



Teaching Sociology and Invoking Sociological Imagination in Neoliberal Times: Possibilities and Predicaments in New Contexts

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Abstract

This paper draws from the authors' experiences of teaching sociology and social anthropology in academic institutions in India and the possibilities and predicaments they entail. Cultivating the sociological imagination has been at the heart of pedagogical practices in social anthropology; however, in the new, neoliberalized and privatized higher education spaces, invoking this link between individual and society is increasingly becoming challenging thus making the authors contemplate whether the preconditions for teaching critical sociology and sociological imagination are diminishing. With sociology's relevance for employability often called into question, sociologists in such spaces find themselves conflicted between caring for the students, their need for more skill-based sociology, and caring for the discipline's fundamental critical approach that forces individuals to encounter uncomfortable truths of inequality, marginality, oppression, privilege, and domination. The paper argues that alterity and diversity are fundamental and necessary preconditions to both cultivating a sociological imagination and a pedagogy of care that elicits values of solidarity, empathy and the collective.

Keywords

Sociology, India, liberal arts, pedagogy of care, diversity, homogeneity

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Introduction

This paper reflects on the authors' experiences of possibilities and predicaments of teaching sociology and social anthropology in academic institutions in India. Cultivating the sociological imagination has been at the heart of pedagogical practices in social anthropology; however, in the neoliberalized and privatized higher education spaces, invoking this link between individual and society is increasingly becoming challenging, thus making the authors contemplate whether the preconditions for teaching critical sociology and sociological imagination are diminishing. With sociology's relevance for employability often called into question, sociologists in such spaces find themselves conflicted between caring for the students, their need for more skill-based sociology, and caring for the discipline's fundamental critical approach that forces individuals to encounter uncomfortable truths of inequality, marginality, oppression, privilege, and domination. The paper argues that alterity and diversity are fundamental and necessary preconditions to cultivating both a sociological imagination and a pedagogy of care that elicits values of solidarity, empathy, and the collective.

We draw from our experience of having taught sociology courses to students enrolled in a four-year B.A. in Liberal Arts program and B.A. (Honours) Sociology program in the school of liberal arts and humanities at a private university in India. Under the liberal arts degree, anthropology and sociology are offered as a major among other disciplines including psychology, literature, history, philosophy, economics, environmental studies, and international business. We have enjoyed ample freedom in imaginatively designing course manuals, including newer areas for research, and incorporating different pedagogical practices.¹ For instance, in a module on "sound ethnography" as part of a research methods course, we included an exercise where students were asked to document and present the different soundscapes on campus and what activities were indicated by the soundscape. Simultaneously, we often also grappled with students' uncertainties about their employment prospects and the relevance or suitability of their degree, a seemingly old and persistent anxiety among sociology students in India (Béteille, 1996; Deshpande, 2003; Jayaram, 1998). Our students find it difficult to explain sociology's appeal and "usefulness" to their families and friends. The problem is further compounded, and is perhaps new and peculiar to privatized education, when kin are particularly baffled by the significantly higher tuition fee compared with their government university/college counterparts. This is complicated further by the desire harbored by private universities to create courses that "sell." This is especially evident in the profusion of Artificial Intelligence (AI)-related courses in social sciences, which leads us to further reflect on the commodification of disciplines and its varied ramifications.

In this paper, we revisit some of these old predicaments along with fresh challenges and perhaps opportunities the newer institutional spaces present. Our observations are based on classroom anecdotes, conversations with students, among ourselves, and our collaborative reflections on these predicaments, and are therefore an emergent autoethnography. We both have studied in public universities, but we landed our first teaching jobs in a private institution. Our observations are also derived from our positionalities of belonging to middle-class families from privileged social locations, accessing public

higher education in Delhi as students, and subsequently teaching in private higher educational institutions in the National Capital Region. Hence, we draw upon our lived experiences and memories from public university classrooms but intersperse our account with experiences of senior academics who have taught in other institutions in the country. At the outset, we would also like to emphasize that the paper does not dwell on a simplistic binary of public and private or advocate a return to previous models of teaching and research but looks at different institutional contexts located on a spectrum of freedoms, opportunities, and constraints. Our repeated use of “perhaps” in this paper is indicative of the unresolved dilemmas, as we continue to ruminate over these conversations in the new spaces where sociology is being taught and practiced in India today.

The first two sections discuss the new institutional contexts that have emerged in the evolving higher education landscape in the country and sociology’s location in these spaces. Here, while we discuss the persistent issues, we also reflect on the kind of possibilities these contexts offer, perhaps to dismantle and decentralize older hierarchies that have shaped the discipline. In the last two sections, drawing from our experiences of teaching “Indian Society” and “Social Inequalities” (explored in detail later), we discuss our predicaments as instructors to constantly think about how to reimagine and repackage sociology to suit new realities without altering the discipline’s fundamentally critical approach. Against this backdrop we also reflect on the theme of this Special Issue, the framework of “pedagogy of care.” We argue that sociologists in such settings often find themselves in a precarious position with conflicting responsibilities of care toward the students, and the discipline they are trained in. In this space that instructors occupy, a balance has to be struck between these opportunities and challenges.

