

A COVID-19 EDUCATION

Katyayani Suhrud*

I. INTRODUCTION

In my relatively short life thus far, I already feel that there are many wonderful things in the world, carefully put and held into place, which most of us are so used to that we fail to recognize and marvel at their wonder. A good education was one such thing for me. Ever since I could be sure of things, to be certain that they will exist, schools and universities are ideas and places I have been certain of. Not once did I imagine that I would not go to school or not go to university. I also took going to university for personal pleasure, and not just for professional necessity, for granted. In 2020, the pandemic hit, and this changed.¹

Although I had enjoyed school for the most part, I wasn't a grateful student whose life was being changed by what she was being taught. I went to school because that is what the fortunate among us did, and I never took it too seriously. I was also perhaps too young to stop and ask myself why we went to school, what good was it supposed to do, and why I was lucky to be taught by loving, observant, and well-meaning teachers. I grew up with a father who said, "I send you to school so that you learn how to read, how to count, how to coexist with others, and how to manage your time and work efficiently. The rest, the stuff that really matters, I will make sure we teach you." This attitude towards school was slightly flippant. No doubt, it was an important place, and I was expected to do well, but life-altering, mind-boggling learning would happen in other ways—through books that were not textbooks, and if I managed to secure admission, it would happen at a good university. Consequently, I did not grow up thinking that certain physical spaces, people, or textbooks were necessary to acquire a good education. In fact, one could have all the above and still be (one of my father's favorite words) "illiterate." Thus began an effort to procure the elusive—literacy, learning, and a good mind. It would've been much easier had I been taught

1. See letter from Srimanto Sen, Sec'y, Bar Council of India, to all the Vice-Chancellors', Deans', Principals', Ctr. of Legal Educ. in India (Apr. 23, 2020), https://theleaflet.in/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/BCI_s_Letter_to_VC_Principal_and_Dean_of_Legal_Institutions_in_India.pdf.

to think of grades, memory, or other such trappings as accurate determinants of the educated. I am also forever grateful that I was not.

I went to university a little beaten up by the entrance exams. Looking back, I had done well, but somehow couldn't help feeling stupid. I now know that I don't test well in certain ways, and that doesn't necessarily mean that I'm inadequate. However, the path to getting admitted to a good university was arduous and has broken many of us down. It's strange how, in order to enter spaces that open students' minds and eyes to looking at themselves and the world differently, they must first go through mind-numbing multiple-choice exams, which stress only one way of thinking and only one way of determining intelligence. Nothing is gray, nothing is contemplative, and nothing is complex or nuanced. Students don't have the luxury of being good at one thing and bad at another. They must understand languages, logic, law, math, and possess completely inane general knowledge (which is always oddly specific). If not, entry to a place that will let them breathe, ask questions instead of just giving answers, and be okay with knowing one thing and not the next, will be denied. Thankfully, once I stepped into university, I, along with many like me, left that horrifying world behind. Compared to what I had just come out of, this felt freeing, and I quickly stopped feeling completely worthless.

I realized that although teachers and a classroom were not guaranteed to teach students how to think, they could and, in my case, would, help me both learn and unlearn. I was also taught by classmates and friends, who may not have always known just how enriching conversations with them could be. Being in a fully residential university surrounded by fields also meant that it was easy to feel slightly removed from the outside world, which helped. There was nothing to cut students off from life on campus, and conversations from classrooms very naturally spilled into all kinds of other spaces. After the first year or two, I began to marvel at what a university could be and do, and how a two-and-a-half-hour class could alter something within me forever. It was better not to resist when someone introduced a new idea or tried to change the way I thought about something. I could always decide later that I disagreed, but in those moments, it would help if I could open myself to new ideas and not put up an unnecessary fight. Of course, if something felt absurd or just wrong, I didn't have to sit silently and accept it all, but it was a good sign if a class or conversation unsettled me, and I became better at embracing that.

Some foundational ideas were introduced to me by teachers who were both thorough and gentle. They knew that they were rocking some of our worlds and questioning ideas of normalcy, justice, social responsibility, or merit. I was fortunate that they were exceptionally adept at introducing a set

of tools with which to examine the world. It was also both fun and a source of comfort that I was being pushed outside of my comfort zone, along with so many other students. It helped that our heads were being tinkered with in communion. I became used to being taught in this manner—having classrooms, friends, reading groups, a library—and all those informal, unplanned conversations that added up to a lot. All this went away, without warning, one day in 2020, when I was halfway through law school, with two-and-a-half years left. I didn't know it at the time, but for the next two years, it was going to be my desk, my laptop, and me—without any of the joys that others used to bring.

