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Researching South Asia in Pandemic Times: Of Shifting Fields, Research Tools, Risks, Emotions and Research Relationships

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Introduction

A pandemic: A matter that pertains to all people. When the World Health Organisation declared the rapid spread of the infections caused by the Covid-19 virus a pandemic in March 2020, many of us were unsure what this would mean for our daily private and professional lives. We, the members of our working group and co-authors of this article, have witnessed critical geopolitical events—from sometimes different, sometimes joint vantage points, given our own socio-spatial positioning—, unfolding numerous grave regional and global ramifications that also impacted on our identities, academic biographies and everyday realities. In case of a pandemic, we had little or distant reference points to fathom in which ways this change would affect our lives. While it was clear that some people would be more affected than others, how these effects would play out was difficult to predict. In universities and research institutions there was a rush to take teaching, events and research online. No longer able to meet, there



was little space and time to discuss the smaller and larger issues that emerged due to the pandemic in our social and professional lives.

The convergence of a constellation of identity- and context-based factors creates opportunities and challenges that are specific to each person seeking to produce knowledge. A large corpus of literature explores and examines how the positionality of the researcher and the context and location of the study shape research practices (see England 1994; Rose 1997; Moser 2008). While our worries were diverse due to our unique positionalities, a number of concerns were quite similar.¹ Especially for scholars working in countries of the global south or working on topics connected to the global south or those marked by different volatilities, disruptions ranged from travel restrictions, to technological disconnects, to delays in research activities to questions of health and risk that required rethinking established ethical protocols. Andrea Fleschenberg and Sarah Holz regularly offer advice and mentor early career researchers whose work is in and on the global south. We were used to develop multiple, flexible, context-sensitive and care-oriented contingency plans in terms of adapting research designs, research tools and sampling strategies and field sites, for instance in case of frequent electricity or internet cuts, protests, attacks or socio-political violence disrupting fieldwork, putting those involved at risk or placing a too strenuous burden on research participants and research team members. Mentoring and planning research projects during a pandemic, raised additional questions about long-term implications for research projects because it required different considerations for planning, access, rapport building and ethical implications in a rapidly evolving, shifting context of uncertainty and widespread anxieties, newly emerging and exacerbated existing vulnerabilities and inequalities. When we are not sure what is happening, what is the scope of the phenomenon unfolding? What are its ramifications? How is it possible to plan for the future? Any kind of reflexive and flexible planning requires certain parameters to build upon, to take for somehow "given," "stable," "known" or "mapped out" – a radar of sorts, taken with a critical pinch of salt, with certain "visibilities" or rather "cues" to use for orientation.

Early on, Andrea Fleschenberg and Sarah Holz noticed that conversations with a range of colleagues and early career researchers converged on similar themes and thus decided to form an informal working group on India and Pakistan for those in our immediate circle, whose work has been and is affected by the Covid-19 pandemic.² We set three overarching aims: (1) to create a space to explore and discuss the implications of the Covid-19



pandemic on research and communities in South Asia; (2) to exchange and collect experiences as well as useful resources that would support planning and conducting critical research in times of a pandemic and beyond; and (3) to establish a platform for co-learning of critical knowledge productions with regard to research design, research methods, sampling and ethical challenges when engaging in research in pandemic times. Through exchange and dialogue we hoped to create a sense of community that would leave us feeling less alone; a space for sharing and thinking together about contingency plans, alternative research approaches in epistemological, methodological and ethical terms and for providing care in these challenging times. While we are interested in practical aspects of planning and conducting research during a pandemic, we also aim to explore how the pandemic affects knowledge production and academic practices more generally. Does the pandemic constitute a radical turning point, a complete shift in how we work and plan projects? Is it an opportunity to rethink established practices?

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Is this a time to engage with the hard and uncomfortable questions about institutional structures and the politics of knowledge production that often fall through the cracks in our busy schedules or are sidelined by mainstream institutional practices and the academic fields we involve with? Have new questions and issues emerged that require attention? Or, is the pandemic a crisis in a crisis that highlights and magnifies existing challenges that had received little systematic engagement? Did the phenomena we were studying change due to the pandemic? How would we be able to map such shifts? A question especially important for researchers about to complete their work. Lastly, for many researchers and participants who were already living in and under difficult and precarious conditions, the pandemic constituted another layer of difficulties that they had to navigate and live with, by no means the only one. In such a situation, would it be viable and ethically correct to start or continue with a given research project, adapted to the circumstances or not? What kind of knowledge is needed, should we rethink what kind of research we do why and how in what we consider as our fields in more fundamental terms? And can we do that given our own embeddedness in institutional structures, oftentimes constraining us and forcing us to deliver in particular ways despite our approach to decentred, critical approaches to knowledge production and transregional research cooperation?

With these aims and questions in mind, we emailed early career researchers in our network to set up the first meeting of the working group.



At this time Salman Khan joined our team of working group organisers and guest editors. Before our first meeting we circulated a number of readings by authors who critically reflected on the pandemic to help kick-start the discussion (Bisoka 2020; Das 2020; Hussain 2020).³ During the first meeting of the working group in autumn 2020, each participant briefly presented the issues and questions they were currently grappling with. Based on these elaborations, we mapped salient issues and aspects that require considerations as well as a collection of e-resources and open access material via padlet. Subsequently, we encouraged members of the working group to develop vignettes to document and illustrate their struggles, which were used to initiate and further our discussions and to develop feedback and peer support.⁴

These vignettes combine thick descriptions of particular situations and issues where the authors grapple with their reflections and aim to map emerging questions and difficult decisions to take in unpredictable times of uncertainty, anxieties, ambiguous and shifting rules and restrictions impacting on our daily lives, academic encounters and research fields in manifold and diverging ways. We hope that the vignettes shared here will open fellow research travellers a window and unveil some of the ground realities, often messy, fuzzy and in many colours and shades, and subsequent everyday challenges of conducting research and producing knowledge. Quite often such testimonies receive little attention in published research, primarily focused on the presentation and discussion of research findings and avoiding discussing the difficult decisions taken, vulnerabilities, ambivalences and dilemmas in place. How does this implicate the knowledge produced when we have to navigate without an unequivocal compass and maps at our disposal or when our readings are based on blurred sights, missing cues or can be taken from different vantage points? An emerging body of research publications focused on pandemic research challenges do not offer definitive prescriptions or checklists how to cope with the effects of the pandemic, instead they put forward mitigation strategies that have been developed and improvised, sometimes more and sometimes less successfully, during the pandemic or in circumstances deemed similar enough to infer from (Baczko & Dorronsoro 2020; Howlett 2021; Mwambari, Purdeková & Nyenyezi Bisoka 2021; Viandrola-Padros et al. 2020; see further Fleschenberg & Holz this issue).

Most of our vignette contributors were at different stages of their PhD journeys and their respective pieces helped building the puzzle of grasped and missed opportunities, coping strategies, emotional challenges in terms



of researcher's feelings, and resilience against fast-approaching deadlines, limited and dried-up funding as well as performance indicators and academic career trajectories still set in stone and valid for post-pandemic times. The vignettes provide critical insights into decision-making procedures and flag issues and topics that other researchers might have to address under conditions of uncertainty. Thus, we attempt to tie together these vignettes as context-specific and grounded examples along with the aim to illustrate broad themes and questions that emerged from our working group discussions.

An overarching *agraffe* that framed our discussions and that continuously appears in the vignettes is how to define 'the field' we were working in.⁵ Where is 'the field' located? Where are its boundaries and what are its specificities? Can we simply 'take the field online'? An interrelated theme is the challenges and possibilities of digital and remote research, especially if face to face data collection and interactions were central components of research projects. What would be the implications of shifting to digital and hybrid approaches or distanced research? How does our frame of reference and possibilities of interpretation and interaction change when remote and digital approaches are employed? How can researchers establish initial contacts and keep in touch with participants, especially at early stages of their career when networks are not yet well established and resources are limited? What does rapport building look like under such conditions? Moreover, what kinds of silences and exclusions are created through remote data generation, particularly when thinking about marginalised groups and existing as well as newly emerging vulnerabilities in pandemic times? Does remote research offer opportunities to transcend some of the limitations of face to face interactions, especially those related to the positionality of the researcher and participants?

A third theme is questions that pertain to risk, safety and power. Do no harm is a well-established ethical principle that takes on additional meaning during a pandemic because it also raises questions about the transmission of infections. What should researchers do if research participants do not adhere to safety and hygiene protocols and social pressure is exercised on the researcher or research team members to equally disregard such measures because they violate cultural norms, sociability protocols, which is seen as disrespectful and might impact rapport-building? On the other hand, participants might not be able to afford adhering to lockdowns and hygiene measures due to their vulnerable livelihood situation and scarce resources. In such critical conditions, is research ethical, asking those



struggling for survival with the pandemic as additional challenge for their time and input to advance one's knowledge production? What does this mean and imply for our notions of reciprocity and care as well as why and for whom we produce knowledge? Lastly, remote and distanced research is not a new phenomenon, particularly in volatile regions scholars have routinely relied on research assistants, even the term use of the term is contested in research ethics and research cooperation.

As scholars like Mwambari (2019) and Bisoka (2020), among others, have noted, the safety of research assistants, as well as their substantial contribution to the success of research projects, has generally not received sufficient consideration and is part and parcel of power relations within research processes, heightened by the pandemic in particular ways. In times of a pandemic, risk assessment for the work of research assistants is a topic even more important to address. The significance of this question is extensively debated in the context of the power relations between a researcher in the global north/or Western Academia and the local co-researchers, located in the fragile institutional context of the global South (Mwambari 2019; Bisoka 2020; see Fleschenberg & Holz this issue). This is one of the difficulties highlighted in our working group, given also the diverse positionalities of our authors contributing here. Salman Khan (see separate research report this issue) was working with two research assistants in Pakistan, who had to spent months at home due to the risks posed by the second and third wave of the pandemic in Pakistan, while others such as Mateeullah Tareen could not explore the possibility of hiring research assistants due to absence of funding provision for PhD students or the sensitivity of the research topic within a volatile context. To this end, some vignette authors rejected this option from the outset (e.g. Mateeullah Tareen, Aseela Haque), while others turned towards pre-existing informal social relations (such as Aseela Haque and Shulagna Pal) to achieve their research objectives.

A fourth theme that emerges in the vignettes is the mental and emotional well-being of researchers, research assistants and participants. Pandemic-related additional stressors have emerged and existing worries, for instance about delays in project completion, have been heightened. Mental and emotional health, mentoring care and institutional support thus requires further tending to, in particular for early career researchers having to negotiate uncertainty, precarity and anxieties in often difficult circumstances and with limited resources and supportive networks at hand.



The themes and issues that emerged from our discussions are neither entirely novel nor unique; they have existed and have been written about before the onset of the pandemic. A re-reading of the existing body of work might provide fruitful insights, yet, we also ask what kinds of reconfigurations are necessary and possible to draft decentred, critical and situated social science research practices.