“Margin,” “Periphery,” and “Fringe”: Evolving Contexts of Higher Education and Sociology in India

Some debates on sociology in India have dealt with the questions of relevance and employability, the hierarchies between sociology in *muffasil* (rural/provincial) colleges and metropolitan, elite departments, the language chasm between scholarship taught in English and other Indian languages, and concerns over the absence of indigenous concepts and categories (Chaudhuri, 2016; Jayaram, 1998; Patel, 2011). The question of relevance itself has evolved in different contexts (see Introduction in Chaudhuri, 2016). Sociology’s relevance in India has always been determined by where it is located.

Since the 1960s, the sites of sociology research and teaching have expanded from central and state universities/colleges to other institutional spaces such as the Indian Institute of Management (IIMs), Indian Institute of Technology (IITs), and National Law Schools (NLS).² The introduction of sociology in these spaces as foundational or elective courses at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels, rather than as full-fledged degrees³ has prompted deliberations on the crisis and opportunities in sociology research and pedagogy.

Scholars have weighed in on the emergent hierarchies, such as with the “marginal” and “peripheral” positioning of sociology as taught in IITs/IIMs in comparison with state and central public universities (Deb, 2010; Thakur, 2016). Furthermore, within professional

science, law, and management institutes, sociologists occupy a marginalized and peripheral position. Thakur argues, on the one hand, these sociologists who are teaching in overtly management and technological ambience occupy a marginal or “add-on” status vis-à-vis the mainstream within the IIMs and IITs and are often provoked to prove the seriousness and relevance of their disciplines to students and colleagues from other backgrounds. On the other hand, the sociology faculty and the very nature of sociology taught in these institutional contexts are considered “inferior” by peers employed in older central/state universities and colleges. Furthermore, sociologists in management and technological institutes are also expected to undertake research in management focus areas such as rural management and entrepreneurship or research with applied nature, which again invites criticism from their “purist” counterparts in public universities. Despite this criticism however, in the emerging higher education landscape in India, sociology is still deemed relevant to training students in management and technological institutes.

In this context, we note that the emergence of the liberal arts departments in elite private universities marks the latest inflection in these conversations on sociology. In India, three factors since the previous decade have been significantly reshaping the higher education landscape: 1) growing incomes and global aspirations among a section of upper-middle class, reflected in their access to privatized education; 2) emphasis on “internationalization of education” to meet the demands of a global workforce; and 3) students’ mobility for higher education especially to the United States and the United Kingdom. The liberal arts departments in the elite private universities, based on the American curricular model, promising exposure to global partnerships and collaborations, short-term and long-term international exchange programs, and faculty with overseas experience are aligned with these shifting class aspirations and trends in higher education (Modrowski, 2016). The expansion of liberal arts education is also aligned with the emphasis placed upon “multidisciplinary learning” in the New Education Policy in India 2020.

Liberal arts departments have only become a viable site for sociology research and teaching in the last two decades. Echoing Deb (2010) and Thakur (2016), Tripathi (2023) terms teaching sociology in liberal arts departments as the “fringe of sociology teaching.” However, he attributes this “fringe” location not to the add-on nature of teaching sociology—such as in management and technology institutions—but rather to the limitations that liberal arts spaces in private institutions present of catering to primarily elite students. Here it is important to briefly delve into a significant shift occurring in the public character of education in India since the late 1980s and 1990s. Tilak (2008) writes that *pure* (emphasis in original) private education that solely depends on student fees is a relatively recent phenomenon, noticeable since the onset of neoliberal economic policies although private education with state support has existed before.⁴ In the schooling landscape, Nambissan (2010) observes that since the late 1980s, the lower-middle class started migrating to English-medium private schools leaving the lowest tiers of government schools as concentrations of the poor, girls, and religious minorities. These trends have unfolded with a simultaneous decline of public investment in school education, raising concern among scholars about issues of equitable access to quality education especially for hitherto marginalized and excluded populations. The higher education

landscape has somewhat begun to mirror this highly diverse, segregated, and stratified nature of schooling provision now. An overview of the fee structure of public and private universities makes these concerns over equitable access even more apparent. Our comparison of tuition fees in 2023–2025 for an undergraduate degree in sociology revealed that on average private universities charged INR 24 lakhs for a four-year B.A. program, while public universities charged INR 70,000. It was therefore approximately 3,329% more expensive to pursue an undergraduate degree in sociology at private universities in India on average. Such differences in costs have clear ramifications in determining the student body. In fact, citing “substantial” fees as a barrier, a parliamentary panel noted the glaring absence of Other backward castes/classes, Scheduled Castes ST and Scheduled Tribes students in select elite private institutions, recommending introducing reservations (Harigovind, 2025).