There were many phases and different states of mind from 2020 to 2022. More often than not, there were bigger and better things to worry about than courses, essays, and ideas. For the first year or so, it didn't really matter if the student's learning was affected. At least they were here, still alive, and in their homes. That was enough. Priorities were brutally put into perspective, and only the largest, most significant things about life (such as the possibility of losing it), mattered for a while. So many things about students' lives and surroundings must be okay for them to pay attention to educating themselves. It is a privilege—almost a luxury—to be able to devote years to university life. Of course, it shouldn't be, and everyone should have the choice to acquire higher education. However, if very fundamental things must be worried about, other kinds of pursuits, especially those done for personal pleasure and fulfillment, and not just for professional gain, can seem lofty and fanciful at times.

States of terror, fear, insecurity, uncertainty, anxiety, and gloom are easier to endure when anyone one talks to knows exactly how one feels and what one means. Earlier, if one of us was struggling with personal problems or medical emergencies, the rest of us were carrying on with our lives as usual. The pandemic was frightening and bizarre, and it left no one out. Its effects were felt across the academic community—it was not just the students who suffered, but also the teachers. There is a distance from, and often even a reverence for, teachers. The act of teaching, especially when done well, easily places the teacher on a pedestal. Teachers become slightly other-worldly, and it's hard to imagine them having normal or trivial everyday experiences, like running out of shampoo in the shower or eating something hot too quickly and burning their mouths. There is a curiosity about who they are when they are not teaching, but it's usually left unsatisfied because students rarely gain enough insights into professors' lives to humanize them. Then, there is also the physical layout of the classroom. It's us on one side and them on the other. They can see us all, but we cannot see what they can see. From the students' point of view, only the professor can observe all that

occurs in the classroom. There is no parity between the teacher's view of the room and ours, reinforcing the differences and hierarchies between us. This panopticon-like seating and structure does not aid the de-pedestalization of the teacher. An online class, however, is another story.

From the peeling paint on their walls to the sound of pressure cookers and children, we were in our teachers' homes and suddenly knew what cup they drank tea from and what kind of art they liked. Once, a professor carried on talking about the Uniform Civil Code² while his cranky toddler insisted on sitting on his lap to stop crying. I didn't know he had children, and now here he was, talking about fairly serious legal problems with his child, who eventually fell asleep on his shoulder. The distance disappeared and reverence became easy to forgo. Overnight, there was a very new and sometimes uncomfortable intimacy. It can be conducive for professors to keep some parts of their lives at arm's length, at least while they are teaching. Even though I had wanted to know things about my professors' lives, once I gained this information, I realized that I mostly preferred not knowing. Having insights into their homes, lives, and families made many of us feel like we were privy to things we should not know. We weren't prying, but it felt like we were. There is also something to be said about eye contact and a teacher's ability to note changes in posture or expression. Cameras didn't need to be on in every class, so professors often had no way to tell whether students were listening or doing other things. We also had the luxury of zoning out or not attending a class or two. They didn't. After some time, very understandably, their exhaustion and irritability began to show. We could seek extensions for assignments and were accommodated. Attendance was also relaxed for us, but professors could not refuse to conduct classes or only grade assessments when they felt up to it. It must also have been isolating, tiring, and even annoying to stare at a screen with all other cameras switched off, dealing with increasingly unresponsive and disinterested students.

The ethics of the classroom and evaluation changed. The online classroom shouldn't have been so skewed against the one teaching. Pre-pandemic, good teachers managed to elicit interest, conversation, and curiosity. If professors were good, prepared, and fair, students showed up and the class flowed from both directions. Online, however, it was much harder for even really good professors to be met halfway. Not only were they not at their best, but we were near our worst. I got a sense of what it must have been like for the professors because I was a teaching assistant during

2. See Kaushik Deka, *The Politics of a Uniform Civil Code*, INDIA TODAY (Aug. 5, 2023, 02:29 IST), <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/cover-story/story/20230814-the-politics-of-a-uniform-civil-code-2415996-2023-08-05>.

my final year, with one semester online and the other, my last, offline. There was a huge difference in how someone, even as peripheral as a TA, was treated and responded to online versus in person. Online, it could feel like I was talking into an abyss. Physical classes never felt thankless or like a meaningless effort.