The contributors to this article are positioned at different stages of their research process and thus the degree and intensity of the dilemmas described above varied, depending on the stage of their research project. We start with the experiences of Aseela Haque and Shulagna Pal; both were planning their field research stays in Pakistan and India, respectively, when the Covid-19 pandemic-imposed travel restrictions. Their reflections exemplify the helplessness caused by the uncertainty and impossibility of planning that marked all areas of life. Both vignettes display the struggles that particularly early career researchers faced, because they had not yet established a network of respondents, contact persons or research partners. Because of funding and submission deadlines, postponing data collection is not always an option and shifting data collection online is not an option for every project either. Aseela Haque, for instance, had to deliberate on how to access the physical field of study from a distance.

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Vignette 1: Planning (im)possible research during the pandemic – Reflections on positionality and relationships with local researchers by Aseela Haque

Stand up please. Adjust your screens. Now... Place your hands just at the edges of the space that's visible on your screens. On either side of you and just above your head and close to your midriff. Mark and acknowledge. These are your horizontal and vertical boundaries. This is where you are visible. This is your space. And that is it.

The excerpt above is from an exercise in a workshop on effective online video communications offered in my pre-doctoral programme in Berlin. The aim of the workshop was to prepare us for the digital lives we are bound to live under the current conditions of the pandemic as researchers. With my hands hanging in the air, marking my "space," I remember having a sinking feeling. How do those researchers whose work involves ethnographic fieldwork and physical immersion in non-digital realms carry out their research?



As an early-career researcher, I observed the scramble to "digitise" projects in the social sciences. One of my peers professed, 'My supervisor has told me that I should plan a PhD that I can do entirely at my desk.' Methodologies had to be re-envisioned, restructured, reconciled, reimagined, reconsidered, and so on and so forth. We dug into ethics in digital research, digital ethnography, and online methods of qualitative research. Some found the shift easier than others and some, like myself, found it entirely impossible.

The difficulty in adopting digital methods comes not from some sort of predilection that they are 'less than,' but from the simple fact that the limits of their feasibility exclude a great number of communities, persons, phenomena, and lived social realities. In my project, I am investigating issues of rights to space and urban informality under flyovers in my home city, Karachi. In order to understand how these spaces are configured in the everyday lives of people and practices such as appropriating, street hawking, loitering, praying, eating, drinking, and resisting eviction, I need to rely on ethnographic methods of inquiry. However, due to the pandemic logistical challenges in the shape of cancelled flights and travel bans from governments and universities have brought on the need to consider other avenues of data collection.

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Many researchers in advanced stages of their work have been able to shift their interactions with interlocutors online or to telephonic communication. Yet, in my case, I do not have prior relationships with interlocutors in Karachi that can undergo such shifts because I am in the planning phase of the project and located in Berlin. To develop such relationships, I need physical access to the places and official permission from my university to conduct fieldwork. In conjunction with this challenge, there is the mounting time pressure of limited funding periods that put researchers in highly precarious positions. In as much as researchers are expected to adapt their methods and questions to the pandemic environment, funding bodies and university structures are not entirely conducive to the limitations brought on by Covid-19. How does one then go on to do (im)possible research?

In discussions with my peers, one severely precarious aspect of dealing with the challenges in the face of travel bans from universities and strict time frames of funding periods is that some doctoral researchers are considering doing fieldwork through "personal visits" (without research trips being approved by the university). This would entail not only working in difficult and dangerous environments without any structural and institutional support from universities, but also putting their lives and the



lives of their participants at risk. Thereby, their already insecure positions become open to further security issues and risks. These practices and discussions would not be happening if doctoral students were reassured that their funding periods would be extended to accommodate the challenges brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic. The pressure to complete dissertations on time is increasing with little or no consideration by funding bodies of the impact of the pandemic on researchers (Hedding et al. 2020). Echoing calls for a more considerate approach by universities and funding organisations, I also wish to highlight the need for universities to better understand how research projects are affected differently and to respond with support that is more individualised to the needs of the researcher. Some ways of easing the pressure on researchers would be to make deadlines open ended and allow extensions in scholarships for those whose fieldwork has been affected.

Another possible approach to deal with logistical and safety challenges is to seek the help of research assistants. I considered this approach with the idea that, perhaps, research assistants could reach out to potential interlocutors and help me set up telephonic interviews. However, the power differential in positionalities embedded in this arrangement means that the risks and insecurities in doing research in the pandemic environment are passed over from the researcher to research assistants. Bisoka (2020) reminds us of the colonial continuities in such frameworks: 'When the time comes for "difficult" fieldwork in Africa, research assistants become body-instruments, an extension of the bodies of Global North researchers.' He also stresses on the need to recognise the various burdens imposed on research assistants such as the difficulty in complying with lockdown measures when salaries are subject to temporary contracts and completion of work.

The Covid-19 pandemic is not the only factor introducing ethical dilemmas of employing research assistants for researchers located in the Global North. In the case of Karachi, I am also concerned with the risks posed by protests, political unrest, street crime, terrorist attacks, and other bouts of violence that may be borne by researchers on the ground while I inhabit only the space on my screen—safe from the perils of fieldwork in the city. Although, I chose not to take this approach, I found that connecting with local researchers and discussing the challenges of doing research in the pandemic environment can open up opportunities to reflect on one's positionality and introduce avenues for (im)possible research to take shape.



Furthermore, it is ever more necessary to connect with local researchers and learn about their experiences to break away from Eurocentric conceptions of challenges to research. In some of my conversations with local urban researchers, I expressed my reservations regarding the halted state of research under the pandemic. I found that my concerns were not echoed back to me. An urban researcher in Karachi shared with me,

Our work has not stopped because life has not stopped. Our methods have adjusted and we are now doing phone interviews and distanced participant observation. There are challenges of course but equally there are measures and strategies to cope with them.

Another commented, 'Everything is open. There are no physical restrictions barring us from research.' This reflects how challenges in research due to the Covid-19 pandemic are felt differently across the North-South divide, thereby highlighting the hierarchies in systems of knowledge production. Bisoka (2020) invokes that the pandemic is not an "event" out of the norm because researchers in the Global South continue to work in contexts that are dangerous as they did before the pandemic. It is important to consider here that those of us whose focus resides in literal field sites in the Global South are experiencing not only different challenges in doing research but also different experiences of the pandemic and lockdowns altogether. While I saw markets, restaurants, businesses shutting down in Berlin, research travel trips being cancelled, and masks becoming mandatory in train stations, inside buildings and even in pedestrian promenades, it was very different in Pakistan. *Life has not stopped*. During my personal visit to my parents in December 2020, I took a walk underneath one of the flyovers that is a case study in my project and things were not very different from what I had observed back in 2018.

Indeed, for people whose daily lives encompass the struggle to survive *life has not stopped*. I was the only one wearing a mask on the busy street in Gizri market, prompting me to consider my positionality within the network of subjectivities constructed by the pandemic. The adoption of guidelines of health and safety during the pandemic is not simply a matter of safety measures—the guidelines are an expression of privilege and class positionality. The "pandemic conscious" body, abiding by WHO guidelines and keeping itself informed of infection rates and quickly changing rules and regulations, is one inscribed by varying degrees of power and access to health goods, services, and information. If research ethics during the pandemic mean adopting the role of the "pandemic conscious researcher", the power dynamics that are entangled in my interest and work in Karachi



with street hawkers, small-scale traders, and vendors as someone with an upper middle class family background who has the privilege to study and work at a German university are overwhelming exacerbated.

It is a type of fieldwork violence to impose ideas of "sanitised" research conditions on environments and people. Staying home, quarantining, wearing masks, disinfecting, washing hands for twenty seconds or keeping distance are embodied practices of power and privilege that have their structural limits and exclusions. We must reflect on how these practices govern our conceptualisation of research ethics concerning fieldwork during the Covid-19 pandemic. How do we define safety in the field and good research practice? How do we account for the safety of participants without imposing our ideals of ethics and security that are exclusionary due to structural inequalities?

From the dilemmas faced by researchers in the Global North arises a particular opportunity to critically examine how existing frameworks of knowledge production reproduce coloniality and colonial relations. Additionally, there is opportunity for native-outsiders to re-consider their relationships to people, places, and environments they consider as their own or as their home. In discussions with researchers in Karachi, I felt acutely aware of shifts in my positionality from a native to an indigenous outsider. Whilst this transformation would have been felt regardless of the pandemic, travel bans, flight cancellations, and stricter border controls created greater degrees of separation in my positionality. I found myself in a similar position as researchers in the Global North and I could relate to their challenges in continuing research during the pandemic. Was my vocabulary changing from 'Karachi, my home' to 'Karachi, my fieldwork site?' As a PhD fellow at a university in Berlin, had I traded in the Karachi that is "here" and part of my everyday life to a city "there" and "elsewhere" in the framework of knowledge production? How could I not be the self-fulfilling prophecy that is the positionality of the native informant in global knowledge production? And the even more painful question: am I "out of touch" with realities in Pakistan? Such questions and feelings prompted anxieties regarding my role and belonging.

I relied heavily on my digital space and communication means to "stay in touch" in my personal and professional life. In my personal life, I felt that the immigrant experience of the pandemic involves body and mind that are perpetually split between locations. I was physically in Berlin but checking Covid-19 infection numbers in Pakistan, calling my family and friends every night, reading the news every day, and checking Twitter for updates. My



home and my family were constantly in my prayers. The fear I experienced had little to do with my safety in Berlin and more to do with my family's health in Pakistan. Between worrying constantly about my parents and sister at home who work in hospitals and learning about the passing away of relatives, family friends and friends' family members from thousands of kilometres away, my heart and mind were with loved ones in Karachi. My research life was not very different as I was revisiting my field notes from an earlier project on flyovers and reading, writing, and thinking about flyovers in the city, the struggles of daily wage earners exacerbated by the pandemic and urban space as a fundamental resource in the economic and social lives of people during lockdowns and restrictions. The "field" I had thought to be out "there" was ever present and alive in my mind and daily work.

My experience of fear brings me to another point about the nature of academic work and emotional lives of researchers during the pandemic. It is rarely highlighted how even in normal circumstances a lack of structure in terms of "time off" can affect those engaged in academic labour, especially early career researchers. It will be no surprise for anyone within academia to hear how often weekends are easily forgone to meet with deadlines. To perform work that is unpaid, holidays are postponed, time supposed to be spent with family is compromised, hobbies are abandoned, and physical and mental health is put on the back burner. Moreover, fieldwork can be emotionally draining, dangerous, and traumatic (Pollard 2009). Within such a framework, the pandemic heightened levels of stress, anxieties, and fear not only regarding deadlines and contracts but also with regard to our personal lives as people facing the challenges of a global pandemic. What do we do with how we feel? How do we cope with fear, loss, and grief as researchers? How do we nurture a culture of support, healing and emotional care within research work environments? Covid-19 has increased the need for us to consider the place of emotions in research and calls urgent attention to these issues.