The cascading effects of high cost of education is not only limited to student demographic profiles alone, but also that of the faculty body. Universities justify these costs by laying emphasis on hiring faculty with overseas experience for the internationalization of education and global exposure to showcase “distinction” from public counterparts. In effect, these practices also generate a similar homogeneity in faculty profiles, leading to consolidation of caste and class privileges in these spaces. To justify such steep costs, private institutions are under immense pressure to differentiate themselves from their public counterparts. While on the one hand the costs are justified by universities through physical infrastructure such as high-tech campuses, modern classrooms, and internationally trained faculty, on the other hand, the courses on offer are also repackaged in a new liberal arts mold. This repackaging necessitates various changes in the way sociology is taught. Keeping the trajectory of institutional practice of sociology in mind, where it has traveled from central/state institutes to professional institutes, to now liberal arts departments in elite private universities, we wonder whether a liberal arts repackaging of sociology, in addition to a crisis, may also be an opportunity?

To unpack this, we draw from our experiences of having adapted sociology for liberal arts teaching. First, we have adapted our sociology and anthropology foundations course to suit the liberal arts curriculum and tailored it to appeal to our students. This introductory course is interdisciplinary in nature, combining perspectives from sociology, anthropology, and human geography, which different from how sociology is traditionally introduced in other departments in public education. In our course, owing to its introductory nature and interdisciplinary focus, we designed the course to begin with an introduction to the three disciplines using Mills (2000), Bauman and May (2001), Clifford Geertz (1973), and Doreen Massey (1994), as opposed to beginning with an intellectual history of the disciplines. Then with the intention of introducing conceptual frameworks that would be directly relatable to the social worlds of the students, the remainder of the course is built around themes such as digital space and society, urbanity, politics of food, religion, marriage, and intimacies. We use contemporary scholarship and ethnographic works to introduce these thematic areas. For example, Craig Jeffrey’s *Timepass: Youth, Class, and the Politics of Waiting in India* (2010) unpacks different notions of “timepass” among educated, lower-middle-class youth in Uttar Pradesh who find themselves in a limbo as they wait for stable, salaried employment (*sarkari naukri*)

and grapple with uncertainties induced by economic liberalization. This reading allows us to introduce the intersection of the three disciplines, and appeal to young students' world-views, aspirations, frustrations as "timepass" is a relatable term from their everyday usage. The course is designed this way to evoke curiosity about sociology and anthropology, in the hope that it will draw students toward this major. This is different from the public university curriculum that we studied, where contemporary theorizations and studies were arrived at much later, having traversed the history of the discipline and key concepts. Recognizing the importance of this approach, of grounding contemporary ideas in the evolution of disciplinary thinking, once students opt for the major, assured of their commitment to the discipline, students are introduced to key thinkers including Marx, Weber, and Durkheim, for a more immersed engagement in the discipline and not just concepts. However, at a much deeper level this also allows us to perhaps reimagine the conventional modes or what is considered the "core" or "mainstream" approach of teaching sociology, as we invert the trajectory and begin with the contemporary. In these adaptations, we recognize the need for sociology to address contemporary realities.

Sociology as More than Just "Vibes"

Despite these adaptations, sociology and anthropology in the department have limited takers compared with psychology and economics, disciplines perceived as more employable and capable of producing immediate employment opportunities in the end of term placement cycle. In this context, we are also witnessing a need to transform social sciences and humanities in line with professional courses that equip students with employable skills. While this has been a longstanding trend, in this section, we delve into the persistent predicaments of sociologists to maintain its appeal among students but highlight the specific challenges we are presented with in a liberal arts setting in a private institution. Sociology has perhaps never been the most popular choice for students (Jayaram, 1998). It is often described as the "leftover" discipline that draws reluctant students and civil services aspirants in India. In places where it is popular, it rests on its perception of being an "easy-to-score" subject. Even for those who are fascinated by it, their love for sociology co-exists with apprehensions to commit to it. For instance, a liberal arts student in our department, despite her interest in sociology, selected psychology as her major. It was already an uphill battle, she explained, to convince the parents to allow her to pursue a degree in liberal arts; specializing in sociology would be a bigger "risk." Every year, students who show interest in sociology end up specializing in more "employable" majors such as psychology and economics.

The sociology and anthropology major in our school continues to compete with psychology and economics as they are perceived as dealing with more "serious" and "complex" issues. A student shared that he prefers to study economics as it is a more "solution-oriented discipline." In sociology classrooms, we are often told by students, with a hint of fatigue, about how we harp incessantly on social stratification and inequalities without proposing solutions, again a point previously discussed by sociologists such as Andre Betéille and N. Jayaram. In another instance, a colleague recounted how a student conveyed that "sociology feels like vibes." Owing to generational differences, we

may not be able to accurately explain what “vibe” means but it can be inferred that students feel that sociology engages with a loosely defined, broad area of ideas and themes. This feeds into the existing perception of sociology being a “soft” discipline where “anything can pass” (Jayaram, 1998), which is further compounded by the pressures to make sociology palatable and “fun,” by drawing upon the everyday, in the hope that we will have more takers for the discipline. In our attempts we therefore inculcate a critical understanding of “vibes” as “common sense” which sociological methods and theories systematically dismantle, showing how hegemonic notions condition the social worlds we inhabit (Béteille, 1996). Deshpande (2003) captures this difficulty by noting that confusing the science with the object of inquiry is like mistaking a geologist for a rock. However, he complicates this and adds that “geologists need not worry about rocks shaping their minds, whereas sociologists must constantly worry about common sense doing precisely that. And there is no simple or permanent solution for this anxiety” (Deshpande, 2003, p. 6). As educators, we have to constantly straddle this delicate balance between making sociology attractive and risking the discipline’s criticality.

