

# No publication, no degree : of knowledge production as doctoral candidates in anthropology/sociology in India

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# NO PUBLICATION, NO DEGREE

## Of knowledge production as Doctoral Candidates in Anthropology / Sociology in India

*Cheshta Arora and Debarun Sarkar*

### Abstract

The paper rekindles a three-decade-old debate in the annals of Indian anthropology / sociology which became dormant after no significant headway was made. The debate which goes by the name of "crisis in sociology" in India provides the backdrop against which the paper makes sense of current regimes of knowledge production that a doctoral candidate in India must navigate. By doing so, the paper reflects on the limitations of epistemological critiques wherein an epistemic critique stops at the corridors of an academic workplace. The paper argues that doctoral candidates in India today are cognitive workers engaged in exploitative relations of knowledge production. However, these exploitative relations are obfuscated by the postcolonial epistemological critiques that indulge in foregrounding the hegemony of the North / West. The paper proposes an infrastructural critique of knowledge that does not respond with despair to perceived transformations and crises.

**Keywords:** *academic labour, knowledge production, cognitive worker, doctoral candidates, infrastructure*

*The spectacle of publication presents itself as a vast inaccessible reality that can never be questioned. Its sole message is: What is published is good; what is good gets published. The passive intellectual acceptance it demands is already effectively imposed by its monopoly of appearances, its manner of appearing without allowing any reply.*

Yoann Bazin, Gazi Islam, Martin Parker, Yiannis Gabriel (2018)

### Introduction

In 1993, Veena Das initiated a decade-long debate which is referred to in the annals of sociology<sup>1</sup> in India as "Crisis in Sociology."<sup>2</sup> Her announcement of the crisis was supported by

<sup>1</sup> The disciplines of sociology and anthropology have had a shared affinity (Srinivas 1952; Srinivas and Panini 1973; Breman 2002; Beteille 2006). The paper uses the word anthropology / sociology to refer to this shared affinity. The particular signifiers of "anthropology" and "sociology" are used only when referring or evoking the discipline as someone else does.

<sup>2</sup> This terminology is not just used by the papers themselves but is the title under which these debates have

noting problems of sub-standard research, plagiarism, academic integrity etc. while locating the crisis in three institutional structures – the universities, the University Grants Committee (UGC)<sup>3</sup>, and professional bodies like the Indian Sociological Society. To address the crisis, Das advocated centralization of research in “five-to six departments in the country ... with proven competence” (1993, 1161) and called for drawing “up a list of accredited journals to which young scholars are encouraged to submit their work” (Das 1993, 1161).

We invoke this debate for a very precise reason. The existing debates concerning precarity, academic labour, and the changes in the nature of academic work frame the concerns amidst the problematic of “neoliberalism” and ongoing austerity measures<sup>4</sup> in the recent decades. This particular “Crisis in Sociology” debate in India sheds light on certain foreclosures within the earlier liberal paradigm which prefigures the ongoing transformations of the university system. By tracing this debate and its foreclosure, we aim to find the adequate vocabulary for this experience of academic labour in the present.

The concern of academic labour has become exigent for Indian scholars as global debates concerning academic precarity, labour conditions in the university, or changing nature of academic work have not found adequate place within Indian academic debates barring minor exceptions. Rather, it is to highlight the trajectory of postcolonial experience wherein a social welfare state never materialized and whatever existed in its place was deeply inegalitarian. The debate prefigured the changes which were to come two decades later wherein concerns of quality and competence were discursively installed over and above the inegalitarian and exclusionary relations in and outside the university. The aforementioned debate is an important site to intervene and reflect on the continuities between the past and the ongoing transformations and their effect on knowledge production in anthropology / sociology in India.

The debate was a discussion among a closed group of established scholars and renowned faculty where the figure of passive students was manufactured to ground the pedagogue’s pastoral power (Martin and Waring 2018; Bairy TS 2004). Consequently, the central problematic revolved around merit, commitment, pedagogy, role of the discipline, teaching, institutional integrity, etc. without highlighting the hierarchies that constitute these concepts, practices, and institutions. It was as late as 2019 that a group of doctoral candidates from a sociology department of a central university in India highlighted their position in the “knowledge food chain.” (Reddy et al. 2015) Backed by their quantitative data and in the backdrop of the UGC Regulations 2009 and 2016, the authors noted structural exclusions produced via mandates of mandatory publishing, lack of funding, and lack of training. They argued that the neoliberal constructs informing the UGC regulations manufacture underachievers rather than a discipline in crisis plagued by under-committed, under achieving students.

While this paper complements Reddy et al. (2015), we disagree with their call to relegate the debate “to the dustbin of history”. (Reddy et al. 2015, 41) We believe that rekindling this

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been archived in the online archive maintained by the Savitribai Phule Pune University known as Documents on History of Sociology. <http://www.unipune.ac.in/snc/cssh/HistorySociology/index.html>, 16<sup>th</sup> April 2022.

<sup>3</sup> UGC is a statutory body under the Ministry of Education which regulates the standard of higher education in India.