Moreover, my interactions with researchers, teachers, and students in Karachi were helping me negotiate the various degrees of separation I felt to the city in my work. Beyond understanding local contexts under the pandemic, consulting with and developing relationships with local researchers can open up avenues for (im)possible research to take shape. For me, this entails working with a researcher and scholar in Karachi as a supervisor and mentor. Sharing my research with him has not only sharpened my focus and opened a reservoir of knowledge created by his



students I did not previously have access to but also opened up opportunities for me to digitally acquire the archival materials necessary to develop my case studies through his help, until fieldwork becomes possible. As a result, my planned research activities have been reorganised. I have started working in urban planning archives in order to understand how flyovers came to be and what sort of aspirations and imaginations warranted their construction. Not surprisingly, my fieldwork is still delayed and although I am still operating from that box on my screen that is my digital space, I am finding ways to connect with local realities by connecting with local researchers.

Even before the pandemic, it was an important consideration for me to have someone with significant experience in urban development research in Karachi in my supervision team, not only to have the practical guidance I need in methods specific to local contexts, but also to understand how my work can benefit the local urban research landscape. This stems from my desire to contribute to the conversations on the politics of infrastructure and right to space happening in Karachi and being reflexive regarding "extracting" knowledge only for the academic audience in Berlin. As I mentioned earlier, these interactions have spurred further reflections on my positionality. Moreover, developing relationships with local researchers has allowed my research to continue through other methods and much needed help and guidance.

For researchers located in the North, indigenous or otherwise, it is crucial to connect and collaborate with local researchers, not in the ways that reproduce hegemonic designs in knowledge production, but through relationships aiming to dismantle those hegemonies, in which the time, participation, efforts, and work of all researchers involved are valued, respected, recognised, and compensated in equal measure. As a doctoral researcher, my capacities may not be as of those in advanced stages of their careers who can acquire third-party funding for formal institutional collaborations. Nevertheless, I can use the privilege afforded by my position as a PhD fellow in Berlin to create spaces for voices in "othered" academic worlds by offering informal partnerships. These can include organising joint seminars and conferences, sharing calls for publications, scholarships, and other information for scholarly activities and inviting students and researchers from Pakistan to present their work in my seminars. Therefore, as the pandemic lingers on, I plan to continue to inhabit my digital space to foster relationships with researchers in Karachi that will not only help me continue



my work but also nurture fertile grounds for solidarities and innovation in research.

In contrast to Aseela Haque, Shulagna Pal had contacts she could rely on for data collection at the chosen site of her research in Kolkatta, West Bengal, India. Not being physically there while the data was collected, presented her with the dilemma how to interpret and analyse the collected information and to consider limitations and blind spots that arise due to mediated, remote data collection methods.

Vignette 2: Understanding "home" away from home – Researching remotely struggles of belonging in pandemic times by Shulagna Pal

It was many years ago while reading Amitav Ghosh's 2004 novel *The hungry tide*,⁶ that I had first stumbled upon the case of the Marichjhanpi Massacre of 1978–79 (see Sengupta 2018). The incident, wherein the government of West Bengal forcibly evicted thousands of Bengali refugees, who had settled on the island, forms the background for some parts of the novel. Whilst embarking on this research project, the principal motive was to investigate the question of how desire for a home informs the dynamics of identity formation amongst vulnerable migrant communities. Furthermore, I also wanted to know whether migration can forge new identities and resilience among disaster/crisis impacted groups. Herein, I present a snippet of an interview of Bishu Mondol, himself a Namasudra (Dalit) who shared his memories and experiences of this traumatic event and its aftermath. Bishu Mondol is not his real name; it has been changed upon his request for anonymisation and confidentiality.

Apart from my primary research question, it was also in my interest to know whether the restrictions on mobility due to the lockdown and the perceived proximity to illness and death had led Bishu Mondol to think through his migrant identity in a different light. My interest in knowing what it means to be a lower caste immigrant in India was also sparked while working on a term paper on the precarious citizenship status of Namasudra immigrants in West Bengal. These experiences and issues could not be comprehended without speaking to people belonging to the community who could talk me through their life journeys. But, owing to current restrictions, including international travel bans, imposed due to the Covid-19 pandemic,



conducting field research by myself proved impossible. Hence, I had to continue with my exchange of communication digitally, based out of Berlin, Germany.

Bishu Mondol was born in an erstwhile eastern Bengal district, now in Bangladesh. As riots broke out in his native village in the aftermath of partition, he and his family were forced to migrate to India in the late 1940s. The conditions in the refugee camps were prohibitive and the government wanted to get rid of them. There was resistance from refugees (hailing from wetland marshy coastal landscape) against the relocation to wastelands. Despite that they were forcibly sent to the rocky inhospitable landscapes of Dandakaranya (currently in Odissa, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and the Terai and Lil Andaman region of India). After years of hardship, just when they were beginning to settle, the Left Front government of West Bengal invited them to resettle in West Bengal in the island of Marichjhanpi in the Sunderbans. They came back with glee, but within a few months, the Left Front government asked them to vacate the island and return to Dandakaranya. The refugees resisted and in February 1978 government forces opened fire to remove the refugees forcibly from the island. Many died while others were forcibly taken to camps across India. Bishu Mondol was one of the few who managed to escape the carnage. He swam under water and took refuge in Kolkata. He could later reunite with his family and, after years of struggle, he finally settled in a small apartment in the south-eastern suburbs of Kolkata.

Owing to my difficulty to conduct interviews in person, I got in touch with a close friend of mine whom I know from my BA and MA studies in Jadavpur University, Kolkata, and JNU, New Delhi, India, respectively. Being part of an equitable, respectable equation and friendship, we deemed Bisoka's (2020) concerns about power asymmetries between researcher working from the Global North and research assistants situated in the Global South, including differential exposure to precarious and risky working conditions, doesn't hold in our case. I was deeply aware of this hierarchy in a researcher-research assistant-relationship and was looking for a way by which I could evade or minimise this power asymmetry. Subsequently, I discussed my predicament with my friend, who offered to help by conducting the interview on my behalf. Having completed his M.Phil. dissertation in history, he is presently working as a researcher for a television show that focuses on the impact of partition on the lower caste Hindu population of Eastern Bengal. This friend of mine knew an activist who worked with



people suffering from dual caste-class oppression in Bengal. We decided to contact this activist who referred us to Bishu Mondol.

Whilst discussing the pointers and guiding questions for the interview, we anticipated probable incommensurabilities that could crop up during the process of the interview. While our university education might prompt us to frame our questions in terms of certain categories such as rights, democracy, citizenship or what we identify as his sense of belonging and desire for home, these terms might not be appropriate or even sufficient in capturing the entirety and complexity of such experiences of forced migration. This perceived incommensurability appears similar to what Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) has identified in his seminal work *Provincializing Europe* as the inadequacy of Western European epistemic formations as tools in understanding peculiar and particular South Asian experiences. Therefore, we chose not to ask Bishu Mondol specific questions; rather, we intended to keep the structure of the interview as informal as possible, asking him to narrate his life's story and keeping to a conversational format. Such a conversational interview format and oral history mode we hoped would correspond with and speak to an *adda* kind of sociability—a format of rich discussion in social gatherings centred on orality and sociability (see: Bhattacharya 2017; Charkravarti 2017)—which would be familiar to Bishu Mondol, thus facilitating an unobstructed stream of narration.

I requested my friend to go on my behalf to Bishu Mondol's residence and videotape the entire interview, in fact, the entire length of his stay at Mr. Mondol's residence, so that I could somehow "travel" through this remote recording asynchronously, to "see" and to be able to develop an idea about how Mr. Mondol shared his personal experiences, how he experienced being interviewed in times of a pandemic, in the ambience of his personal space. After my friend conducted the interview on my behalf, he reported it to me over Skype and sent a videotaped version of the interview. Owing to not being able to conduct the interview myself, I could only form an idea of the respondent's narrative through looking at the video recording, as well as additional communication and reporting from my friend. Because I was unable to connect directly with my research participant and locale, I still feel like I have missed out certain aspects and experiences that are important cues for the later stages of data analysis and interpretation. Drawing again from the notion of *adda*: being a woman researcher in a face-to-face meeting, I would most likely have interacted and socialised during my stay at Mr. Mondol's place with his wife and



children. Consequently, there would have been more voices, perspectives and insights accessible to me.

Having said that, another key interest in this project of mine was to understand how the Covid-19 pandemic impacted the lives of people like Bishu Mondol. The working population in India was perhaps equally concerned about the economic hardships that the lockdown had brought upon the majority of India's population which also saw a migrant exodus subsequently. In this particular case, our respondent was not particularly meticulous about following Covid-19 protocols. Due to associated apprehensions regarding the pandemic, Bishu Mondol confirmed for an interview session at his own residence when first contacted. He lives in a small apartment in a refugee colony in south-eastern Kolkata. He had been reminded to conform to the mask protocol by my friend. Although, he was aware of the rules that should be followed during the pandemic and he had no problem in anyone following it, perhaps he did not consider them to be of pressing importance. The conversation took place on the terrace, as the rooms in his apartment did not have enough space—a home located just beside the Eastern Metropolitan bypass in Kolkata. His apartment was also close to the construction site of a new metro railway project connecting the city with its suburbs.

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Looking at the video recordings, I could not only listen to him speaking about his life and his journeys across different locations in the country, but his account was, somewhat ironically, interspersed with the clatter of construction work building a modern Kolkata and the constant sound of cars plying on the broadways, the quintessential markers of a metropolis, his "home away from home" for many years. Moreover, I could gain a lot of insights about his days in erstwhile East Pakistan through his description of the village home. As he spoke, the tone of formality seemed to collapse into one of comfort. 'We are river people, we always grew up around the river banks [...],' Bishu Mondol explained. This image of a home and search for it haunted Mondol and others like him as they roamed around West Bengal and Dandakaranya as refugees. The interview did not produce definitive answers to many of my questions, yet given the diverse cues collected, it seems that Bishu Mondol is in continuous yearning of a place where the heart feels safe, and where the feeling of belonging and home aren't strained.

This pilot conversation-cum-research exercise, among other things, has revealed a crucial angle in producing knowledge from a remote positionality, which many researchers in the social sciences have to resort to during



the pandemic. One of the main ethical concerns is the complex issue of power, between researcher and research assistant that might be reconfigured or exacerbated in pandemic times. In my case, I could somewhat circumvent, perhaps accidentally, this ethical challenge when one of my friends, who happens to have a social sciences background, offered to help me and engaged with the field and with interlocutors on my behalf. Under which circumstances can we say that we are proceeding to reduce the hierarchy and asymmetry that generally characterise the relationship between the researcher and her assistant? My experience hints that the level of connectedness of the researcher to her field of study is critical in determining what kind of relationship she establishes with the ones assisting her. Rather than commissioning individuals in return for a payment, emotional connectedness and local networks which might evoke respect and empathy for one's assistant might go a long way in overcoming the ethical concerns raised by Bisoka (2020). In this way, perhaps, we might be able to transcend from perceiving our partners researching on the ground as assistants to seeing and acknowledging them as fellow researchers.