It is not as if sociology’s prospects are entirely in question. Chaudhuri (2016) notes that sociology’s “relevance” and “marketability” is a “double edged weapon.” Globalization and market-oriented competitiveness has created demand for students of sociology and anthropology with certain skills such as qualitative and quantitative research techniques, “quick ethnography,” “corporate ethnography,” and social audits; however, simultaneously, and concerningly, the space for critical sociology is shrinking. Critical sociology⁵ struggles to stay relevant in a world where most institutions feel compelled to cater to the demands for skill-based sociology. Tripathi (2023) corroborates this, arguing that, on the one hand, sociology’s usefulness⁶ in generating lucrative employment is doubted, on the other, it is considered valuable for many careers including marketing and business. He notes, “students want to deploy sociological understanding to enhance the product’s visibility and sale” (Tripathi, 2023, p. 199). However, Chaudhuri (2016, p. 16) contends:

Despite greater employability, sociology cannot compete on par with commerce or economics when the success of an academic program in the college is assessed on the basis of revenue generation, employability of the students, industry demand, on-campus recruitment etc. These new contexts offer not only new possibilities to the practice of sociology, but also a whole new series of challenges and predicaments.

Chaudhuri adds that these pressures are not new and what we are perhaps witnessing now are challenges conditioned by the neoliberal context of higher education in India. In this context, we note that a market for “social reality” has emerged which social science departments, and sociology in particular, are trying to address globally.

Sociology and a Market for “Social-Reality”

While on the one hand sociology is facing a crisis of marketability for students to feel that opting sociology makes sense, on the other hand, sociology is reforming in different

institutional practices globally under the threat of redundancy. Various universities in the global north are downsizing or defunding social sciences and humanities, some states have even eliminated sociology courses from their curriculum (British Academy n.d.; The Guardian, 2024; Supiano, 2024; The New York Times, 2024). In this rapidly changing world, sociological enquiry, as always, has evolved to make sense of this contemporary reality.

One new branch of inquiry that makes sense of contemporary realities has been in the field of sociological inquiry of AI. Long dominated by media studies, enquiries into the social relevance of AI are now increasingly being conducted by sociologists, anthropologists, and social scientists. Armed with theories of inequality, stratification, and power, sociologists are deliberating on the political economy of AI and big data practices, uncovering the underlying labor relations, demystifying its use (and abuse) in governance, and broadly analyzing the hype around AI. In short, sociologists are demystifying the common-sense knowledge about AI by carefully uncovering its materiality and everyday practices.

As sociologists we are equipped with methods, theories, and perspectives that allow us to generate knowledge about a field where we are not the creators. This has earlier been done with sociolegal studies, where sociologists and anthropologists have been demystifying the world of law through courtroom ethnographies and sociolegal enquiries. These skills of uncovering everyday realities have been useful in integrating sociological enquiry into the legal education paradigm in India. Under the NLS model, sociologists have been integrated in sociolegal pedagogy. Similarly, sociologists are now actively generating knowledge about big-tech infused social realities in a field that is dominated by computer scientists. Sociology has long been integrated in technical education in India, in most technology institutes such as IITs. Although several scholars (Deb, 2010; Thakur, 2016; Tripathi, 2023) have noted how sociology in these sites remains a marginal discipline, sociology's grasp over the understanding of transforming social realities has been crucial in redefining the pedagogical and research practices in these institutes.

In today's hyper digital world, a market for a qualitative understanding of social reality has also emerged, further leading to the commodification of the discipline. When asked why they were interested in liberal arts and sociology programs, several students that we interviewed for admission noted that they deemed "critical thinking" skills that were grounded in contemporary social realities to be highly valuable, especially in the age of AI, where monotonous tasks could be easily automated and replaced. Liberal arts, social sciences, and especially sociology were seen as crucial to equip students with these skills. Capitalizing on this, several departments are now incorporating courses such as digital sociology and digital humanities, diversifying methods courses to include digital ethnography, creating research pathways on digital infrastructures and algorithmic systems. While similar work has been happening in technology institutes (Thakur, 2016), with the proliferation of AI chatbots and generative AI models in our daily lives, as well as corporate sources of funding (Google n.d.) to support research, sociology and liberal arts departments have also incorporated these changes in their core curriculum and research agendas. Concomitantly, pedagogical practices are also evolving to equip students with skills of market research catering to the needs of a new market for social reality.

