Researching Asia in Pandemic Times – the Triple Crunch of Early Career Researchers:
Navigating Changing Research Designs, Funding Issues and Ethics of Care

A conversation with Abdullah Athayi, Laurent Glattli, Esra Sözalmaz Tiryaki and Mateeullah Tareen, moderated by Amanda Oliveira and Andrea Fleschenberg

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Laurent Glattli just completed his PhD at the Institute of Asian and African Studies at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, for which he researched heritage conservation policies in the decades after Indian independence, with a focus on how heritage was placed at the service of postcolonial nation-building by the state.

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Mateeullah Tareen obtained a PhD from the Institute of Asian and African Studies at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, working on "Community Affairs in Transition: Educated Youth's Civic Engagement in Balochistan", a study that looks into young men forming anjumans (committees) to voluntarily help their respective communities in Balochistan, Pakistan, one of the most marginalised regions in South Asia.

Andrea Fleschenberg: Welcome to today's guest lecture series, in a slightly different format today: a fishbowl discussion where we're featuring PhD candidates. A fishbowl is a format where big fish like Esra Sözalmaz Tiryaki, Laurent Glattli, Abdullah Athayi and Mateeullah Tareen will swim around, sharing their experiences, and then you, the audience, can jump in as well and

talk about currents, the temperature of the water that is the pandemic, post-pandemic times and research methods. Why we have this fishbowl talk format goes back to the beginning of our working group "Researching Asia in Pandemic Times". We published a special section in the open-access journal *South Asia Chronicle*,[1] and Mateeullah Tareen as well as Laurent Glattli were two of the co-authors contributing a vignette to the collaborative article we published in that special section. I'm looking forward to listening to Laurent and Matee and learning more about where they stand now, given that pandemic experiences are very dynamic in nature. Navigating these circumstances is not just a one-time decision; flexibility is demanded from you in your research design, that you are self-caring while managing this "triple crunch" in an ongoing process.

During the first meeting of the working group in the autumn of 2020, each of the participants briefly presented issues and questions they were grappling with. Based on these elaborations, Sarah Holz, Salman Khan and myself mapped salient issues and aspects that required further consideration and we compiled a collection of e-resources and open-access materials. Subsequently, we then encouraged members of the working group to further develop the vignettes they presented in order to document and illustrate their struggles. These vignettes were used to initiate and further our discussion and develop feedback and peer-group support. We found the format of fishbowl talks very helpful, because it's also a self-care space where we can talk about the challenges and think together. Furthermore, these vignettes combine descriptions of particular situations and issues with the aim to map emerging questions and difficult decisions that researchers have to make in unpredictable times that are marked by uncertainty, anxieties, and ambiguous and shifting rules and restrictions. Such elements impact our daily lives, academic encounters and research fields in manifold and diverging ways. We are looking at very diverse settings under which early career researchers operate. We hope that this idea of vignette sharing, which we translate into a fishbowl talk today, will open a window to fellow research travellers and unveil some of the ground realities – which are often messy, fuzzy, and come in many colours and shades. We also hope that the discussion will illustrate the everyday challenges of conducting research and producing knowledge.

Quite often, such testimonies receive little attention in published research. Publications primarily focus on the presentation and discussion of research findings and avoid discussing the difficult decisions taken during the research process, as well as the vulnerabilities, ambivalences and dilemmas in place. When we have to navigate without an unequivocal compass or maps at our disposal, how does this influence the knowledge produced? How is our research impacted when our readings are based on blurred vision, missing cues, or can

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1   See the special review essay section in the *South Asia Chronicle* 11/2021, called "Researching South Asia in Pandemic Times", https://www.iaaw.hu-berlin.de/en/region/southasia/publications/sachronicle.

be taken from different vantage points? I think you will see the diversity of speakers – their experiences, their positionalities as well as the backgrounds through which they come to research. Most of the vignette contributors are at different stages of their PhD journeys and their respective vignettes help us build a puzzle of grasped and missed opportunities, coping strategies and emotional challenges in these difficult times, as well as the resilience that many of you display. I say this with a lot of pride, that I can see how resilient you all have been in this very challenging situation, with fast approaching deadlines, limited or dried-up funding, as well as impossible-to-achieve performance indicators in academic career trajectories, which still seem to be set in stone in post-pandemic times. I hope that these vignettes will provide some critical insights into decision-making procedures and will flag issues and topics that other early career researchers might have to address.