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While Aseela Haque and Shulagna Pal struggled with planning and commencing their research projects, other members of our working group were just about to or had already started their data collection process when the pandemic altered ground realities. Laurent Glattli delayed his data collection trip due to Covid-19 and finally saw the chance to travel from Berlin to Delhi in March 2021, only to arrive right before the third wave hit India. Thus, even though he was "on the ground," access to the field was still difficult because he had to negotiate Covid-19 protocols and lockdowns. Mateeullah Tareen had completed most of his data collection but had planned a trip from Berlin to Pakistan to verify and validate his data and collect additional information. He had to weight the fear of missing out on potentially new and relevant information that could inform his findings against the risks of traveling and conducting research. Eventually, he chose to work remotely with his network of respondents, which was not an easy decision. Rahat Shah and Rahat Batool were already collecting data in Pakistan when the pandemic forced them re-negotiate their practices. A question that figured prominently in their deliberations was how they could continue working ethically under such circumstances.



Vignette 3: accessing Indian archives in Covid-19 times by Laurent Glattli

Covid-19 has been an unwanted companion for almost the entirety of my short career as a researcher. More than an accident, which would offer points of comparison with "before," the pandemic will have become the defining element of these formative years. I began my PhD in October 2019, with the ambition of writing a comparative history of Indian and Pakistani heritage conservation policies since 1947. The bulk of my primary data consists of archival records of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) and of the Department of Archaeology and Museums of Pakistan, complemented with the documentation of a number of selected heritage sites, and with the interviews of retired officers from these two institutions. The first part of my fieldwork was supposed to take place in India. Going to the "field" meant coming back to a familiar environment. Since my first internship in India in 2012, I have lived and worked in Delhi and Mumbai for three and a half years in total, including two years of work experience at the French embassy. I had planned to spend five months in Delhi, a city I call home, to consult ASI archives, visit north Indian monuments, and conduct interviews. Thanks to previous experiences working with Indian bureaucracy, the prospect of approaching the National Archives of India (NAI) felt slightly less intimidating than it might be for other foreign researchers with no prior exposure.

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I had just secured a scholarship and a travel grant in March 2020 and was making preparations for my first research trip to India when Covid-19 happened. It took almost a year before the trip could finally take place. This vignette is an attempt at making sense of the challenges posed by the pandemic to a student at an early stage of his PhD: the long, frustrating wait, and, at last, the complexities of navigating "the field" under such circumstances, with a focus on my experiences at the National Archives of India.

The first consequence of the pandemic was to render international travels—and hence, "field" work—virtually impossible. With the uncertainty surrounding the question of borders reopening and the initial impression that the crisis would not last long, the only option was to wait.

This period of waiting prompted me to re-evaluate the methodology I had designed, and especially to consider giving a greater emphasis to digitally-available data. However, unlike for ethnographic methods which allow for innovative uses of digital technologies, archival work is somewhat more constrained. While the pandemic spurred deliberations about making



established official archives more accessible, especially for global South researchers in the case of colonial records, as well as considering other types of records as reliable alternative sources⁷, in the case of India post-independence records remain largely undigitised. In the case of ASI records, the NAI provides an online portal⁸ hosting thousands of digitised records, mostly from the pre-1947 period. My numerous attempts to identify relevant files via the online portal did not yield many useful results. It was much later, after several actual visits to the NAI, that I discovered how to efficiently navigate the portal's sizeable collection of exploitable records. Finally, changing data sets in favour of what was only available digitally would have meant drastically altering the research project by renouncing to study the inner workings of the ASI, and potentially abandoning a seemingly promising data collection plan without even making an attempt to salvage it.

After months of lockdown in Berlin, I finally landed in Delhi on 4 March 2021 on a research visa for a 4.5 months stay. Delhi at this time pulsed with a contagious energy: Covid-19 was almost forgotten; the government claimed it had defeated the virus and was busy boasting about it⁹ while sharing vaccines with the rest of the world.¹⁰ Workplaces, restaurants and cafés had just reopened, and the city was as bustling as it used to be, albeit with social distancing measures.¹¹ The rule mandating people to wear masks outdoors was irregularly followed; its respect and enforcement seemed to depend heavily on the city's social geography: in fancier neighbourhoods such as Khan Market, fines were diligently imposed on the careless or the forgetful, while in less affluent, more crowded markets following Covid-19 rules was much more haphazard. Outside Delhi, when moving from Lucknow to small towns in Haryana, mask wearing seemed to decrease in proportion to the size of the city.

The National Archives of India too had adopted Covid-19 "guidelines."¹² Only ten scholars were allowed to use the Research Room at the same time, and each researcher could only come for a limited number of days in a month. Foreign researchers had to show an additional "Covid negative certificate" when registering. The institution relied massively on paperwork for every operation, yet they proudly claimed to have 'digitised' their procedures in order to limit face-to-face interactions. This digitisation turned out to be quite superficial and ended up creating more problems than it solved for the beginner researcher. Thus, in order to control their presence, individual scholars had to apply by email and wait until they were summoned by the archivist on a certain day. The email was the 'digital'



part. However, an invitation came only after submitting a request to consult particular record files, which meant providing the precise reference. Information available on the website is scant, with no online index, only hard copies. These can only be consulted in the Research Room, which can only be accessed by providing the references of files found on the index lists. Convincing the archivist to let me enter the research room to consult the index lists took two weeks! Once I could access the index lists, requesting the files I had identified proved equally Kafkaesque. One could submit a maximum of ten requisition slips, and these had to be filled by hand, before giving them to the archivist. However, this procedure too had recently been 'digitised': The applicant had to take a photo of each of the ten slips and send an email to the archivist attaching the pictures, while simultaneously handing over the paper slips. After a few working days, the archivist would send an email summoning the scholar to the Archives, usually at 9:00 a.m. for 10:00 a.m. the same day. This whimsical procedure somewhat limited the number of times I could visit NAI and significantly slowed down my work.

Having closely followed Indian politics since 2019, I was concerned about raising suspicion over the sensitivity of my research topic. The question of heritage politics has gained in importance in public debate, not least with the recent developments on the Ayodhya issue.¹³ In the visa application, I had thus very carefully framed the required description of my research project to remove any mention of Pakistan, or references to contested heritage sites or to the rewriting of history by Hindu nationalists. It is with the same caution that I approached the National Archives. I felt very conscious about the potential of surveillance while performing everyday tasks as benign as signing up in the Research Room's registry or a friendly chat with the archivist. A bigger source of concern was the regime of daily authorisations that had been introduced because of the pandemic: with no long-term laissez-passer, I was afraid access to NAI could be retracted for arbitrary reasons. One example of the slightly paranoid mood this situation caused: on my first day, I was about to hand in requisition slips pertaining mostly to contested heritage sites.¹⁴ Realising I might have been too "greedy," I mixed more innocuous-sounding files in my requests so as to ward off any suspicion. Over the weeks, I shifted away from this—maybe—excessively cautious approach. Nevertheless, the precariousness of access to NAI always remained and remains a cause of concern.

Despite these difficulties, the work at the National Archives proved extremely rewarding in the amount and quality of data I could collect. This



also helped me get a better understanding of how records were classified, which became useful when the second wave of Covid-19 and the ensuing lockdown left me with no other option but to work with digitised archives.

When I tested positive for Covid-19 in early April 2021 after developing mild symptoms, it did not exactly come as a surprise. What was a surprise, however, was the savageness of the wave in India and Delhi in particular. Not a day passed without hearing news about friends, colleagues or their relatives falling sick or losing someone, without reading hundreds of desperate calls for oxygen cylinders or hospital beds on social media.¹⁵ During these dark weeks, I revisited the NAI's online portal; this time I found many useful records from 1947 until the 1950s which I could analyse from home. This was a productive time, although PDF files do not provide the scholar with the same intimate connection that physical archives do (Farge 1989). This work on digitised records also raised questions about the exhaustiveness of archives: What has been digitised, and what has not? Do other factors besides time and human resources available come into play in digitising records? The question of gatekeeping figured acutely in the context of digital archives, but should be extended to physical archives too. Are index lists comprehensive? What records get transferred to the National Archives? What records get destroyed? What records get transferred but are still not made available to researchers?¹⁶ These interrogations made even more obvious the necessity to triangulate archival data with other sources such as interviews.

Finally, around 15 June 2021, one month before my departure, everything reopened at once: archives, libraries, monuments, etc. And with life returning to a semblance of normalcy, people became available again for interviews. Speaking with archaeologists helped fill the blanks where archives were silent. Perhaps more importantly, discussing their experiences and motivations brought out the human side to the work and life trajectories of these individuals I had been following only through the dryness of the administrative language.

In this vignette, I have tried to address some of the difficulties of working with official archives in times of a pandemic, with the hope that it might be useful to other scholars. Now back in Europe, I can finally look back at the last few months and realise how much could be achieved despite the pandemic. The amount of data collected is of course not as high as initially hoped, but the experience certainly made me grow as a researcher. It is difficult, however, to assess what in this experience derives from confronting the "field" for the first time, and what is directly a consequence of Covid-



19. Perhaps the single and simplest takeaway from the pandemic was that it was a lesson in patience and fortitude, coming to terms with the delays it has caused. Still, managing uncertainty, hope, disillusion, doubt, anxiety, frustration, was the hardest of all challenges of doing research in times of a pandemic. Fortunately, the mental health cost of the pandemic on researchers, which particularly concerns those in their early and mid-career, is receiving greater attention from scientists and recognition from the academic community.¹⁷

While Laurent Glattli took his chances and travelled to India, Mateeullah Tareen decided against a follow-up trip and instead tried to substitute the physical with the digital field. As his vignette shows, re-designing a research project in the middle of the data collection and data analysis phase bears many difficulties. Additionally, he had to grapple with the fear of missing out on essential data that would add finishing touches to his findings, a feeling that probably many scholars who can suddenly not travel to their chosen field sites, share.

Vignette 4: the haunting shadows of missing data: approaching the field through online methods by Mateeullah Tareen

Like any other research relying on in-person field visits for data collection and extended interactions with people, my doctoral research, *Community affairs in transition: educated youth's civic engagement in Pishin*, was also hindered by the outbreak of Covid-19. Since I was following grounded theory as my theoretical-cum-methodological approach, I had to spend extended time in the field, i.e., Pishin, Pakistan, to conduct in-depth interviews. When Covid-19 was declared a global pandemic in March 2020, I was in the final stages of my data collection, but not quite done yet. The last field visit, planned for December 2020 was important because I wanted to conduct a final round of interviews with new candidates and follow up interviews with youth-led *anjumans*¹⁸ and community-based committees actively working in Pishin. I could not continue with my pre-Covid-19 fieldwork plans due to restrictions on cross-border mobility. Yet, I still required new data, and this is why I turned to online methods to get into the field from a distance.

This shift from ethnography to netnography exposed me to new forms of primary data and additional perspectives. However, approaching the field through online methods created a gap in trust-building with respondents



and deprived me of participant and nonparticipant observations. Despite these concerns, I gave online methods three months of observation and interaction time, until I realised that this form of engagement was not adding valuable new information to my research.