<sup>4</sup> See the Special Issue on “Politics of precarity: Neoliberal academia under austerity measures and authoritarian threat” published in *Social Anthropology* 27(2), Sundar (2018), and Chattarji (2016).

debate is necessary as it reflects an effect of power on existing knowledge-making practices most succinctly. As mentioned earlier, we are interested in giving meaning to the emerging hierarchical experiences in the academic industry that get lost in enunciations and performance of being a scholar. While acknowledging doctoral candidates as producers of knowledge, Reddy et al. do not dwell on the labour of doctoral candidates. Their articulation is limited to demanding infrastructures that recognize doctoral candidates as dignified scholars. Acknowledging the university as a site of labour shifts the concern away from scholarly interests such as pedagogy, teaching, and research. These scholarly concerns tame the debate and at times take inegalitarian turns, as witnessed in Das' articulation or, as Thorkelson argues, limits the identification of "scholars" with notions such as "precarity" that "can lead into a split discourse, in which a liberal subject gets to take pity on the abject, precarious, or unemployed Other within its ranks" (2016, 485) without identifying as one. To situate this experience is to move away from relations of "empathy" to "the embodied outcome of proximity... that leads people to share perspectives and passions." (2016, 486)

### Academic labour as cognitive labour

An emerging literature today marks out the specificities of academic labour as a "specific historical form of academic work". (Allmer 2018, 56) It interrogates the one-sided focus on content, values, and pedagogy (Winn 2015) and opens up academic work to questions of political economy with increasing proletarianization of academic labour (McCarthy, Song, and Jayasuriya 2017). Reddy et al. (2015) remains a rare articulation on the conditions of doctoral research work in the discipline of anthropology / sociology in India. Gupta and Nair (2019) broach similar concerns vis-à-vis conditions of doctoral research workers in management schools highlighting the "neoliberal aspirations" of global recognition. While there are parallels to be drawn with this literature such as corporatization of higher education sausage factory (Smith 2000), intensification, contractualization of academic workforce (Hey 2001), segmentation of faculty into tenured and flexible tenures, etc. (Bauder 2005) that introduce the problematic of labour to academic work, practice, and values (Winn 2015); we extend this literature by analysing the experience of doctoral students as cognitive workers juggling corporatization of academia as well as postcolonial anxiety vis-à-vis a "competent scholar".

By situating the experience of academic labour within the discipline of anthropology / sociology, as doctoral candidates in India specifically, our intent is to mark out the specific transformations perceptible from such a situation. We insist on marking out the contours of academic labour in India for two reasons. First, this kind of articulation doesn't find meaningful place in Indian academia except for scattered reflections on the nature of academic work. Second, certain notions such as "precarity" that predominate the discussion globally cannot address the specificity of the postcolonial position and its dreams of a welfare state that never materialized (Arora 2020). Thus, it is not the experience of precarity and its nostalgia for Fordist or social-welfarists configurations (Winn 2015, 4) that interests us. Rather, we want to name and articulate extractive labour relations within academia that are otherwise obfuscated from Indian academia but govern the doctoral students, teaching them the



rules of the game, prior to joining the academic workforce. For us, it is not just the context of neoliberalization and precarity but also the postcolonial condition that sheds light on our current predicaments which allows us to extend a notion of academic labour upon doctoral students. To that extent the paper differs from literature steeped in Marxist analysis of academic labour while borrowing certain conceptual apparatuses.

By using “cognitive worker” to mark the figure of an anthropologist / sociologist, we do not wish to mark the despair and anxiety vis-à-vis the changing nature of university systems and knowledge production in general, a common tone deployed by academicians talking of decreasing academic freedom and the changing conditions of work in the university (Sundar 2018). Making meaning of oneself through the concept of the cognitive worker allows the research-workers in the university to locate their shared experiences with cognitive workers outside the university. To put it differently, this identification brings to light the landscape as well as the horizon of existing academic practices that are not able to locate their own anxiety, despair, experience of crises, and their possible solutions within the political and social transformations that they all too often promise to study.

Following Rabinow (1986) and echoing Sangren (2007), Hey notes the hesitancy of anthropologist / sociologist “in addressing the significance of ‘corridor talks.’” (2001, 67) Similarly, Sarkar (2022, 115), noting the ability of science and technology studies “to document and ask questions surrounding the practice of scientific knowledge-making in the lab and outside.” calls for interrogating “knowledge-making practices in the fields of social science.” In interrogating the infrastructures of knowledge-production, we find an affinity with the figure of the cognitive worker in explaining our experience as research workers. The notion of a cognitive worker evokes both the immateriality of the labour and the managerial anxiety vis-à-vis quantifying it. Moreover, the notion of living knowledge built into the concept of cognitive labour evokes the dual nature of creative production wherein the extraction of value from the commodity is evident to the worker at the same time an inalienable quality of the work is also perceptible (Pasquinelli 2019; Smith 2013).

The paper contends that an infrastructural critique of knowledge is exigent over the epistemic critiques of western knowledge hegemony that have become the norm in postcolonial articulations. Though valid, such postcolonial articulations create a hyperopic view of the world. The above formulation and Das’ figure of an incompetent student, as we argue later in the paper, are inadequate in explaining the infrastructural shifts that have already been underway. By invoking infrastructures of knowledge, we want to stress the material side of epistemological processes to accent infrastructures “are things and also the relation between things.” (Larkin 2013, 329) To emphasize infrastructure is to highlight the relations that populate academic spaces and what make knowledge production possible.