While we continue to grapple with these old and new predicaments, we note two interconnected difficulties that make teaching sociology challenging: 1) increasing homogeneity in the classroom; and 2) the difficulty in invoking sociological imagination among students. We unpack these in more detail in the subsequent sections.

Encounters with Difference, Diversity, and Teaching Indian Society

In this section, we discuss how teaching courses such as “Social Inequalities” and “Indian Society” have pushed us to introspect about the social composition of our classrooms. While teaching a session on the changing landscapes of neoliberalizing India, the demand for English-medium private schooling, and proliferation of personality development and enhancement (PDE) centers (Lindsay McGuire, 2013), students were asked to review videos of PDE training on YouTube in class and identify the skills these centers are offering to make their recruits (largely low-income and lower-middle-class families) more employable, cosmopolitan, and urban. Curiously, we found students sniggering while watching the videos and asked them to reflect on what had triggered their laughter on these tutorials on self-improvement, confidence, or performance of professionalism. It took them a few moments to contemplate and acknowledge the taken-for-granted cultural capital many of us have inherited from our privileged social locations and which to a large extent has become the new middle-class template of success for others to pursue.

This exercise made us contemplate whether sociology can flourish in socially homogeneous settings and if sociology’s task is to defamiliarize the familiar, can defamiliarization happen in such spaces? Could diversity and plurality in the classroom be a precondition for defamiliarization, and by extension fundamental necessities for teaching sociology? Higher education in India has historically been a preserve of the caste and class elites and, therefore, Rege (2010) draws attention to the “anxiety” caused among established academics when first-generation learners from historically disadvantaged communities began entering the “sacred” halls of higher education (Rege, 2010). As higher education offers a possibility for social mobility, to equalize access to wealth and subvert traditional hierarchies, it becomes a guarded and contested site (Deshpande & Zacharias, 2013). Hence, the increasing plurality in student composition, worldviews, and knowledge production which accompanied the entry of formerly excluded groups has been often articulated as a “crisis” about falling standards. However, in our experience, what we see in our classrooms is a reversal: a return to homogeneity. This in some ways is ensured by the fee structure highlighted earlier, which perhaps also performs gatekeeping functions for elite private universities.

Teaching sociology, especially courses such as “Indian Society” or “Sociology of India” has in the past confronted the disjuncture between “society and self” of the textbook and “society and self” of the student thus making “kindling of the sociological imagination impossible” (Chaudhuri, 2016, p. 22). Other scholars have noted that when first-generation learners and girls began to enter higher education, students especially from tribal and dalit backgrounds in the classrooms felt a disconnect with the homogeneous, dominantly Hindu, male worldviews of the textbooks (Kumar, 2010).

Rege (2024) draws attention to the invisibility of non-Brahmin perspectives in discussion of caste in sociology classrooms, missing connections with gender and even the tendency to locate caste in rural outskirts. But it is the epistemological challenge posed by dalit and tribal narratives that forced Indian sociology to confront these biases and become self-reflexive about the knowledge transacted in the classrooms. Given this context, we contemplate the question “What happens when the sociology curriculum becomes more reflexive, representative, and inclusive of a multitude of worlds but classrooms turn homogeneous?” We apprehend that a course such as “Indian Society,” in this case, risks becoming a course about the caste, class, and religious “other” and perhaps explains the sense of “fatigue” among our students when such conversations happen. This is not to suggest that diverse classrooms are free of complications and could in fact present more complexities for instructors to navigate. We are also aware that diversity without self-conscious institutional reforms can be debilitating for the first-generation learners and nonelites in such spaces as is evident from the well-documented experiences of students in the IITs and other public universities (Rao, 2013).

The pedagogical challenge posed by this social homogeneity has been evident for us in other instances, too. For example, students are in denial whenever they are asked if they classify people based on English language competencies and cite how they never judge their grandparents for lacking proficiency in English. This is when we have to constantly remind them to go beyond their family orbit and recognize how language is often used as a class and caste marker in heterogeneous public settings where we encounter strangers. This resonates with what Tripathi (2023) calls a “crisis of relatedness” as our cohort finds themselves surrounded, in classrooms, hostels, dining halls, by students who speak fluent English. The difficulty also arises because their schooling has been in similar settings indicative of the stratified and segregated schooling landscape. We believe a desire for sameness and erasure of differences has created socially homogeneous enclosures making such conversations about the intersection of language, caste, and class difficult.

Unlike Delhi University or Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), where many students struggle with following lectures and readings in English, our students come with a fairly decent command over English. JNU’s linguistic empowerment cell or remedial lectures offering support for students from diverse and disadvantaged backgrounds is a testament to this. Our liberal arts school also runs a peer support group; however, students invariably reach out for remedial classes for economics, psychology, and Spanish language. While we do not have to work around the constraints faced by sociology faculty in state universities in revising syllabus⁷ as there is limited material in regional languages where revisions can seriously hamper the engagement of a linguistically diverse body of students, we think the lack of a diverse cohort perhaps thwarts our attempts to invoke a sociological imagination. It is important to note that the “language debate” that has plagued sociology is not simply about the elite/English versus regional/vernacular because what is regional and vernacular itself is implicated in caste and gender (Rege, 2024). As Rege (2024) contends, the “language problem” in sociology should not be reduced to merely communicative aspects or translations of textbooks, or a problem resolvable through remedial classes but opens up a larger debate about democracy, politics, and epistemology.