During two previously conducted field visits in 2018 and 2019, I had opted for the triangulation of three data sources, i.e., participatory observation, interviews, and field notes. I participated in different gatherings at *adah*¹⁹ (market place), *kotah* (private guest rooms), playgrounds and corner meetings and also actively observed activities and events of various youth-led committees and *anjumans*. A substantial part of my research depended on these first-hand experiences that could only be captured by spending time with my research participants in Pishin, especially because some of the issues I was learning about were rather controversial topics that were difficult to probe while being on record: for example, criticizing the political representatives and administrative officials for lack of basic facilities provisions; political discussions on movements like the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM); and impact of the banned religious organisation on community affairs. The shift from observing and participating in small talk, informal discussions and observation to chatrooms and online meetings deprived me of experiencing the changes firsthand. Since I am focusing on youth, an increased use of social media platforms became an alternative for nonparticipant observation of activities and also selective interaction with young men. Different committees broadcasted their sports events and youth-led protests live on Facebook. Their viewers could ask questions in the chat-box which the young volunteers broadcasting the event were often responding to. In contrast to in-person interactions, the broadcasted events were limited to formal questions related to the events only.

Critical discussions on political participation, community issues, reporting on day-to-day affairs, etc., which I had often observed among the participants and spectators during the in-person field visits, were nowhere to be seen. I chose the live broadcasts for a couple of reasons: (i) they attracted young male audience from different villages and cities on a single platform and (ii) the streaming was broadcasted by the committees and *anjumans* that I followed during the data collection processes, e.g., the Elaqqai Ittehad Association (local unity association) which organises cricket tournaments in Pishin. Similarly, I chose the WhatsApp groups with the same criteria in mind. However, after giving the online methods a couple of months of observation and interaction time, I realised it was not adding valuable



information to the research, even though this process got me in touch with new interviewees and kept me updated on the events unfolding in Pishin, Pakistan. While writing this reflective note, I feel I might have made incorrect choices in selecting online spaces for participant and nonparticipant observations. For example, as pointed out by a colleague, making a group or page dedicated specifically to this research where young men, previously interviewed or not, could share their views and feedback simply did not occur to me.

Since I had already conducted 25 interviews and compiled comprehensive field notes during my previous two field visits, conducting further interviews was only possible through either recruiting a research assistant or conducting interviews online from a distance. The former seemed unlikely due to (i) lack of funding, (ii) potential breach of trust with respondents by introducing a new face, (iii) and time and training required for the search and skills development of a research assistant. Therefore, I conducted two new and two follow-up interviews via WhatsApp and Facebook calls. I found these online interviews challenging in terms of rapport building with the research participants and absence of participant observations. For me, pre-interview trust-building is much easier face-to-face in comparison to online interactions. Explaining the research question, the need to reach out to the interviewee, requiring their verbal consent and conducting their interview were all done on the same call for first two interviews, as it was preferred by the respondents. I found that due to this, interviewees would share less information and talk tight tongued. Later, I changed the approach to calling the respondents, introduce my work, have small talk about *elaga* (region), mutual connections, etc. and set a later date for the interview. This proved to bring the interview into relatively more trust-worthy environment. As for the first two interviews, I had to be more vigilant in their analysis as to not miss any information hidden behind the words.

Being in the field, I could follow the respondents to their meetings and events to see that what they were saying was reflected in the actions of their committees. In the online interviews, three of which were audio calls due to connection instability, a common problem in Pishin, it was difficult to see the work, achievements, outcomes, etc. of the respondents. To mitigate this issue, I would contact people in my network, as I was born in Pishin and spent my childhood there, for their indirect observation. I would record their responses and take the subjectivity of their opinions into account while coding. For example, one young interviewee claimed to have



brought all the young men in his village together on one platform for continued engagement with welfare activities. However, when I contacted three young men (one from the same committee and two outsiders but from the same village) to crosscheck his claims, some of the claims turned out to be misleading. The crosschecking would also bring unnecessary criticism, but I would limit myself to the information concerning the previous interviewee.

Once the severity of the pandemic pushed the possibility of traveling to Pishin toward a seemingly indefinite future, I jumped into online arenas and went for anything that was being posted, streamed or shared with me, trying to respond to this urging anxiety of mine to collect "missing" data and immersing myself in a potential substitute field. However, after spending quite some time navigating through online groups, electronic or social media platforms, connecting with potential respondents and conducting online interviews, I realised that the data already at my disposal was saturated to the point where new digitally collected additions did not make significant difference, except for some of the interviews. During this strenuous process, I furthermore learned that conducting digital field research from a remote desk like mine requires additional research skills which I did not attain in due time, exacerbated by my ongoing anxious anticipation to still be able to be in the (physical) field in-person. And, given the ongoing lockdown, this desk of mine was neither a library desk nor a university office space, but one in a tiny, shared flat which presented its own limitations for work-life balance and productivity. Time limitations on my PhD funding further constrained my choices. It took quite a long time of pondering, many discussions with mentors, peers and myself to come to terms with the fact that I will have to make do and get along with the available data. As digital spaces and remote methods of data collection only hold limited options for me as a substitute field and/or to complement the existing data with the one I fear(ed) missing out on, this haunting shadow and the anxiety of missing out stayed with me for quite some time and was a difficult puzzle to solve (if it ever will go away).

While Matee had to make hard decisions about going back to the field, Rahat Shah was already in the process of collecting data in March 2020. After initial difficulties in accessing respondents and creating conducive interviewing environments, Rahat had just found that interviewing respondents in their workplace was an effective strategy to collect information when public offices closed and everyone started to work from



home due to the lockdowns. His reflections show how he negotiated Covid-19 protocols and access to respondents in the context of an already difficult research topic after the initial lockdowns were lifted. He thus raises questions about the power dynamics between researchers and the persons they work with.

**Vignette 5: gendered positionalities in pandemic times -
Interacting with female respondents as a male researcher by
Rahat Shah**

The topic of my PhD thesis deals with employed women who are the sole breadwinners of their families because their husbands are unemployed. In a patriarchal and gender-segregated society like Pakistan, this topic posed major challenges even before the pandemic: neither men nor women were ready to talk about such a touchy subject. Initially, I had intended to interview the women and their unemployed husbands, however, because the men were uncooperative and hostile when I asked them about their experiences of unemployment and having their wives earn for the family, I shifted the focus to the experiences of female breadwinners only and asked them questions regarding the husbands'. The reasons for this shift were mainly related to the prevailing social structures: Men in Pakistan tend to idealise a very dominant, powerful, and authoritarian role in their families where being the head of the family is a title they refuse to give up regardless of the level of their sincerity towards the responsibilities attached with this status.

The men I wanted to interview may be unemployed and at ease with their wife's employment, but they do not like to be reminded that she is the financial head of the family and that she is the one bearing the load of the household. Instead of creating an egalitarian household where the unemployed husbands assist in homemaking while the wives earn, the men would prefer keeping their wives under their dominance and surveillance so as to assert their role as the undisputed head, entitled to all that is being given to him, a common patriarchal sense of entitlement. This is why men did not appreciate being questioned about unemployment as it would draw attention to their failure of acquiring a job. Failure, for them, is the most despised sentiment as it hurts the strongest element of most Pakistani men's conception of the self, his ego.

Secondly, women were also reluctant to give interviews and share their experiences with me, a male researcher. The socio-cultural context framing the data collection process discourages women to participate in research



actively or confidently. The social setting of Pakistani society also makes it difficult for unrelated men and women to interact. This is why I faced numerous challenges to access female respondents even before the pandemic. I started my data collection in September 2019 and was able to collect data from a few female respondents at their homes. While they were the main interview partner, I also asked their husbands a few questions who were present during the interview. I had to get permission from the husbands first, which I primarily managed using personal contacts. Each time I requested for one-on-one interviews with female respondents, my requests were blatantly denied by the husbands because willingly allowing their wives to be alone in the presence of an unknown man would be dishonorable and would show weakness on the husband's part, a sentiment unanimously found among almost all men in rigid patriarchal settings like Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The only way I could get data was to conduct interviews with female respondents in the presence of their male partners.

Approaching women as a male researcher was not the only issue; getting honest and useful responses has also been an obstacle, specifically when data is collected in the presence of their male partner. From my initial three to four interviews, I found that the women tended to be under pressure and felt obligated to respond in ways that their husbands would approve of and they would avoid elaborating any theme that could offend their partners. As mentioned above, my initial plan was to interview employed women and their unemployed husbands, but the initial failed attempts of interviewing couples, made me realise that it is essential to strive for one-on-one interviews with employed women, away from all influences and pressures, ideally in the absence of their husbands, in environments where women are relatively more in control, independent and confident. I felt that there would be higher chances of building strong rapport and conducting a successful interview if my respondents find themselves to be liberated of all judgements. This is why I found the workplaces of employed women appropriate spaces. I observed a significant difference in the level of information I was getting from female respondents at their workspaces in comparison to the interviews conducted at homes in the presence of their male partners. They were comparatively more vocal and expressive while narrating their breadwinning experiences.

It had taken me some time to figure out this strategy. However, to my very misfortune, I had only managed to conduct interviews with a few respondents at their workspace when the Covid-19 pandemic hit the world. In March 2020 almost all offices were closed, at least for visitors, and many



employees were expected to work from home. The already existing challenges I had faced during the initial phase of my data collection were magnified. I was no longer able to contact my respondents at their workspaces and I had to readjust my data collection plan. While I was still adapting my data collection strategy to the conditions of the pandemic, out of the 40 interviews I had initially planned, I conducted 13 interviews with employed women in semi-urban regions of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) between March and July 2021. In hindsight, these 13 interviews did not provide the information and depth of detail that I desired and required for my research. Almost all interviews involved similar difficulties and I will quote from one of these interviews which was particularly difficult and frustrating in order to illustrate my struggles. This example exemplifies my many failed attempts of interviewing female respondents in a rigid patriarchal society during the Covid-19 pandemic. This incident helps to illustrate how some already present challenges, when combined with a pandemic make up a researcher's most dreaded nightmare.

In April 2020, while the pandemic had shut down everything, I planned to interview a woman who is employed as an officer in a government institution in KP, Pakistan. I call her Mrs. Khan, a pseudonym. At first, I had planned an interview her at her world place during work hours, but I came to know that she was no longer reporting for regular duties due to the pandemic and only had occasional shifts. I got Mrs. Khan's mobile number from a clerk working at her office through a personal contact. Upon contacting her at home on her mobile number, I was received with unwelcomed and hesitant responses. Mrs. Khan's tone on the phone felt quite bothered by the fact that I, a strange man, had called her for some strange study. My personal introduction, the reference of my workplace and university, the mentioning of my PhD studies, were all ruthlessly brushed off. I felt like one of those telephone sales representatives trying to sell my product to annoyed customers who usually shut the phone during the pitch.

Mrs. Khan cut me short and asked me to speak to her husband for further discussion and handed over the phone, a classic move every submissive wife in the Pakistani society pulls off when a man tries to speak to her for long enough to cause suspicion, which apparently takes no longer than a minute. Owing to the lockdown and his unemployed status, her husband was staying at home full-time, which is why accessing my participant without the husband's intervention was impossible. The husband seemed a lot colder, in a very assertive tone he kept saying 'ok, so?' to every part of my explanation about myself and the study. The study was possibly



perceived as some kind of threat to the masculinity by the husband. And then, as feared, the interview was coldly turned down by the couple.