## Methodological note

The paper is autoethnographic in nature borrowing from years of our experience in higher education while also borrowing from fellow doctoral candidates we have encountered over the years. The style of the paper isn't evocative but analytical. As an exercise in co-writing and co-authorship, the paper follows works that have attempted to build co-constructed narratives (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011) while doing collaborative auto ethnography (Chang, Ngunjiri, and Hernandez 2013). Autoethnography has emerged as an important method in interrogating the field of education (Pithouse-Morgan, Pillay, and Naicker 2021; Pillay, Naicker, and Pithouse-Morgan 2016). The method of autoethnography has resonated significantly with actors involved in education in disparate roles (Cortes Santiago, Karimi, and Arvelo Alicea 2017; Peters et al. 2020; Chang, Longman, and Franco 2014; Trahar 2009). Despite the lack of research on Indian higher education system and the labour that goes into it, one can point to rich autoethnographic work such as that of Jagannathan and Packirisamy (2019) and their evocative co-constructed narrative (*Lives in Search of Love* 2019). Though the paper does not match the scale and scope of such auto-ethnographic accounts, it attempts to lay the ground for situating the experience of doctoral research-workers in India, in the disciplines of anthropology / sociology in particular.

The paper builds on our experience as doctoral candidates in two different locations. One of us enrolled in 2016 in a state university<sup>5</sup> while the other enrolled in 2017 in a non-profit private research institute affiliated to a private, deemed-to-be-university.<sup>6</sup> We build on our experience of doctoral supervision, fieldwork, writing, and publication in order to theorize the reconfigured relations between the supervisor, the student, and the university. These experiences were noted down as "notes" that inform the auto ethnographic account recounted here while the anecdotal evidence is recounted from memory as remembered narratives (Keightley 2010).

## Outline of the paper

Following this section, the paper is divided into six sections. The first section situates the paper amidst the consumer / producer problematic of doctoral candidates in India. The second section provides a brief overview of doctoral trajectories, particularly noting our encounter with higher education institutions in India. The third section highlights the transformation of doctoral candidates into cognitive workers while noting the exploitative relationships in universities and extractive relationship of the publishing industry. The fourth section provides an overview of a writing workshop to highlight the ad hoc and inegalitarian responses to the above problems. The fifth section notes the limitation of epistemic critiques central to

<sup>5</sup> Public universities in India are primarily of two types, central universities are funded by and hence fall under the jurisdiction of the Union of India while state universities are funded and hence fall under the jurisdiction of the state.

<sup>6</sup> Deemed-to-be-university is an accreditation granted to certain institutes, public and private, by the Union at the advice of UGC which allows them to function like a university.

postcolonial articulations and its inability to address the current predicaments vis-à-vis knowledge production. The concluding section sketches a brief outline of an infrastructural critique of knowledge.

### **Situating the Debate: Consumers/producers of knowledge**

Das's account of the crisis coincided with the rise of a new middle class in India in the late 80s and early 90s, through the process of liberalization of markets (Fernandes 2006; Deshpande 2003), and a slow but steady expansion of higher education, through measures of affirmative actions, to groups that were earlier excluded from the university system (Jaffrelot 2006). Amidst this context that transformed the class composition of sociology classrooms (Rege 1994), Das built a dichotomy between "brilliance" and "competence" to announce the crisis in sociology. In an attempt to "curtail the rhetoric of brilliant individuals" (Das 1993, 1161) and put forth an infrastructure built around fostering competence, Das continued to fall back on the notion of a "competent few" who were to benefit from sound infrastructures rather than an infrastructure that could serve all and sustain varying degrees and standards of competence, desires, interests, and ambitions. Despite interrogating the notion of brilliance, she hesitated to interrogate the notion of "competence" that values, standardizes, hierarchizes, and perpetuates distinctions in anthropological/sociological knowledge-production.

Das' (1993) announcement of the crisis and ensuing solutions were later complicated by raising questions around canonization and its entanglement with the colonial and the metropolitan (Giri 1993), caste/class location of students (Bairy TS 2004), challenge of women's studies departments to the discipline of sociology (Rege 1994), limitations of certain sub-fields (Uberoi 1994), and "widespread lack of commitment to the discipline." (Deshpande 1994)

Despite these differences, a common thread that ran throughout the texts participating in the debate was the division between the consumers/producers of knowledge wherein undergraduate, postgraduate, and doctoral candidates were implicitly considered as consumers of knowledge. A decade later, Bairy TS pointed out the "politics of exclusion" that informed the debate indicating that: a research community did not refer to the undergraduate or postgraduate students of sociology, while imagining sociology "as being a craft" that solely worked within the academia without evoking a "sociological imagination to be at work and of use outside the academia" (Bairy TS 2004, 2). The consumer/producer dichotomy which Bairy TS located at the heart of the debate highlighted the deeply inegalitarian imaginations that informed the crisis debate in sociology wherein students were framed as incompetent and passive consumers rather than producers of knowledge. Though recently, changes in the education policies have explicitly transformed doctoral candidates in the Indian university system as producers of knowledge, involved in practices of knowledge production for the global publication industry.