This comfort with sameness among our students perhaps also produces a deep discomfort to engage with difference. While co-teaching a course on introduction to fieldwork, we have taken students to villages in Haryana to familiarize them with rural health and education, through conversations with Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs), Anganwadi workers,⁸ and the beneficiaries of government schemes, largely the most disadvantaged social groups. During field visits, our students have often told us how uncomfortable they are in navigating the field when sharp differences and inequalities in lived realities and economic and cultural capital are laid bare in a rural, resource-poor public school and health center. While fieldwork is never easy and there is a significant unease even seasoned ethnographers (should ideally) experience, in this particular context, however, we wonder whether this discomfort of “us” and “them” among students stems from their socialization in nondiverse, enclosures, where people from different social locations are only peripheral participants in their everyday lives.

Drawing from Rege (2024), we note that the language question is indeed fundamentally linked to institutional practices of democratization of the classroom. A return to homogeneity hinders sociological pedagogy as it distorts social reality in its everyday setting. Perhaps to teach social reality more accurately it is necessary that the classroom (comprising both students and faculty) in its demographic profile itself is inclusive and/or representative of social realities. The distortion of social reality is further amplified by the multiple ways in which the interplay of the self and the social plays out in such homogenous settings.

Interplay of the Self and the Social

A persistent challenge for us is to invoke and cultivate a sociological imagination that embeds ourselves (students and faculty) in society. According to Mills (2000), sociological imagination is the “quality of mind” that enables us to connect private troubles with “public issues,” to go beyond our immediate milieu and make sense of our own lives in the context of larger, historical, and contemporary events and shifts taking place in the world. In doing so it opens the possibility of change and transformation by addressing what may appear immutable (often generating fatalism), individual traps. During our lectures on the political and economic power enjoyed by dominant castes, students often argue that their family members do not practice caste-based discrimination and therefore caste is a phenomenon of the past. This often makes us pause to think about how our students “are bound by the private orbits in which they live” (Mills, 2000, p. 3) perhaps in these spaces more than in other diverse settings. Such instances, however, have also presented an opportunity to explain that it is not a question of whether “you” or “I” or my family discriminates, but rather to assert that even if one does not discriminate, one still enjoys the privileges derived from the collective power of the group one belongs to. Castelessness too is about caste privileges (Deshpande, 2013). This inability to transcend the private milieu which presents an obstacle in teaching concepts such as caste and class is compounded by students’ limited vision of rural and urban spaces. Their first introduction to caste was derived from textbooks, schoolteachers, and, in a few cases, parents. Those who have studied sociology in their higher secondary are familiar with

conceptualizations offered by M. N. Srinivas and Louis Dumont. For our urban, educated, English-speaking students, caste is often a thing of the historical past, nonexistent in contemporary Indian cities and certainly in the immediate milieu of their everyday lives.

Only when students are asked to probe further into practices such as keeping separate utensils for domestic workers at home or unpack everyday categorizations such as “chote log” (small people), or “gande log” (dirty/bad people) (Frøystad, 2006), do they sheepishly recognize the presence of caste in their everyday lives, but this discomfort often makes them shirk it away as rare occurrences which are not based on caste but rather, class, work, and sometimes “cleanliness.” We see a vehement denial and a deliberate misrecognition of caste-based practices as “other” forms of discrimination. The students who do come from marginalized backgrounds, however, are persistently reminded of their caste in various ways, and therefore for them it is not a distant memory but a lived reality. These students, however, in this largely homogeneous space, are few. Caste and class seem to be someone else’s problem hence we often detect a sense of fatigue in talking about it. It is largely understood as overt practices of untouchability where access to public resources and places like temples are denied. They are more attuned to wealth disparities in the cities they have spent their childhoods in, but the interplay of caste and class are hardest to teach.

Interestingly, the only way in which caste is visible to them in their urban settings, with a sense of resentment, is in the form of caste-based reservation in higher education. This antagonism is often imbibed from conversations among family and friends, about a sibling, friend, or neighbor not getting a seat in coveted institutions because of the “unjustly” reserved seats⁹ for “unmeritorious,” “undeserving” students. Charged arguments are made about why wealthy Dalits continue to avail reservations. When asked to reflect on the fundamental assumption underlying these sentiments, most are unable to respond. This once again is indicative that their understanding of how caste-based prejudices shape life chances and opportunities is either limited to very overt forms of exclusion, or the narrow optimism that class erodes caste. When seen in the context of the development of the discipline itself, this presents a challenge for the pedagogy of care.