Convincing the reluctant respondent was a challenge as her husband adamantly discouraged her participation, even for an online interview. Luckily, I was working with a provincial government institution at the time and requested my superior to assist me in accessing Mrs. Khan. My superior was able to contact Mrs. Khan and assured her and her husband of my authenticity as a researcher and as someone working closely with him. The worth of his words as a superior proved more helpful than my university credentials and the couple agreed to speak to me again over the phone. After a few attempts of negotiations with the couple, the husband came around and my respondent agreed to an interview at her workplace when she would go for one of her shifts. I had to strategise the interview timing and structure to ensure a rich conversation within the limited time and space her shift would allow under the Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for Covid-19 at workplaces.

The day of the interview came, I dressed up and presented myself as appropriately as I could to look the part and make sure they would see me as the trusted researcher the superior had promised them. The security guard at the main entrance of the office building was wearing a face mask, which I appreciated wholeheartedly and I felt reassured that the SOPs were implemented in the building. He also carried a spray bottle to manually disinfect the hands of everyone who entered. However, very soon my appreciation regarding the Covid-19 SOPs came crashing down when the inside of the building displayed the opposite picture. People were roaming around without any masks, even the uniformed staff members were without masks and nobody in the building seemed to be familiar with the 2-meters-distance protocol. Maybe all the SOPs were confined to the main entrance where the display is most needed for impression management.

My anxiety started creeping in as the risk of contracting the corona virus started going off like an alarm in my head. I kept adjusting my mask each time I encountered an unmasked person who had to guide me to my destination. Finally, I was told to wait for Mrs. Khan in an office while she attended to her work elsewhere. In the room, Mrs. Khan's husband, along with their daughter, as well as an administrative officer were already seated. The office belonged to an administrator superior in authority to Mrs. Khan who had facilitated contact. It was a small room that should normally contain no more than four people at a time, let alone have a gathering in a pandemic situation. The husband did not wear a mask; neither did the



administrator officer whose mask was lying on the table next to a pile of files. The room had no capacity to allow a safe two meters distance and my mask was the only protective layer that had to put up a fight against the endless risks of contracting the virus. To further aggravate my anxiety, a few subordinate officers came in from time to time to chit chat with their superior (Mrs. Khan's Boss). Much to my horror, all of them shook hands with the boss and Mrs. Khan's husband and none of them were wearing masks. Ironically, some did have masks in their hands. I kept pinching my mask at the bridge of my nose to adjust it, as a timid reminder for the rest to put their masks on. I gave myself a mental note in despair while people came and went: 'Ethical considerations for researchers will supposedly now include not compelling respondents to take safety precautions. Researchers should be willing to risk their lives to conduct a study when people refuse to take a pandemic (and the associated hygiene measures) seriously.'

As I patiently waited for Mrs. Khan, her husband skeptically inquired me about the study, my purpose of conducting such a study, the possible benefits of my research, and he brought forth more such queries that, in not-so-subtle ways, conveyed his disapproval and mistrust in me and my work. Mrs. Khan's husband and the administrator officer were chatting in their regional language and seemed well acquainted. This was not surprising as it is customary in Pakistan for husbands to inspect the place of work their wives intend to join, meet their bosses, get to know the people she will be surrounded with before entrusting her to work there. Usually, wives and daughters are allowed to work at places headed by known and trusted people like relatives or friends.

I was patiently waiting for her arrival and the respondent finally came in, sat next to her husband, farthest away from me, something I had anticipated as a male researcher attempting to interview a female respondent in Pakistan. I greeted her ever so politely, still making sure to balance the politeness well enough to not invite her husband's disapproval any more. Much to my disappointment, the husband denied my request to conduct the interview privately with his wife. The room where we were gathering was now accommodating Mrs. Khan and myself, her husband and daughter, and Mrs. Khan's boss. At one point, I thought of reminding them of the Covid-19 SOPs and that so many of us should not be in one room. But that idea immediately got railed by a thought that in case of such a reminder, I might be their first choice to kick out of the room.

Finally, the interview formally started, but from the very beginning Mrs. Khan's husband kept on reinforcing his presence by interrupting me or his



wife with an unrelated comment or his opinion on matters or making disapproving noises when a question seemed too threatening to his masculinity. The boss would occasionally butt in as well and ask a few less aggressive questions in response to my questions. The atmosphere in the room was tense as an encounter continued between a very dominant and cynical husband not wanting his wife to be interviewed, and a determined researcher smiling his way through the passive-aggressiveness while praying for a chance to be able to interview Mrs. Khan away from the influence of her husband and boss. Consequently, the interview with Mrs. Khan did not meet the requirements of my study as her answers to my questions were superficial and constrained. Her monitored and filtered responses may have been satisfactory for her husband and boss, but they were insufficient for my purposes. I could not probe deeper as her husband tracked every word that came out of my mouth and eyed every response his wife gave. Moreover, the presence of my respondent's boss in the room made matters even more restricted. After 25 minutes, her husband interrupted midway and excused himself to leave for some urgent business and this was the end of the interview. I was unable to build a desirable environment based on good rapport.

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After that fiasco of an interview, I was forced to reflect upon how things might have been different, had the pandemic not hit. Pre-pandemic, in an ideal situation, accessing my respondent at her workplace might not have been this challenging and my interview could have been a lot richer than it was now. If we were not in this Covid-19 situation, that very awkward and cold first phone call that I had to make to request her and her husband's consent could have been avoided entirely. I could have just met her at her workplace during her regular work hours. I would have still needed the superior's reference to enter her workplace, get through her boss and then convince the respondent regarding my intentions as a researcher. Nonetheless, things would have been a lot easier than they were in the presence of the unemployed husband and his strong influence over and monitoring of every action. Accessing her at her workplace would have allowed her to be more independent and fearless about her responses because in her office she has her own identity, her title and position, an arena where she has some authority over what goes on, and a sense of power with which she performs her duties. Therefore, I believe the pandemic added to my struggles of interviewing professional women because employed persons now have even more irregular work schedules, and this is why I have to contact respondents at home and I have to negotiate their unemployed husbands who exert a disapproving influence.



This compromises not just the quality of my data collection but also my life as I encountered risky physical situations.

However, Covid-19 may not be responsible for most of the challenges in my study but rather the patriarchal setting. Virus or not, Mrs. Khan's husband was most likely to react in the same way as would many other unemployed husbands: Having to go to extreme lengths to prove my identity as an authentic and decent researcher when trying to interview a female respondent was a given challenge. The husband's presence and attitude were not a new phenomenon, nor were they driven by the pandemic since rigid patriarchal patterns in Pakistan's society are infections that go beyond the scope of viruses. I pondered upon how I dealt with every obstacle as a researcher just to get the data I needed; from the research process getting delayed, not being able to secure an interview as a male researcher, to sitting in a room full of people that did not care about Covid-19 hygiene restrictions and thus having my life in the hands of respondents who refuse to follow SOPs. The pandemic has most definitely changed my data collection process, from. Even so, I would not put it all on the virus. Some issues have roots deeper than the pandemic's intrusion. To summarise, accessing my respondents has become more challenging workplaces are not operating in the same manner now, schedules are different, work from home is a common practice and accessing women respondents in such a situation is all the more difficult, with patriarchy being a constant challenge. And the respondents, I believe, have now even more power over the research process as well as the researcher like in the case of my study, where the pandemic not only took respondents farther away from my reach but also the interview setting violating all SOPs put me as a researcher in harm. The pandemic proved as a cherry on top of the challenges already present for me as a male researcher in Pakistan, a rotten cherry so to say.

Like Rahat Shah, the author of the next vignette, Rahat Batool, was also in the middle of data collection for a research project in Pakistan when Covid-19 was declared a pandemic. She was working with vulnerable communities who were then also disproportionality more affected by the pandemic. In contexts where people do not even have access to basic services, assessing the implementation of Covid-19 safety measures and taking time from members of these vulnerable communities to generate knowledge for project and research processes poses a number of ethical challenges. Rahat Batool presents her reflections on these issues in the following vignette.



Vignette 6: doing research "beyond" and "alongside" COVID-19 – Challenges of knowledge purposes, remote research methods and research ethics by Rahat Batool

Since early 2020, researchers are exploring ways to document challenges and experiences that Covid-19 has introduced to our daily lives. Pandemic measures that impose restrictions on mobility while also requiring the implementation of social distancing and protection protocols have profound implications on research encounters that usually involve face-to-face interactions, including adhering to context-specific rituals of courtesy and hospitality that involve bodily proximity (e.g., in welcoming rituals or seating arrangements).

When Covid-19 cases began to surge in Pakistan, I was part of a national project of the Global Polio Eradication Initiative (GPEI), where we collected survey data from caregivers about their acceptance levels of the polio vaccine. Our direct work with local communities was initially suspended due to the lockdown imposed by the government. We were then re-tasked with collecting baseline data on Covid-19 related risk perceptions, behaviours and practices among the general public as well as health care workers across Pakistan. Based to a large extent on remote methods of data collection, the research work was to help inform the work of the Covid-19 Risk Communications and Community Engagement Task Team (RCCE).²⁰ The team sought to address new questions which the pandemic had been brought to the foreground as well as issues that had been given less importance in pre-existing social science studies.

While the polio vaccine-related primary data collection work has always taken place in a contested, sometimes hostile, environment in a country marked by high levels of heterogeneity, hard-to-access and sometimes hard-to-convince, suspicious populations, the Covid-19 related data collection was neither less challenging nor of an uncontested, unsuspecting nature. What are opportunities and challenges of adopting alternative remote methods such as phone interviews in hard-to-reach, peripheral areas and marginalised communities, marked by conflict, restrictions on mobility or simply by lack of infrastructure and thus often "inaccessible"? Can remote methods bridge gaps, avoid or even counter (further) marginalisation and compounded inequalities? What does a halt in research projects mean for affected communities that might rely on service provisions and humanitarian attention and support from international (non-) governmental organisations and that are often side-lined in data-collection and subsequent policy program-formulations and implementation drives?



How to approach the challenging and contested terrain of research ethics when considering on whose interests and agenda data collection is centred and used for? Or, in other words, who stands to benefit from what kind of knowledge is subsequently produced?

While such questions are always of concern, in my perception, the pandemic operates like a magnifying glass, exacerbating existing dilemmas, challenges, inequalities and grievances that a researcher may encounter when involved with data collection at the grassroots level, not only but in particular in marginalised and deprived communities and with vulnerable segments of a society.

During the past year, quite a number of unsettling, difficult to answer questions accompanied me in my remote and face-to-face encounters across Pakistan, be it in diverse urban areas such as Karachi, Quetta, Peshawar, Rawalpindi or Lahore or in rural areas across Punjab or Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Without being able to have face-to-face interactions, how can one gather genuine and reliable in-depth information on behaviours that are risk-averse or display a disregard for pandemic hazards? Is it ethical to request face-to-face interactions and to ask people to follow specific hygiene and pandemic SOPs (standard operating procedures) in communities where people struggle to access safe drinking water and safe sanitation facilities? Is it even ethical to expect members of deprived, impoverished communities to participate in research, taking out precious time and resources otherwise needed for ensuring one's livelihood? And is it ethical to solicit participation even when one cannot claim or explain how this data collection exercise will benefit the respective community or the individual you interact with?