The UGC guidelines of 2009 and 2016, while not a direct consequence of these earlier debates amongst sociologists/anthropologists in India, responds to the same problematic of producers/consumers by redesigning the doctoral programme. The 2009 guidelines man-

dated one peer-reviewed, journal publication to be eligible for a doctoral degree. This led to an emergence of predatory journals which was then curbed by announcing a UGC Consortium for Academic and Research Ethics (UGC CARE) list of Indian journals of where students and researchers were encouraged to submit their work. This was incentivized by assigning higher points during job-recruitment and promotions to accredited publications. A doctoral candidate today has to prove their status of knowledge producer before they are considered eligible for the doctoral degree. Additionally, a few private universities in India took the liberty to mandate two Scopus indexed publications as an eligibility criterion for a doctoral degree. Both Das and UGC arrived at a similar solution to above anxiety: a whitelist of journals.

It can be argued that these mandates emerged from a deep-rooted anxiety about the quality of higher education in India which passes on the burden and anxiety of quality of knowledge production to the doctoral candidate. This transfer of anxiety becomes a disciplinary mechanism to integrate and inculcate the “rules of the game,” (Reddy et al. 2015, 41) to legitimize unpaid labour in the knowledge economy, and maintain the (feudal) hierarchy of client-patron relationship (Reddy et al. 2015) between the student and the supervisor. These characteristics make the position of a doctoral student akin to a cognitive worker, managed and disciplined for the purpose of immaterial commodity-production for the knowledge-economy rather than of an anthropologist / sociologist as an altruistic scholar, civil society member “engaged in high vocation.” (Gulli 2009)

### **Doctoral research in India: A view from two institutes in Mumbai and Bengaluru**

One of us enrolled in 2016 in a state university, University of Mumbai, while the other enrolled in 2017 in a non-profit research institute, National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS), in Bengaluru, affiliated to a private deemed-to-be-university called Manipal Academy of Higher Education (MAHE).

As doctoral candidates in India, we were able to secure funding for our doctoral work. One of the authors worked under the UGC-Junior and Senior Research Fellowship (JRF and SRF) – a research fellowship scheme funded by the Union government which arrives at the eligible list through a national testing two times a year. A UGC-Junior Research Fellow is paid 31 000 INR, roughly 354 EUR, plus a house rent allowance, per month. After two years of satisfactory performance, the fellow is upgraded as a Senior Research Fellow who is paid 35 000 INR roughly 399 EUR, plus a house rent allowance, per month. The other author was able to secure equivalent monthly stipend through a project-PhD which was funded by a subsidiary of one of the largest conglomerates in India, the Tata Group.

Such funding arrangements account for a very small minority of doctorates done in India. For each exam, only a small percentile of candidates taking the national level test for UGC-National Eligibility Test-Junior Research Fellowship for each subject are accorded an option to avail the fellowship following which the candidate must register for a PhD in under two years or the fellowship expires.

Most doctoral candidates in India live off the measly non-NET fellowships<sup>7</sup> which provide 8000 INR, roughly 91 EUR a month. Another fellowship for doctoral candidates in anthropology / sociology is provided through the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) whose value, 20000 INR i. e., roughly 229 Euros per month, is offered only for two years. There also exists a range of other fellowships, as part of state's affirmative action, for students from minority and marginalized communities provided by the Union and state governments some of which match the UGC JRF and SRF stipends. No extra funds exist for fieldwork or translation expenses and the students must either self-fund their fieldwork or use the fellowship funds. Such funding constraints affect anthropological / sociological knowledge-production wherein anthropologists / sociologists in India end up doing fieldwork primarily in India with rare exceptions (Arif 2004).

University of Mumbai, one of the earliest modern universities, was founded in mid-nineteenth century during colonial British India. The university's sociology department is the first sociology department in the country with its own peculiar historical trajectory. To suggest that the university is now going through a crisis of its own wouldn't be an exaggeration with grave financial problems which have, for example, resulted in the withdrawal of interest-bearing financial instruments such as fixed term deposits owned by the university (Chhopia 2017).

The university, like most public universities in India, doesn't have any pool of internal funding for its doctoral candidates beyond the measly non-NET fellowship. That is, admission to a university's doctoral programme doesn't guarantee any funding and funding is secured independently by the doctoral candidates through various national and state-level avenues. Thus, as a doctoral candidate at the University of Mumbai, receiving funding from the Union or state government, one is in a direct financial relationship with the state while the university functions as an institution which grants the doctoral degree and attests to the candidate being enrolled and working at the university. At the same time, the funding agency, the Union or state government, does not directly stipulate how the money is to be utilized, for what kind of projects, and by whom allowing a degree of academic freedom to decide the nature of one's work if one is able to find a willing supervisor.