Reflecting on the historical evolution of anthropological studies in India from colonial to contemporary, Thapan (1998) notes a transition in the focus of anthropological studies from the “other” to the “self in the other” to the “self itself.” We note that the sociology and anthropology curriculum has also, in some ways, transformed to imbibe this transition from “other” to “self.”¹⁰ These shifts, however, are hindered by homogenous settings, where sociological and anthropological perspectives may revert to being “other” perspectives. Drawing from Freire (2000), scholars have noted how a pedagogy of love and care is necessary to intervene in the social world, inside and outside the classroom (Flores & Román Alfaro, 2022). We wish to complicate these perspectives on the pedagogy of care by asking “How do we bring the outside world into elite private classrooms, without resorting to tokenistic representations?” In this context, we reiterate the question invoked earlier—“What happens when the sociology curriculum becomes more reflexive and inclusive, but classrooms turn homogeneous?” In these altered landscapes, how does one invoke the pedagogy of care responsibly, balancing the politics of inclusion and pressures of keeping the discipline “palatable”?

It is not as if students have never encountered caste-based discrimination in spaces outside of classrooms in the university. During one discussion, one student shared how he had heard someone label another student in the hostel as “Dalit,” jokingly (*hasin-mazaak*). Casteism is openly practiced in hostel spaces across campuses in public and private universities, which makes us wonder why there is almost a denial or failure to recognize caste in their lives. One possible explanation is the binary they operate with, seeing caste as a rural phenomenon obscures the reality of caste in apparently urban and modern educational spaces. In addition, the homogenous student and faculty body perhaps creates echo-chambers where their collective beliefs are reinforced, often dismissing experiences of marginalized students. Interestingly, although the campus is located in a rural setting, students and the nonacademic staff consider the university to be urban, hence a casteless space. Following this rigid distinction, we observe a persistent belief that caste exists beyond the walls of the campus. Not only are the interplay and congruence between caste and class easily lost but also the everydayness and subtle manifestations of caste in casual remarks, food practices, segregated housing, and matchmaking are often not noticed until one is pushed to think about them.

As educators we seek to invoke the sociological imagination by bringing theoretical discussion on caste in conversation with the students’ everyday realities in order to train them to see caste in their daily lives; eventually some students do begin to notice caste in its contemporary manifestations. They develop two broad responses when they do start noticing caste and this is most evident through essays and conversations on social inequalities. A majority of students argue that social inequality, and therefore caste-based inequality in India, is inevitable, and that absolute equality, while a worthy aspiration, is ultimately a utopian vision and not a sociological reality. This view is usually harbored by students who themselves come from privileged social locations. On the other hand, some students argue that while social inequalities have been persistent, especially caste, it is a consequence of power and therefore not inevitable, and that through political action it can be undone. This perspective is put forward by students who have themselves faced marginalizations and are usually in a minority. The journey that students make from viewing caste as a thing of the past to seeing caste in their daily lives is inherently uncomfortable.

While the representation of STs in private institutions is abysmal, the few students with tribal backgrounds who are present in our classrooms enrich our perspectives in ways that allow us to make a case for diversity in such settings. As part of their group presentations, when students were asked to identify a reading from their course, a student from Nagaland selected an article on the experiences of northeast migrants living and working in metropolitan cities of India. He began his presentation by sharing how sociologist Dolly Kikon belongs to his tribe and that they derive a deep sense of pride from her accomplishments. He weaved insights from the article with his own experience of living away from home, in cities such as Delhi and Haryana. This presentation was followed by another student, a resident of Delhi, who had chosen the same article but presented a distant reading of it. These different readings of the same article brought diverse perspectives in conversation with each other.

Engaging with these dynamics mandates the development of a pedagogy of care, where we vacillate between making the courses palatable and encountering discomfort.

We do these in multiple ways by introducing narratives from diverse perspectives, while ensuring that students who identify with specific social locations do not feel targeted or victimized. In our experience, developing a pedagogy of care in homogenous settings, however, is challenging, as diverse perspectives may easily become “other” perspectives. Therefore, we note that perhaps this pedagogy, as a balancing act between care and discomfort, is contingent on the diversity of the classroom itself.