On the other side of the coin with the bold imprint of "doing no harm": what will be the psychological impact on researchers listening day by day, week by week to traumatising stories? How do researchers deal with the fact that in such encounters they have to translate abstract notions of "knowledge purposes," "project aims" or "reciprocity" for deprived, impoverished communities barely making a living, barely being acknowledged by the government and aid organisations? How do researchers explain and justify the aims of such research, to themselves and to the communities, beyond the immediate concern of extracting information and the vulnerable communities being an "object" of policy concerns? The contracted researchers who conduct such surveys are local researchers whose families depend on the (often temporary) salaries made in such contested, challenging and risky work environments and who, as "native



insiders," are expected to manage to stay on the ground despite all odds, tasked to engage with myriad communities (their grievances and expectations) and to produce the assigned data results, to 'mine the information' (see Bisoka 2020). What are coping strategies, what are appropriate responses? Is it ethical to continue or to stop, to give feedback (in hope for open ears and minds) or to disengage even when having to bear the mental and material costs? Who should assess what kind of research is needed? What are important feedback loops that should inform and shape such projects, especially during a pandemic? Pacheco and Zaimağaoğlu (2020) argue that research in unprecedented times should benefit participants involved by promoting psychological wellbeing or providing a therapeutic mechanism.

But allow me to take a step back from the questions lined up. Please follow me into the field and allow me to unveil some of my experiences. Most of the following experiences are part of the remote data collection phase of the Covid-19 database. However, our direct interaction with local communities restarted in February 2021, focussing then on the issue of vaccine acceptance. It added a new challenge for me personally: the ethics of imposing Covid-19 SOPs on deprived communities and the adherence to context- and gender-specific rules of hospitality and sociability. My own veiling allowed me to manage mobility in public places, to ensure my own safety as a woman. To a certain extent, but not always, as a woman researcher tasked with face-to-face interviews, veiling enabled me to address my fears of the heightened risk of a Covid-19 infection (not having had access to a vaccine myself) as part of the local data collection team. Veiling allowed me to conceal a medical mask through an added layer of a face veil, which became a risk mitigating exercise to minimise my own exposure without jeopardising my relationship with my interview partners in public places and communal, non-segregated gatherings. While this works in certain spaces and encounters, this is often not possible to follow through in women-only private spaces of sociability in which an interview can take place.

Moving back to remote data collection, one exemplary snapshot of the scope and features of our data collection (and the attached epistemological and ethical challenges) can be taken from a phone interview with an UNHCR volunteer from Quetta/Balochistan, conducted on 13 July 2020, who shared with us the challenging livelihood situation on the ground:

We have been locked for more than a month and I am afraid that people will die from hunger instead of this illness. Lack of water and



poor sanitation make our area a perfect breeding ground for contagion. During my awareness campaign people stated that we don't have enough water to drink – then, how can we wash hands so frequently with soap?

Even though directly accessible visual cues that allow us to enrich and contextualise the data are missing in such a remote interview setting, such challenges can be overcome by enlarging one's sensory radar and by ensuring a more sophisticated rigour including careful listening. This means, for instance, picking up on verbal cues and reacting upon them (e.g., when confusion, hesitation or frustration is displayed). The quote above provides very important indicators even from afar about the ground realities and important information to consider.

The quote indicates an ethical challenge for researchers as well: given the challenging situation, what should and could be community priorities and areas of concern, or, in other words, which immediate or strategic interests should be reported back as part of one's data collection? What kinds of data—beyond the immediate verbal one—should be fed-back to the higher levels of data interpretation and aggregation and subsequent report-writing by contracted researchers involved primarily or exclusively in primary data collection?

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Telephone interviews can provide more autonomy to participants as they can disconnect and call back anytime if they are unwilling to continue or if someone enters their immediate space when talking to the researcher. This might be of particular relevance, among others, for accessing women confined to their homes or facing higher levels of social control for public mobility and interactions with non-family members. One of our participants, a working woman from Quetta, disconnected the call after sharing the following first answer about her risk perceptions of the Covid-19 pandemic:

I am living in a joint family system. Some of my family members are not taking precautionary measures. They don't believe in the existence of [this] virus. Even [though] my brother-in-law showed symptoms, but he didn't isolate himself and his daughter got infected. I am well aware how dangerous the virus is and [I am] worried about my child in this environment.

However, she couldn't continue with the phone interview and sent a text message about her further unavailability. What to make now of this first answer and how to incorporate such important glimpses of insight while at the same time having the feeling, as a researcher, that it is highly difficult



to gather relevant information and to follow up after such incidents occur? The woman might have a lot of important insights to share, critical ones that maybe others are not so willing to share in a telephone interview. What to do when the successful completion of the whole interview process is not possible even though researchers are employing careful listening (albeit frequent calls with bad audibility or noise interferences), they take detailed notes and allow participants to talk without interruption and thus follow best practices to collect in-depth information from persons in challenging and/or monitored environments? Following research method-related SOPs might mean to exclude the fragment of information quotes above, but what are broader implications of what data is then included and fed-back to the database? Which distortions or blind spots/gaps, for example in gendered terms, are generated?

Another challenging example and ethical concern are derived from my interaction with a lady health worker from Lahore. While the pandemic meant that "frontline workers" such as medical staff in offices and hospitals were praised for their efforts (albeit many protests took place due to insufficient protective equipment for example), lady health workers face quite a distinctly challenging environment as 'community-based healthcare providers' across Pakistan, due to 'irregular and inadequate salaries, and part-time status as government employees' (Jawed 2020; see also: Quidwai 2020). The pandemic's magnifying glass exacerbated their insecure, risky working conditions due to a continued failure to provide them with 'sanitizers or masks as protection from the highly contagious virus' when engaging for example in the homes of local communities in the province of Sindh, thus having to pay for 'protective equipment themselves' (Jawed 2020). It increases the risks lady health workers are exposed to in exponential ways and adds to the pre-existing vulnerabilities of women working with deprived communities, where Covid-19 SOPs are next to impossible to implement. However, they do not have much choice because they have to rely on such employment for their livelihood. During my interview the lady health worker from Lahore wanted to save my contact number as she needed a friend with whom she could talk when distressed. What should and could be my response? How to negotiate my positionality in the field and the ethical strings attached? Should I provide her this mental support and thus become a researcher whose actions allow for data collection projects to serve as a therapeutic mechanism as suggested by Pacheco and Zaimağaoğlu (2020)? How about my own psychological wellbeing and need for (professional) supervision when embarking on such research relationships? What skills and resources would that entail and



necessitate? Could and should this be fed-back to the (inter-)national project managers in order to readjust the project-related SOPs and thus to address this request as a concern for reciprocity?

Allow me to conclude my writings about the continued or reconfigured challenges researchers are facing in pandemic times by leaving you with a central snippet from an interview with an Afghan refugee from Chakwal, Punjab. His powerful message reverberates until today, making me ponder about the questions of what knowledge purposes should be considered and foregrounded in these pandemic times, who and what should be considered and used to inform such research encounters and baseline data collection drives and what my position and my take on all of this is. This man had lost his job as a driver due to the government-imposed lockdown. He voluntarily took the responsibility of informing fellow Afghan refugees about Covid-19 related precautionary measures and distributed masks and pamphlets in his vicinity.

Afghan refugees are facing a difficult situation nowadays due to the lockdown and unemployment. I have already talked to the UNHCR team about people's needs and you are asking again what are our concerns and fears about corona virus. I want you to deliver my message to officials in Islamabad that if poor families are not provided with rations, they will have no option but to steal food. I am warning you that rations are depleting and people are in depression and frustration. Some people can afford the brunt of lockdown but how would these poor families do that? I will wait for few weeks, if poor families are not provided with any rations, then I will come to Islamabad personally along with five to six people from the refugee community to directly talk to UNHCR officials. People don't need masks and gloves, but they need food or they will die from hunger. Even women and children are roaming the streets to collect papers from the garbage to earn small chunks of money for food.

Food for thought: where do we stand, how do we proceed, what do we leave by the wayside?

Does the pandemic constitute a break, a critical event that can induce major shifts in research practices or do the pandemic and "post-pandemic" years constitute an exceptional time period we are trapped in, for the moment, accelerating or exacerbating challenges and inequities in academic research and life in general? The vignettes and our discussions show that most of the pressing issues and uncomfortable questions had already existed and they just came to the forefront since the start of the pandemic



in early 2020. While there have been broad and systematic engagements with aspects such as the definition of the field (see Katz 1994; Knapp 2014), the creation of marginalities through sampling and power dynamics in research practices, many more challenging aspects of research ethics have often been taken as a given. It was possible to relegate "difficult" questions to the last page on a research proposal, to add them on an additional PowerPoint slide or to address them as afterthoughts in research design and data collection plans. While we are writing this paper, lockdown restrictions are lifted in many parts of Europe (while they have been re-imposed in other parts of this world) and it appears that many people—in a rush to make up for the time that was "lost"—are eager to "go back to the usual." We chose a different option and slow down to engage with the experiences we made over the past months and ask ourselves what can and should be done differently now and in post-pandemic times.

A number of points that require further and sustained engagement are the manners and modalities of cooperation between different research partners to avoid extractive data collection, to minimise risks for all partners involved and enable co-learning and co-production of knowledge and the valuation of the work each person contributes to the project. This requires rethinking research networks, supervision teams and reviewing bureaucratic procedures, especially in terms of project timelines and budgeting that might place restrictions on how funds are spent.

The disturbing aesthetics of field research, characterised by individual idiosyncrasies encapsulated by overwhelming uncertainties and manifold and compounded vulnerabilities and inequalities, and the tension between formal procedural ethics and the "good research practice" (or ethics as practice of care, see Hussain 2020; Tiidenberg 2020) have posed many challenges for how researchers feel. For some, researching during the pandemic became a moment of calculated excitement created by the opportunity of opening research sites previously closed for them due to their gendered positionality (see Khan in this special section). Others saw the pandemic in terms of regrets after reflecting upon the pandemic as a missed opportunity in terms of conceptual expansion and topical significance (to their research).²¹

Yet others were unnerved at the lack of provision for their needs as early-career researchers, while some became more aware of the significance of specific spaces (e.g., rooms, markets, urban outdoor sites, and agricultural fields etc.) as a site of interviewing. Reflexivity on positionality in relation to one's host institution in the global north, and their native city/village as



a field site was painful, a pain which was exacerbated by their growing realisation of being 'out of touch with realities' of their home countries (see contribution of Mehwish Zuberi this special section and her take on "dis-jointed geographies"). If field research is viewed as an affective encounter, and feelings of the researchers are unavoidable to reflect upon for increased transparency, researching during pandemic times calls for increased attention to researchers' feelings and emotions in their reflexive accounts and the emotional labour involved, not only in decentered, critical knowledge productions that take cue from decolonial, feminist takes to research and ethics thereof. 'How did it feel for you' as a researcher is not a novel concern (Beatty 2010), but the pandemic helped translating the significance of this question across disciplines such as anthropology, urban studies, economic sociology, employment studies, geography, political science, area studies, and within our personal relations.