On the other hand, the doctoral programme at NIAS promises four years of fellowship to every doctoral candidate. NIAS, established in 1988, is relatively new compared to some of the older universities such as University of Mumbai. It was established by JRD Tata as an avenue for exchange amongst administrators, managers, and social leaders and insists upon the interdisciplinary characteristics of its four schools. While NIAS has an internal pool to fund independent doctoral proposals, most doctoral candidates at NIAS are admitted and funded as part of project-PhDs funded by various private and state actors. The funding agency, in this case, is directly involved in deciding the kind of projects they fund and regularly intercept the progress and allocation of budgets. This means that for a significant number of doctoral candidates enrolled in project-PhDs there is a small margin of academic freedom in terms of challenging the methodological and theoretical concerns that the project has

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<sup>7</sup> It is important to note that there have been attempts to withdraw and scrap even this measly non-NET fellowship in recent times.



already fixed. NIAS, affiliated to MAHE, belongs to an emerging model of privately funded higher education that is slowly gaining ground and legitimacy in India given the deteriorating conditions of funding in public institutions and an overall political climate which supports deregulation and privatization of education (Hegde 2016; Deshpande 2001). This suggests an intricate relationship between conditions of knowledge production and how it is intrinsically tied with reconfigured relations between the state and capital.

Both the institutes are at the margins of existing “centres of excellence.” (Das 1993) While sociology department at University of Mumbai was one of the former “centres of excellence” until 1960s (Deshpande 1994) which has since lost its glory, NIAS as a non-profit research institute affiliated to a private deemed-to-be university still exists in the shadow of few publicly funded “centres of excellence” housed in central and state universities and institutes such as Jawahar Lal Nehru University, University of Delhi, University of Hyderabad, etc. that attract most aspiring candidates.

Thus, these two institutes allowed us to experience transformations from deteriorating public education to new forms of knowledge production that coagulate around project-PhDs. With this, we avoid two most common responses to the problems of higher education in India: 1) despair at deteriorating conditions of existing centre of excellence or, 2) bemoan the increasing deregulation and privatization of higher education. Coming from a former “centre of excellence”, at University of Mumbai, as well as a non-profit research institute, NIAS, affiliated to a private deemed-to-be-university, these events, for us, are in the past giving way to a position that is interested in thinking of a future which is other than “what already is” or “what was” which could generate new dispositions towards research and learning (Gulli 2009).

### **The doctoral candidate as an underpaid and unpaid cognitive worker**

As mentioned before, barring few exceptions, most doctoral candidates in India remain grossly underpaid, bordering on minimum wage, which barely covers housing and living expenses. The publication mandate exposes the doctoral candidates to the publication industry: to craft an unpaid commodity to prove one’s credentials as a researcher. Thus, while only few candidates are paid through either Union or state avenues or are funded by private universities, the mandate of publication and its corollary values such as quality, rigour, commitment, etc. is applied to all candidates equally, producing starkly different conditions of production for different candidates. While a notion of precariousness helps explain the global trend towards uncertainty, flexibilization of working conditions and ongoing austerity measures, the publication mandate governing the doctoral candidates in India takes an interesting turn that’s not replicated elsewhere. It’s not just precarity that governs a doctoral candidate’s working conditions in India but a differential, exclusionary system of payment wherein a small minority gets paid for its commodity, i. e., a mandatory publication, while others are expected to craft a commodity while being underpaid or unpaid.



Opening up the labour of the rest of the underpaid, unpaid, and overworked bodies of the doctoral candidates, who are unable to secure decent funding, to the publishing industry makes the nature of the doctoral work evidently exploitative. Das's and Deshpande's formulation of a lack of quality and lack of commitment takes on a different meaning in the context of these exploitative conditions of research work. Lack of quality and commitment to knowledge-production is a subtle resistance against productivity and the exploitative social relations that encompass research work in India. The problem of predatory journals in India then appears not as a problem but a symptom of something else, of social relations that are extractive.

Marking this allows interrogating the range of issues around knowledge-production and consumption which cannot be reduced to ad-hominem attack against the quality of doctoral candidates, of the discipline's parochialism, or the persistent positioning of the discipline in India within postcolonial theory or some updated variant of it such as southernism which shifts the blame elsewhere to the global north. We discuss the last point in detail in a later section.

### The mandate for publication and its consequences

Predatory journals<sup>8</sup> (Seethapathy, Kumar, and Hareesha 2016) emerged swiftly in numbers following the 2009 mandate for publication. This resulted in the UGC cracking down on predatory journals by creating a blacklist of journals. This process was eventually conceived as flawed which resulted in the creation of a whitelist named, UGC CARE list. This list, by default, accepts all journals which are Scopus and Web of Science indexed.<sup>9</sup> For other journals a bureaucratic mechanism was set up which allows for whitelisting in the UGC CARE list for journals not listed on Scopus or Web of Science. Publication in an indexed journal accrues higher points during recruitment and promotions in universities.

Though one can publish in non-indexed journals and still receive the doctoral degree in certain universities, these incentive structures determine the value of a publication (Szadkowski 2019). This has generated a new hierarchy among researchers as it produces an opaque system wherein the value of the work is filtered through the repute of a journal.