Since sleep cycles went for a toss during the pandemic, I did, on occasion, first log in to early morning classes, and then brush my teeth while in class. By comparison, I would always shower, and maybe eat, before I went to class in person. Trivial as it sounds, living in a pair of pajamas for two years straight also does something to a person. Trying to look good and dressing up for yourself or others can feel good. It is the small and unimportant things like this that bring respite and joy. Pre-pandemic, I took handwritten notes because I knew that if I had a laptop open in front of me, it was likely that I would be distracted. It was easier to snap back into class if I was distracted by something outside a window than by something on my screen. This was, of course, no longer possible post-pandemic when both work and entertainment came from the same source. I could tell that I was a worse student than I had ever been, but there was an alarming lack of will to change that.

After a year or so, the initial dread dissipated. People were vaccinated, we knew more about the disease we were dealing with, and the novelty of that terror and its accompanying anxiety had worn off. However, it had also worn us out. A decreased chance of severe illness or death did not lead to an increase in good days or more motivation towards work. I remained a bad student, except for a few electives, which made me realize that a spirited classroom, even an online one, still had the capacity to put a spring in my step and make my day. Each of the four semesters I spent online, I had at least one course I was truly excited about. It punctuated my days and weeks with some purpose, some joy, and some togetherness. It was a huge relief to find that I hadn't gone completely off the bend and still had it in me to read for class, pay attention during class, and feel good after class. It was also obvious that only certain courses, and certain professors, managed to elicit easy, natural, and constant conversation and thought. The ones that went on as if a pandemic hadn't struck were almost irritating. The ones where the law was taught as if in a vacuum, bereft from our world and people, were also easy to zone out. Courses with professors and peers who reckoned with the world in honest, unflinching ways were the ones I felt like preparing for and participating in.

II. PART I

Legal education does not require labs or studios and is mainly discourse-based.³ For courses that required students to think with their hands, make tangible three-dimensional work, or in the case of medical schools, have access to hospitals, online classes were far worse. For law students, physical internships did not happen, and access to courtrooms was cut off.⁴ Indian courts were also forever altered after being held online for nearly two years.⁵ Hearings became virtual or functioned in a hybrid manner, courts became paperless, and the internet acquired newfound importance.⁶ Law school is also supposed to qualify students as professionals. An understanding of courts, judges, and the legal profession becomes particularly important because studying the law is so very different from practicing. Being cut off from courts and lawyers' chambers created a greater divide between the imagination of our professional futures and the reality of that world.

Some people, in some professions, with some levels of privilege and opportunity, do not get to avert their eyes and shirk responsibility, although they often do. Classrooms in law schools during the pandemic could not possibly go on teaching the law to people as fortunate as those in my university as if the only thing we should aspire to obtain were good jobs or admissions for further education. The difference between students like us and millions of others was grotesque and unjustifiable. Having the resources to continue to pay fees, not being compelled to drop out, and having laptops and steady internet connections was not the reality for many students in India.⁷ The pandemic altered the course of life for too many students permanently, often delaying the chance of a better life for another generation, if not more.

3. See *Life as a Law Student in India*, REST THE CASE (Mar. 14, 2023), <https://restthecase.com/knowledge-bank/life-as-a-law-student-in-india>.

4. See Syed Badrul Ashad, *Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic upon Legal Education*, INDIA TODAY NE (June 29, 2022, 12:48 AM IST), <https://www.indiatodayne.in/perspective/story/impact-covid-19-pandemic-upon-legal-education-400753-2021-01-18>.

5. See Mansi Yadav, *Judiciary in Covid-19 Pandemic*, LEGAL SERVICE INDIA, <https://www.legalserviceindia.com/legal/article-4519-judiciary-in-covid-19-pandemic.html> (last visited Sept. 9, 2023).

6. See COVID Coverage: Court's Functioning, SUP. CT. OBSERVER (May 1, 2021), <https://www.scobserver.in/journal/covid-coverage-courts-functioning>.

7. See Siddhartha Makhija, *Covid-19 Pandemic and Legal Education and Profession*, LEGAL SERV. INDIA, <https://www.legalserviceindia.com/legal/article-8707-covid-19-pandemic-and-legal-education-and-profession.html> (last visited Sept. 12, 2023).