Linked to the questions of positionality, reflexivity and feelings are the dynamic power relations between the researcher and already employed or potential research assistants as discussed above. Reflections of the vignette authors, mostly positioned as indigenous outsiders, allow us to go beyond the exploitative relation between the global south researcher and his/her research assistant situated in the global north (while being conscious of existing privileges of indigenous outsiders in terms of education, resources, class etc.). In line with the concerns of some global south researchers employed in Western academia, local positionalities of our vignette authors, demonstrate not only greater sensitivity to the tribulations of using bodies of research assistants as an instrument in the neoliberal academic machine, they also reinforce the need for empathy, mutual respect, and resentment to epistemic and economic violence in the interest of vigorous knowledge production. Vigorous knowledge production is not possible if relationship between the researcher and research assistants are characterised by negative or unevenly balanced reciprocal relations.

Instead, reducing negative effects of asymmetrical power relations between the researchers and their assistants requires attention to the political, cultural, and emotional context in which one's research field is located and to continuously reflexively challenge one's own positionality in terms of privilege (e.g. socioeconomic status or educational qualification/affiliation) or power (as a researcher taking decisions and assuming authority when designing research, deciding on methods and fields or analysing and disseminating data and findings). We need to cultivate research ethics based on the principle of work-out-of-passion instead of



working for the sake of work. These principles should be based on care and mutuality, on the ability to listen and to work with and alongside diverse fellow travelers, and thus genuine cooperation and coproduction of knowledges. Key to harnessing such a passion, as Rahat Batool or Shulagna Pal hope, is the stage where research assistants are viewed as fellow researchers instead of assistants working for money only. This can reduce the disconnect between the researcher and the field, especially in the case of research designs based on extractive transactional relations treating research assistants as instruments for data generation.

The relation of researchers with the field was influenced by the pandemic in varied and complex ways. Our co-authors have raised variegated empirical concerns across diverse geographic regions and positionalities and have drawn attention to some fundamentally challenging subjects. In some instances, the pandemic distanced the researcher from the field altogether as the most promising spaces for interviewing and observing subjects or accessing archives were closed down due to remote working environment (Rahat Shah, Laurent Glattli). Turning to online methods of accessing the field remotely was more promising for some (Mateeullah Tareen, Rahat Batool) than others (Rahat Shah, Aseela Haque) due to their gendered positionality or their work with hard to reach communities. Whereas some underrate the use of online methods by lamenting the inability to capitalise on one's gendered positionality if she had the chance to physically access the field (as the case of Shulagna Pal). Aseela Haque goes a step further by implicitly sharpening the division between researches that can and cannot rely on online methods. Nevertheless, regardless of multivariate positionalities, our contributors unanimously emphasise the significance of pre-existing relation with the field, and the role of informal networks in facilitating both online and offline methods of accessing the field and remaining connected to it. This raises numerous questions about field work practices for indigenous outsiders, local researchers and foreign researchers alike.

Lastly, the vignettes also raise questions about knowledge production on a systemic level. What is the point of "producing" this knowledge, as Rahat Batool's painful pondering explores? Why and for whom are we researching? Especially in the face of crises and humanitarian emergencies, how can the knowledge we generate be used to advocate for change and to help those in need? What are persistent, compounded and newly emerging silences and emergencies (Boaventura Sousa Santos 2020)? Is the knowledge of any relevance and importance to those we work with?



How do we engage with volatile contexts and produce meaningful, careful research, when the (post-) pandemic world's livelihoods are marked by exacerbated, compounded vulnerabilities, inequalities and scarcities? These questions are not easy to answer, but now should be the time to develop and discuss viable responses. We agree with many others (e.g. Hussain 2020; Das 2020; Dunia et al. 2020; Corbera et al. 2020) that we should not rush to research and publish, but slow down and introspect with care and be willing to listen and to understand before responding and considering next steps and imagining research in post-pandemic times. In the words of Arundathi Roy (2020):

But the rupture exists. And in the midst of this terrible despair, it offers us a chance to rethink the doomsday machine we have built for ourselves. Nothing could be worse than a return to normality. [...]. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.

Endnotes

¹ If we would have to map our positionalities as authors, we are quite evenly split between those in the field and out of the field or rather remote access to the field. We also are diverse to a certain degree. Some are with so called hybrid positionalities, e.g., global south scholars based in academic institutions in the global north, others working, researching and writing from within the global south, apart from other intersectional variations that mark our positionalities such as gender, age, abilities, class/caste or religious orientation.

² See the working group website: Institute of Asian and African Studies. 2020. *Researching in Times of a Pandemic*,

<https://www.iaaw.hu-berlin.de/de/region/suedostasien/forschung/gruppen/researching-in-times-of-a-pandemic> [retrieved 23.07.21] and the website of a related initiative: Institute of Asian and African Studies. 2020. *Negotiating Research Ethics*, <https://www.iaaw.hu-berlin.de/de/region/suedostasien/forschung/gruppen/negotiating-research-ethics> [retrieved 23.07.21].

³ As we understand this article primarily as a contribution to experience-sharing, documenting research work in progress and providing a space for a much needed reflexive process, we do not engage extensively with the existing and emerging broader state of the art related to the topics presented here. This is the subject of a separate contribution to this special section of research reports where we will engage with an in-depth critical and systematic literature review (see Fleschenberg and Holz this issue).

⁴ At a later stage, one of these presentation rounds was open to the public to receive feedback from students and researchers outside of the circle of the working group (Institute of Asian and African Studies. 2021. *32nd HIP Workshop* on 15.01.2021 via Zoom. For the program please refer to: Institute of Asian and African Studies. 2021,



<https://www.iaaw.hu-berlin.de/en/region/southeastasia/15-01-invitation-to-32nd-hip-workshop-part-of-the-covid-19-research-method-working-group-on-pakistan-researching-in-times-of-a-pandemic> [retrieved 23.07.21].

⁵ Our multi-vocal guest editorial team is aware of the multiple uses of the term "field", e.g., as a methodological expression or as a theoretical or a heuristic construct (popularised by the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu). In this paper, we employ the term "field" in the former sense.

⁶ "Marichjhanpi massacre." *Wikipedia*, last edited 11 July 2021, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marichjhanpi> [retrieved 30.07.21].

⁷ For instance in the webinar "Unstable Archives presents: Digital Archives in South Asian Studies: Towards Decolonisation" organised by the University of Oxford and the University of Pennsylvania, 23.10.2020 via zoom. For event details see: University of Oxford, South Asian Studies, <https://www.southasia.ox.ac.uk/event/unstable-archives-presents-digital-archives-in-south-asian-studies-towards-decolonisation> [retrieved 23.07.21].

⁸ National Archives of India. *Abhilekh Patal*, <https://www.abhilekh-patal.in/> [retrieved 30.07.21].

⁹ India Today. 2021. *PM Modi at Davos: despite doomsday predictions, India defeated Covid and helped 150 other countries*, 28 Jan., <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/pm-modi-at-davos-despite-doomsday-predictions-india-defeated-covid-and-helped-150-other-countries-1763662-2021-01-28> [retrieved 30.07.21].

¹⁰ Financial Express. 2021. *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam: India's "Vaccine Maitri" wins over world, 25 nations queue up for corona jabs*, 6 Feb., <https://www.financialexpress.com/lifestyle/health/vasudhaiva-kutumbakam-indias-vaccine-maitri-wins-over-world-25-nations-queue-up-for-corona-jabs/2189422/> [retrieved 30.07.21].

¹¹ India Today. 2021. *MHA issues fresh Covid guidelines: theatres, cinema halls, swimming pools allowed to operate at higher capacity*. 31 Jan., <https://www.indiatoday.in/coronavirus-outbreak/story/home-ministry-covid19-coronavirus-guidelines-full-details-activities-allowed-1763318-2021-01-27> [retrieved 30.07.21].

¹² National Archives of India. 2020 *Notice: Guidelines for researchers/users of research facilities in National Archives of India, New Delhi*, 29 Oct., http://nationalarchives.nic.in/sites/default/files/new/Notice%20for%20Re-opening%20RR_0.pdf [retrieved 30.07.21].

¹³ Deutsche Welle. 2020. *India PM Narendra Modi lays foundation stone for Ayodhya Ram temple*, 5 Aug., <https://www.dw.com/en/ayodhya-temple-india/a-54440591> [retrieved 30.07.21].

¹⁴ These files included one on the ASI's official reaction to the book by P.N. Oak claiming the Taj Mahal was in fact a Hindu temple named Tejo Mahalaya, another one on the contested "Alamgiri" mosque in Varanasi, one on the "alleged desecration" of the Moth-ki-Masjid in Delhi, etc.

¹⁵ South China Morning Post. 2021. *As a second wave of coronavirus overwhelms India's hospitals, desperate relatives turn to WhatsApp for help*, 21 Apr., <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/health-environment/article/3130463/second-wave-coronavirus-overwhelms-indias-hospitals>.

¹⁶ See Swapna Kona Nayudu. 2021. *The Two Anxieties Surrounding India's Archives*. *The Print*, 7 June, <https://theprint.in/opinion/the-two-anxieties-surrounding-indias-archives/672684/>, [retrieved 30.07.21] and Lakshmi, Rama. 2021. *Real Fight for National Archives Should Be about What It Doesn't Contain, Not the Relocation*. *The Print*, 6 June,



<https://theprint.in/opinion/the-real-fight-for-the-national-archives-of-india-is-to-change-it/672754/> [retrieved 30.07.21].

¹⁷ See Sanja Djerassimovic & Oliver Hooper. 2020. The coronavirus crisis: What impact for early career researchers? *Research Intelligence*, 143, 34–35, <https://www.bera.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/ecr.pdf> [retrieved 30.07.2021] and Watchorn, Deirdre & Esther Heckendorf. 2020. *Locked down, burned out*. Berlin, Germany: De Gruyter, 15 Dec., https://blog.degruyter.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Locked-Down-Burned-Out-Publishing-in-a-pandemic_Dec-2020.pdf [retrieved 30.07.21].

¹⁸ Anjuman means a gathering of people to consult on matters temporarily or permanently. Anjumans are youth-led organisations focusing on social-welfare of the people in their respective *sanda* (neighbourhood) or villages. They voluntarily work as a medium between the community and its administration for infrastructural development, provision of basic necessities like clean drinking water, health facilities, free education, job opportunities for youth, etc.

¹⁹ These are town markets where people gather informally in groups, usually with their friends and acquaintances, on daily basis to discuss day-to-day current, political and community affairs.

²⁰ The RCCE was established by UNICEF in March 2020, with a membership comprised of multiple UN and NGO agencies operating in Pakistan during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. See: UNICEF. *Risk Communication and Community Engagement COVID-19 response*, <https://www.corecommitments.unicef.org/rcce> [retrieved 23.07.21].

²¹ One of our working group members Mudassar Munir, a PhD fellow at the University of Milan, shared this perception in multiple discussions as well as earlier versions of this article. We would like to thank and acknowledge Mudassar Munir for contributing to the development of this idea outlined here.

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