This has three direct consequences. By incentivizing publication in private indexes, UGC and in turn the state outsources quality control of research output to international and private entities while devaluing the work of its researchers. Secondly, it exposes the labour of the doctoral candidates to the extractive relationship of academic publication industry for

<sup>8</sup> Predatory journals have adopted various forms over the past decade to circumvent publication mandates. These journals often demand a publication fee from the authors. While claiming to be peer-reviewed, they are not. Many predatory journals, a few years ago, remained offline or with paywalls. Although today, a lot of them have adopted open access means to appear legitimate (Krawczyk and Kulczycki 2021) which led to authors like Beall (2013b; 2013a) misattributing the problem to the open access movement. The authors who publish in predatory journals tend to be "young, inexperienced, and often located in developing countries." (Xia et al. 2015, 1414) This points toward increased demand for publication placed on authors who either are unable to or perceive themselves to be ill-equipped to publish in legitimate journals.

<sup>9</sup> Scopus is a database owned by Elsevier and Web of Science is a database owned by Clarivate Analytics.

which they are to craft a commodity at public expense. Third, it standardizes research output, its form and content, by limiting the publications to traditional peer-reviewed journals restricting any scope of experimentation. Indexed journals largely represent established fields, concerns, and styles. Limiting doctoral candidates and professors to indexed publications acts as a scaffolding for one's thought and writing as one cannot opt for new or experimental journals which usually are or remain non-indexed.

Moreover, outsourcing quality control misunderstands the nature of anthropological / sociological knowledge which unlike natural science doesn't insist on replicability or universality. Rather, it flourishes when a singularity of each context is maintained along with its own singular explanation (which at a later stage can be brought in conversation with other contexts). The fact that infrastructures in the north are given the authority to judge starkly different contexts puts another burden on researchers elsewhere to forever explain and translate one's problem into the language, theoretical concerns, or problems comprehensible by the north. Existing postcolonial critiques have already pointed out these limitations, however, the knowledge emerging from the global south is today expected to repeat these epistemic postcolonial critiques which have themselves become hegemonic knowledge articulations. Only those articulations from the south that either use hegemonic concepts from the global north or critique the global north and its epistemic hegemony are deemed worthy of being included in the western knowledge infrastructures.

The consequent problems have not gone unnoticed. In 2018, a committee led by Prof. P. Balaram was set up which submitted a report in 2019 to the UGC arguing to do away with mandatory publication for a doctoral degree. The committee's recommendations are yet to take effect. The committee which comprised of natural scientists could make this demand because of rapid transformations in peer-review process have resulted in the pre-print becoming a norm with the rise of arXiv (Larivière et al. 2014) and the experimental peer-review policies devised by the likes of PLOS One.<sup>10</sup> Though SocArXiv exists, the uptake of pre-print has still not happened in the social sciences for reasons that cannot be explored here. It would suffice to say that Das' (1993) suggestion to identify an exclusive list journals stands in contradiction to the ethos of openness and knowledge as commons (Szadkowski 2019) that open access, pre-print publications today represent.

This is not the place to recap the problems of the academic publishing industry at large (Bazin et al. 2018). However, the peculiar trajectory of anthropological / sociological knowledge production in India and the aforementioned debates around it make it clear that the experience of extractive relationship of the publication industry doesn't inform Indian anthropologist / sociologists' theoretical construction of knowledge even though the problems are widely rampant.

As argued previously, this lack of thinking concerning the infrastructures of knowledge production are overshadowed by a superfluous concern for quality, rigor, commitment, competence, etc. It is hence not surprising that despite the changes in the UGC regulations, no journals are run for doctoral candidates, or no journal devotes a section to publications by

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<sup>10</sup> One of the most interesting choices among others that PLOS One made was allowing the authors to attach peer-review and editorial history of the document to situate the publication in greater detail.

doctoral candidates while opinion pieces by established academicians are published without rigorous peer-review.

Most “reputable” journals in India, that are part of the UGC-CARE list and are represented by leading sociologists, suffer from a serious lack of transparency, slow peer-review process with no portals in place to track the progress of submissions. Without adequate networks or mentors, one is left with no channel of communication or a word on an expected timeframe. The doctoral degree’s temporality then follows the Indian academic journal standard time. This lack of accountability feeds into the client-patron relationship, where maintaining right networks can ensure one’s paper enters peer-review, or at times co-authoring with the supervisor fast-tracks the process. This is particularly important because even the most “prestigious” journals in India have a rather non-transparent and lethargic peer-review process. The relationship with the supervisor is complicated on other grounds as well because the supervisors belong to a generation which didn’t need to publish consistently. With recent changes in the points system for recruitment and promotions which privileges publications, the professors too find themselves in the same boat as the doctoral candidates but this sudden shift in productivity regime means that a large swathe of supervisors themselves remain untrained to guide the doctoral candidates toward a publication.

Writing a doctoral dissertation and articles for publication become two parallel tasks that the doctoral candidates have to navigate themselves as the faculty remains incognizant of different writing styles needed for both the dissertation as well as publication. For instance, one of the co-authors was reprimanded for having too many chapters in the dissertation and not following a traditional chapterization of: Introduction, Methodology, Literature Review, Data, Data Analysis, Conclusion. A dissertation written in such a form can never find an adequate avenue of publication or at best it would produce one research paper. The author’s rationalization was that by increasing the number of chapters, they could maximize the number of papers that could be submitted at the same time to different publications in the hope that at least one would pass peer-review on time. Such remarks display the faculty’s lack of awareness of the changing contours of knowledge production and its effects on the form and style of knowledge that the doctoral candidates must produce.