III. PART II

Reports and statistics published in recent months show the effects the pandemic had on so many Indian schools and students.⁸ An alarming percentage of students are not able to catch up to age-appropriate learning.⁹ Teachers feel that students are easily distracted, lack basic social skills, and find it difficult to grasp concepts that children their age would ordinarily understand.¹⁰ Schools shut down, enrollments declined, and many students did not return when classrooms in India reopened.¹¹ Many students were also promoted to the next grade when they should not have been because schools and colleges were sympathetic to their plight and did not think it prudent to detain students, which would have placed additional mental and financial burdens on them and their families.¹² There was a jump in government school enrollments, accompanied by a decline in private school enrollments over the last ten years.¹³ Government schools in India are notoriously poor and it is not uncommon for parents to go the extra mile, stretching themselves thin, to educate their children in private schools.¹⁴ Unsurprisingly, girls disproportionately bore the brunt of the pandemic.¹⁵ The gender-based digital divide became apparent in the demographic of online classrooms.¹⁶ Despite the fact that 42% of Indian men use mobile internet, only 21% of

8. *E.g.*, *Covid-19's Lasting Impact on Education: Kids Return to School but 50% Not up to Learning Mark*, OUTLOOK (Aug. 18, 2023, 1:29 PM), <https://www.outlookindia.com/education/covid-19-s-lasting-impact-on-education-kids-return-to-school-but-50-not-up-to-learning-mark-news-217185>.

9. *Id.*

10. *Id.*

11. *E.g.*, PTI News Agency, *30% Students Didn't Return to Schools After Pandemic, Odisha Gov't Finds*, THE INDIAN EXPRESS (May 14, 2022 14:11 IST), <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/bhubaneswar/30-students-didnt-return-to-schools-after-pandemic-odisha-govt-finds-7917023/>.

12. *See* Rishi, *The After-Effects of Covid-19 on the Indian Education System: The New UDISE+ Report 2021-22*, THE TIMES OF INDIA: READER'S BLOG (Dec. 20, 2022, 23:21 IST), <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/readersblog/third-view/the-after-effects-of-covid-19-on-the-indian-education-system-the-new-udise-report-2021-22-48226/>.

13. *See id.*; Mridusmita Bordoloi & Anwasha Mallick, *During the Pandemic, Financial Shocks Forced Lakhs of Indian Children to Drop Out of Private Schools*, SCROLL.IN (June 10, 2022, 01:30 PM), <https://scroll.in/article/1025833/during-the-pandemic-financial-shocks-forced-lakhs-of-children-to-drop-out-of-private-schools>.

14. *See Parents in Karnataka Have No Option but to Send Kids to Private Schools*, THE TIMES OF INDIA (Feb. 1, 2023, 6:34 AM IST), <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/bengaluru/parents-in-karnataka-have-no-option-but-to-send-kids-to-private-schools/articleshowprint/97507089.cms>.

15. *The Massive Impact of Covid-19 on Girls Education in India*, EDUCATE GIRLS (Dec. 30, 2022), <https://www.educategirls.ngo/blog/the-massive-impact-of-covid-19-on-girls-education-in-india/>.

16. *Id.*

Indian women use it, creating a 50% gender gap.¹⁷ Girls who would have otherwise been allowed to study were pulled out of school, and there was an increase in child marriages.¹⁸ With an increased economic burden, the loss of livelihood, or resources going towards medical care, educating the boys of the family became an increased priority.¹⁹ Cases of domestic violence and sexual abuse also increased.²⁰ For the world's largest and youngest country, education is the way out of discrimination, oppression, abuse, and helplessness.²¹ Being uneducated and unskilled in India usually implies a life of unpredictable physical drudgery as part of a huge, unorganized, and therefore, unregulated economy.²² In 2021, a year after the pandemic hit, the wealthiest 1% in India witnessed an increase in their wealth by 40.6%.²³ By the end of 2021, just 10% of the country's population held 72.5% of India's total wealth.²⁴ An Oxfam report put India's scathing income inequality into context by stating:

It would take an unskilled worker 10,000 years to make what Mukesh Ambani made in an hour during the pandemic and 3 years to make what he made in a second . . . Data shows what Ambani earned during the pandemic would keep the 40 crore [400 million] informal workers that are at risk of falling into poverty due to COVID-19 above the poverty line for at least 5 months.²⁵

Perhaps it is entirely inaccurate to call the pandemic an equalizer when it has done the complete opposite.

17. Ranjana Kumari, *Girl's Education Among the Post-Pandemic Scenario*, THE TIMES OF INDIA (Jan. 31, 2022, 1:09 PM IST), <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/voices/girls-education-among-the-post-pandemic-scenario/?source=app&frmapp=yes>.

