University of Melbourne and Trent Brown, Research Fellow at the School of Geography at the University of Melbourne, and the commentators for the book launch will be Aparna Gopalan from the Department of Anthropology at Harvard University and M. Vijayabaskar from the Madras Institute of Development Studies and so please do take a look at the CIRCLE website to register for that event and that's coming up again on June 17th.

Finally, thanks again to everyone for a fantastic conversation today. I hope I've been able to sort of incorporate and address all of the fantastic questions that people have been raising, I think this is by far the largest panel I've been involved in online and I think everyone's had a chance to speak and it's been wonderful to hear your insights and observations about the current situation and again I wish you all the best in the coming weeks.

Swarna Rajagopalan:

Thank you for having us.

Craig Johnson:

Absolutely, our pleasure, our pleasure.

Seema Mundoli:

Thank you so much.

Craig Johnson:

Take care everyone, bye-bye.

[End of transcript]