These features, if at all, should have been introduced along with the mandate of publication, or should have been one of the criteria for the journals to be considered for UGC CARE list. If not, the established figures invested in the discipline should have taken up the challenge to respond to the needs of the doctoral candidates. Both the bureaucracy as well as the invested, established pedagogues have been unable to respond to the changing nature of research work. This becomes clear with an account of a writing workshop in the next section.

## Of emerging responses: An academic writing workshop

One of us recently had a chance to take part in an academic writing fellowship loosely structured as a workshop housed at one of the leading policy think-tanks in New Delhi and funded by the Urban Studies Foundation which included some leading academic figures from the field of urban studies in India.

The workshop was conducted virtually, due to the pandemic, over a span of four months. The fellowship provided a modest honorarium amounting to Rs. 20000, roughly 229 Euros, in total covering four months. This was to encourage writing a text for either academic journals or mass media. To that end, various sessions were hosted which taught basic research skills: using tools like Zotero, reading of academic texts, writing an elevator pitch, developing what they called a “hook” for the opening paragraph of the article, providing comments to one’s fellow peers and platitudes on anti-plagiarism. There was an explicit focus on sharing narratives by the mentors on how they managed to get well-cited publication either by intervening in a “hot topic” issue or by providing a catchy title which would allow for transnational appeal of the article.

The cohort included roughly twenty participants at various stages of academic life, from the post-graduate, doctoral candidates, doctorates, and practitioners. The very structure of the fellowship, being an ad hoc program with limited number of fellows, and the participation of senior academics in the workshops from public universities, private institutions, and think-tanks demonstrates vividly the repetition of the exclusionary and ad hoc responses à la Veena Das. The imparting of these skills or teaching academic writing ought to have been introduced in all programmes at the post-graduate level, which holds significant relevance in India due to the vast number of students in India facing linguistic difficulties of various kinds. Such ad hoc responses amount to the continuation of existing inegalitarian arrangements in academia.

This rather cynical approach to writing fit in with the overall tone of the workshop which began with a tacit acceptance of the different styles of academic writing prevalent in the anglophone and francophone spheres. With this acceptance, the possibility of writing beyond these accepted styles was quickly cordoned off. At the same time, writing polemical pieces was discouraged by one of the instructors early on in the workshop, devaluing a whole genre of writing.

Eventually a “mentor” was assigned to each fellow who provided close comments on the students’ writing. The overall structure of the workshop worked under the assumption that writing is important for one’s career, and its formulaic tone, style, and structure bereft of complexity or jargons ought to be learnt in order to succeed as a professional academic. At the same time a vague notion of creativity was stressed. This vague stress on creativity, while teaching young researchers the “rules of the game,” helped distinguish research work as cognitive labour while codifying the performance of research work for the young researchers without addressing the extractive nature of research work. The concrete creative practices, such as publishing pre-prints, seeking open access journals even if not indexed, or discussing possibilities of starting new student journals were foreclosed by this emphasis on writing for the extractive arrangements that already exist.

At the heart of the writing workshop was a tension between acknowledging the necessity of publication in the current academic industry and the supposed demonstration of creativity that these works must necessarily perform and be imbued with i. e., the making visible of sufficient cognitive labour in the work to accord it value. The inability of the workshop to address the limitations of publishing mandates is grounded on a more pervasive problem of thinking which remains unwilling to look at knowledge production as labour (Hey 2001), obfuscating it through either persistent epistemic critiques or passing the buck to the students. The injunction to publish and the injunction to be creative points towards the very nature of cognitive labour. What remains surprising is that despite using conceptual apparatuses such as knowledge economy worker, cognitive labour, immaterial labour, etc. to make sense of the world in the field, the anthropologists / sociologists in India seem unwilling to apply it to their own lives and the lives of their fellows and peers.

### Postcoloniality and its discontents

The colonial underpinnings of anthropology / sociology's origins have over the years necessitated a crucial call for decolonization of the discipline by positing a situated understanding of knowledge articulations and their entanglement with power structures (Grosfoguel 2007). These approaches point towards a certain inegalitarianism in global knowledge production, consumption, and circulation (Çelik et al. 2016). However, these calls to be decolonial reify the possibilities of articulations from the decolonized world or the global south where knowledge from the global south is ghettoized as one is expected to perpetuate these similar lines of reasoning (Arif 2015; 2012).

Decolonial theory's variant in India which emerged as subaltern studies<sup>11</sup> which was later repackaged as postcolonial theory in the west has been one of the dominant schools of thinking in the social sciences in India (Chibber 2013). Despite its emergence, primarily in the discipline of History, the theoretical consequences of subaltern studies cannot be exaggerated. Subaltern studies and the authors inspired from it form the bedrock of social science theory in India across various disciplines. Accompanying this has been the widespread dissemination of postcolonial studies / theory across the west which today informs a vast variety of scholarship on and of India. We are not suggesting that the initial character of subaltern studies in any way resembles what passes for postcolonial theory today but it would not be misplaced to suggest that various rhetorical structures have gone on to influence later articulations of postcolonial theory (Ludden 2003). Recently, postcolonial studies has coalesced around another signifier, "southernism," by certain authors in a bid to adapt to the changing signifiers mobilized in favour of dichotomous thinking of the world to levy an epistemic critique (Roy 2016; Chattopadhyay 2012). Though southernists celebrate this newfound trope of dissecting the world, it points towards a failure of postcolonial epistemic critique and its

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<sup>11</sup> Some of the leading figures of subaltern studies included Ranajit Guha, Partha Chatterjee, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Gyan Prakash, Shahid Amin, etc.



inability to even envision alternative routes to knowledge production that do not depend on or replicate the hierarchies inbuilt in existing knowledge infrastructures.