Extant scholarship on pedagogy of care argues that teaching–learning spaces cannot be neutral and rational. Instead, drawing from feminist perspectives, scholars actively pursue a critical pedagogy of love and care that can encourage empathy and solidarities and teach students how to live relationally in the world (Flores & Román Alfaro, 2022; Frizelle, 2020). Scholars see a potential in critical pedagogy that values emotion, care, and the collective to undermine the neoliberal logic of individualism, self-reliance, and a culture of hegemonic masculinized rationality (Motta & Bennett, 2018). Mehrotra (2021), for instance, writes how centering care amid the pandemic allowed her to resist the neoliberal logic of the university that expects productivity, “business-as-usual” and treats students as customers. Similarly, Maultsaid and Harrison (2023) argue that an open pedagogy that promotes collaborative production of knowledge and learning, inclusive curricula, and fosters reciprocity and trust among students and between teachers and students, can undermine the transactional customer–provider relationship characteristic of the commercialized post-secondary education. If sociological imagination means situating yourself in a web of interdependencies, this pedagogy of care that appeals for solidarities and collective care is closely aligned with it. The dominant debates on the pedagogy of care are premised on the analysis of an ethics of care emerging in interpersonal relationships between the students and the teacher in the classroom, where care is a mitigating factor for persistent inequalities, marginalizations, and oppression. In this context, drawing from our experience, we wish to complicate the debate on pedagogy of care by asking “Is alterity a necessary precondition for care?” If so, what does a pedagogy of care look like in homogenous spaces? We argue that in the absence of alterity, pedagogy of care in neoliberalized, homogeneous settings, such as of private, elite, higher-ed institutions, risks becoming a practice of catering to the demands of skill-based sociology and where in the name of critical sociology conversations can become a tokenistic representation of the “other” without actually having the other to represent their own voices. Therefore, we tread such a setting mindfully, balancing care for students with care for the discipline.

Ruminations and Concluding Thoughts

The changing landscapes of sociological practice in India have often been equated with crisis. Sociology’s current movement from public universities and professional institutes as sites for sociology to elite private universities is the latest manifestation of this crisis. The repackaging of sociology in a liberal arts mold, and the return to homogeneity in the demographic profiles of the elite private universities are two developments that underpin the current crisis. However, since moments of crisis may also open up possibilities and opportunities, we would like to place the current developments in the context of the

history of the discipline itself and explore whether we may be able to identify opportunities in this crisis. Keeping in mind that sociology emerged from cascading social crises in European society in the nineteenth century, including political revolutions, advancements in science and technology, and urbanization, fundamentally sociology is able to analyze and explain changing social realities. The institutional practices of sociology in India have concomitantly changed with the changes in the dominant polity and economy of the country. We witness this in the trajectory of sociology from central/state universities to professional degree institutes in the past, and to elite private universities now. However, we note that the new market for “social reality” in contemporary society perhaps also ensures the relevance of sociology in this rapidly changing institutional landscape. In this context we wonder whether a liberal arts repackaging of sociology may present an opportunity to ground sociological understanding of social reality on a hitherto unavailable interdisciplinary liberal arts foundation that is in conversation with other disciplines such as philosophy, economics, literature, and history. This repackaging also allows it to be different from the “peripheral” and “marginal” understanding of sociological reality for management, legal, or technological purposes. A liberal arts repackaging, furthermore, may also present an opportunity for the pedagogy of care, as liberal arts departments—due to the theoretical frameworks at their disposal and interdisciplinarity—are ideally located to acknowledge and develop care as an essential component of their pedagogy.

If the liberal arts repackaging of sociology is an opportunity, for both the discipline and its pedagogy, we contend that its relevance is contingent on its ability to defamiliarize the familiar by invoking the sociological imagination. We note that sociology’s ability to defamiliarize the familiar, encountering “uncomfortable” truths of inequality, oppression, and stratification, mandates a pedagogy of care but faces renewed challenges in homogeneous classrooms where the subject has to be made “enjoyable” and palatable to ensure high enrolments. In this context, however we argue that despite an evident return to homogeneity, the model of liberal arts education owned by private elite universities is not inherently antithetical to diverse classrooms and all that it can offer pedagogically. Teaching sociology to defamiliarize the familiar becomes a difficult task when we are faced with acute sameness as students and faculty seem to be moving from one enclosure to another in a highly stratified and segregated education landscape. In conclusion, we note that perhaps sociology’s ability to make sense of contemporary social reality and crisis is fundamentally linked to democratization of the classroom such that they are themselves inclusive, diverse, and representative of contemporary social reality.

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Notes

1. See Deb (2010) for a discussion on the challenges faced in syllabus revisions at state universities.
2. Top-ranking institutions in India offering professional degrees in Engineering, Management, and Law.
3. With the exception of Ph.D. degrees in Sociology in IITs.
4. David Harvey (2005) defines neoliberalism as a “theory of political economic practices” that encourages private property rights, free markets, and free trade with minimal state intervention. The role of the state is to facilitate the commercialization of hitherto restricted domains such as education and health.
5. By critical sociology we mean the study of society through the lenses of power, inequality, and oppression rooted in critical analysis of social structures which eschews a functional explanation of how society works. See Fasenfest (2007).
6. We invoke a nuanced engagement with the idea of “usefulness,” as what is considered useful also varies in different regional contexts and among different social groups. See Sujatha (2010).
7. See note 1.
8. ASHAs and Anganwadis are the grassroots workers in crucial public health and early childhood education delivery programs in India.
9. To redress the exclusion of historically marginalized castes and create a level playing field for them, the Government of India introduced a quota system that entails reservation of seats in government funded employment and educational institutions (for more, see Jodhka, 2012).
10. We may note a similar transition in the evolution of sociology in India as well. For a detailed discussion on the evolution of pre-1960s sociology, see Jayaram (1998), Patel (2011), and Chaudhuri (2016).

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