18. See *The Massive Impact of Covid-19 on Girls Education in India*, *supra* note 15.

19. See Ruma Bhargava & Megha Bhargava, *11 Million Girls Might Not Return to School Due to Covid-19. Education System Needs a Reset*, THEPRINT (Feb. 19, 2022, 1:31 PM IST), <https://theprint.in/india/education/11-million-girls-might-not-return-to-school-due-to-covid-19-education-system-needs-a-reset/837087/>.

20. *The Massive Impact of Covid-19 on Girls Education in India*, *supra* note 15.

21. See Manish Yadav, *Education: How Should Poor Children Study in India's Expensive Education System?*, THE TIMES OF INDIA: READER'S BLOG (Dec. 14, 2022, 20:07 IST), <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/readersblog/yadavmanish999/education-how-should-poor-children-study-in-indias-expensive-education-system-48022/>.

22. See *id.*

23. Shipra Singh, *Wealth Inequality in India Peaked During Covid, Says Report*, MINT (Sept. 21, 2022, 02:14 AM IST), <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/wealth-inequality-in-india-at-an-all-time-high-during-covid-11663703375838.html>.

24. *Id.*

25. *COVID-19 Sharpened Inequalities in India, Billionaires' Wealth Increased by 35%: Report*, THE WIRE (Jan. 25, 2021), <https://thewire.in/rights/covid-19-sharpened-inequalities-in-india-billionaires-wealth-increased-by-35-report>.

One of the best things universities can do is jolt students out of perceiving the world in one way, i.e., through their own experiences, biases, and eyes. Realizing that everything about one's perception and opinions is biased, and always will be, is not an obvious or easy conclusion to arrive at. The rich who have gotten richer are the ones who will continue to have access to education.²⁶ As our public institutions crumble, money acquires greater significance in accessing good schools and universities.²⁷ The distance between the wealthy and the poor only widens. India's laws are thankfully not prone to thinking of the poor as responsible for their poverty.²⁸ However, trends around the world are deeply concerning, such as the U.S. Supreme Court recently upending affirmative action policies in universities.²⁹ There is no overstating the impact schools and universities can have. They can change everything about how students choose to live and can provide a means of escape, not just from suffocating kinds of thought, but from very real physical circumstances of deprivation and repression. We are accountable not just for the things we do, but also for the things we do not do.³⁰ History is not just the actions we take. It is also what we forget, what we leave behind, what we neglect, and what we fail to see and act upon.

IV. CONCLUSION

After the world reopened, I found myself attending a different university abroad, and after sitting through many (although not enough) wonderful classes, I stopped seeing universities, and my time within them, through the habituation of the everyday. Universities are exceptional environments where being open to change, challenge, and new ideas is a deeply rewarding experience. They are more than places of learning and intellectual engagement; they foster friendships, love, conflicts, and political discourse

26. See Bloomberg, *India's Richest More Than Double Their Fortunes During Covid Crisis, Oxfam Says*, MINT (Jan. 17, 2022, 12:51 PM IST), <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/indias-richest-more-than-double-their-fortunes-during-covid-crisis-oxfam-says-11642403058284.html>.

27. See Sucharita Sen, *Money Over Merit, Quantity Over Quality: The Indian Education System Kills*, THE ORG. FOR WORLD PEACE (Nov. 30, 2022), <https://theowp.org/reports/money-over-merit-quantity-over-quality-the-indian-education-system-kills/>.

28. See Arya Sharma, *Poor and the Law: A Critical Analysis*, LEGAL SERVICE INDIA, <https://www.legalserviceindia.com/legal/article-4894-poor-and-the-law-a-critical-analysis.html> (last visited Sept. 12, 2023).

29. *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President & Fellows of Harv. Coll.*, 600 U.S. 181, 230 (2023).

30. See Quote by Molière, GOODREADS, <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/49256-it-is-not-only-what-we-do-but-also-what> (last visited Oct. 23, 2023) ("It is not only what we do, but also what we do not do, for which we are accountable.").

that enrich life. In the wake of the pandemic, the seemingly idle days of lockdown culminated in something meaningful. They were not wasted; they had a purpose. While some aspects of the pandemic are best left behind, others hold great significance and should be remembered. They were not for nothing. Some parts of the pandemic are best forgotten, but some parts must be remembered. During the pandemic, I read copious amounts of *Calvin and Hobbes* and agree with their question, “If good things lasted forever, would we appreciate how precious they are?”³¹ Since the pandemic forced us to give up many good things, including the joys of in-person classrooms, I hope that those of us who have returned to these precious experiences will always appreciate their value.

31. 3 BILL WATTERSON, *THE COMPLETE CALVIN AND HOBBS* 449 (photo. reprt. 2005) (1995).