At the risk of being reductionist, at the heart of postcolonial theory is a critique of the European enlightenment episteme (Spivak 1990), interrogation of its various dichotomies and categorizations, and the positing of multiple modernities (Chakrabarty 2009). Though this interrogation of the European enlightenment episteme unpacked various underpinnings of knowledge in the academy and outside, it has resulted in perpetual epistemic critique (Savransky 2017) of eurocentrism whose contemporary variants reduce the world to a north and a south (Arif 2015).

The postcolonial condition or postcoloniality is not necessarily a territorially bounded space-time which only the colonized territories are going through but also refers to a series of consequences affecting the colonizing nations. As Majumdar writes, “They remain profoundly marked by the lasting impact of their imperialist adventures, as do those whose lands were brought under imperial control, though to varying degrees and in different ways.” (2007, ix) By framing postcoloniality in such manner one is not surprised to witness the resonance and receptibility of postcolonial theory in the west across the Atlantic, across languages.

This persistent gaze towards the colonizer, or the global north in the new variety, frames a *dispositif* which is hyperopic while ignoring the material relationalities of knowledge production, consumption, and circulation around oneself. This lack of self-reflexivity is not particularly unique, as Hey (2001) argues following Rabinow (1986), there has been a general lack of self-reflexivity among academicians to think through the conditions of knowledge production, the process of hiring, grant-making, research-funding, tenure-track hiring, etc. This is even more glaring in the Indian context because self-reflexivity is a persistent demand made in writings in anthropology/sociology and social sciences in India (Patel 2006). It appears that self-reflexivity somehow ends at the corridors of one’s own workplace.

To locate the limitation in the postcolonial rhetorical strategy of looking elsewhere is important because the range of problems noted by authors responding to Das (1993) evoked standard problems of postcoloniality; that of language (Giri 1993), lack of diversity of textbooks (Giri 1993), and alien ness of theoretical discussions (Rege 1994). These problems it must be noted arise from a persistent lack of journals, multilingual journals, avenues for writings and translations among different languages in India for which the blame can neither be passed onto the students or the global north. Rather it highlights a space and time of our knowledge production, the lack of engaged praxis around it.

Postcolonial epistemic critiques have not been able to address the conditions of knowledge production explicitly. This is particularly reflected in the lack of transparent journals, of an academic culture that can sustain pre-prints, open access publishing or publishing in small presses. This suggests that even while critiquing the global north, the south and its infrastructures do not automatically become fertile grounds for thought and praxis. A postcolonial critique should have been accompanied by for example, creative publishing practices that could have made the discourse redundant rather than proliferating in different avatars. However, these practices are evidently considered secondary to the primary epistemological critique of the west or the global north just like the doctoral candidates’ compulsion to publish.



## Conclusion

The paper began with a discussion of the crises in sociology debate and pointed out how it prefigured the current ongoing transformations of the conditions of knowledge production. The debates' focus on quality and competence of doctoral students obfuscated the material conditions of knowledge production. Through an auto ethnographic account, the paper then highlighted the challenges faced by doctoral candidates and the consequences of the publishing mandate as a necessary condition to be eligible for a doctoral degree. This allows us to mark doctoral candidates as paid, underpaid, and unpaid cognitive workers engaged in crafting commodities for the academic publication industry. This autoethnographic account points out the foreclosures in the crises of sociology debate as well as postcolonial epistemic critiques. We point out that Das' concerns vis-à-vis quality and competence, and postcolonial epistemological critiques of the west foreclose an interrogation of conditions of knowledge production in the post colony.

Given this, we are interested in moving towards an infrastructural critique of knowledge production. An infrastructure is a temporal order – it works, repeats, and becomes obsolete (Vishmidt 2017). While it works, it obfuscates the relations of production that make it effective. However, in its obsolescence, in the moment when it is showing signs of malfunctioning, these relations of production become more visible. An epistemological critique that isolates knowledge from its infrastructures can misidentify these moments of obsolescence, these moments of crises – as is obvious from the debate that Veena Das initiated in India – as crisis of quality, commitment, rigour, and pedagogy.

An infrastructural critique of knowledge, as opposed to an epistemological critique, constantly looks at conditions of one's own production and does not despair when faced with moments of crises while constantly envisioning infrastructures that are not yet. The initial moment of crisis in the discipline of sociology and anthropology in India has deepened, and it also foreshadows the changing social relations that might come to dominate the extractive research work for most researchers in future with its deep lines of stratifications. These lines of stratification might make existing infrastructures, the few existing centres of excellence that the pedagogue's want to protect as well as their corresponding values, obsolete. For an infrastructural critique of knowledge, these won't be moments of despair but would be rife with possibilities.

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