The pandemic situation changed significantly over the course of time. The initial vignettes[2] spoke a lot about the field, how the field changed and shifted, the difficulties finding where the field is actually located and where its boundaries are. What happens to the field when we play with online-offline journeys? Is it still the same field? Is our understanding of the phenomenon changing because we switch fields, or switch between fields? What does this mean for the methods we need? Another theme concerned questions about risk, safety and power. How do we implement "Do no harm" while having to navigate these shifting fields? Yet another topic that emerged in our discussions was the issue of the mental and emotional well-being of researchers, research assistants and participants.

Due to additional pandemic-related stressors as well as the "pandemic hang-over" that we came to witness, the toll this situation and these conditions take on all of us has emerged as a new theme. Existing worries about delays and project completion have been heightened. Mental and emotional health, mentoring care and institutional support also require further attention, as early career researchers have to negotiate uncertainty, precarity and anxieties in often difficult circumstances and with limited resources, little expertise from prior research endeavours, as well as few supportive networks at hand.

AMANDA OLIVEIRA (moderating MA class participant): Thank you everyone for coming. The first vignette will be presented by Esra Sözalmaz Tiryaki, who is conducting her PhD research on Higher Education Institutions of Islam in Malaysia and Turkey, focusing on their respective religious discourses in the 1980s and 1990s.

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2   Readers can access these first vignettes via the co-authored article "Researching South Asia in Pandemic Times: Of Shifting Fields, Research Tools, Risks, Emotions and Research Relationships" by Rahat Batool, Andrea Fleschenberg, Laurent Glattli, Aseela Haque, Sarah Holz, Muhammad Salman Khan, Shulagna Pal, Rahat Shah and Mateeullah Tareen, *South Asia Chronicle* 11/2021, pp. 419–467, https://www.iaaw.hu-berlin.de/de/region/suedasien/publikationen/sachronik/19-review-essay-batool-et-al-researching-south-asia-in-pandemic-times-of-shifting-fields-research-tools-risks-emotions-and-research-relationships.pdf.

ESRA SÖZALMAZ TIRYAKI: During the first year of my PhD studies in Berlin, I was dealing with applications and doing general readings. This was during the lockdown, so, in a way, during the first year, I was trying to get ready for the PhD process. I worked on my proposal and tried to improve it. Then I got accepted by the Graduate School Berlin Muslim Cultures and Societies. I was part of a group of ten people working on Islam in various contexts like South Asia and Turkey. In the second year, I feel like I started my PhD because I could finally be in classroom settings. […] I was dealing with uncertainties and trying to solve some problems, to improve, to be this "ideal researcher" type. After this big gap between my MA studies and starting my PhD, I was anxious. Mentally, I was getting ready for the PhD, but the setting changed. I was thinking about doing fieldwork, talking to people. My initial aim was to clarify my research question and comparative angle. I know the Turkish field relatively better than the Malaysian one. There are no established notions of ethnographic fieldwork in the culture that I come from, because I am specifically located in Islamic Studies. I didn't have courage, in a way. I didn't feel equipped to do online research during the early stages.

Actually, this winter semester, getting in touch with people has been a great chance. I was working on narrowing down my research question and I didn't know how to do that because of this lack of connections [due to pandemic circumstances]. So, I tried to make use of my networks and the people around me. I had friends working on different Muslim contexts, such as Pakistan, and that actually helped me a lot. Even though they don't know Turkish or Malaysian religious fields very well, they gave me so many ideas. They asked many questions that I had never thought about before, even though these local settings are completely different from the cases that I am working on. The second point was that I realised that I had a problem with interdisciplinarity, coming from Islamic Studies and now working in Area Studies and using sociological tools in my research design. So, in a way, I am not part of these research groups, these journals, working in very specific fields. I feel, in a way, like an "Ausländer" (a foreigner), in many contexts, in academic disciplines. […] I shared my experiences with them, what I am doing, what I am asking, where I started from, where I am heading, in order to receive their feedback. But I couldn't do this for the Malaysian case, sadly. […]

Actually, I am not the kind of person who is socially active. That's my problem; I don't use social media. I don't know how to get through this point given the digital turn that was caused by or accelerated due to the COVID-19 pandemic. At this point, just being visible on social media doesn't help that much because people check former posts and tweets and I don't have a "legacy" on social media, so it's hard to make use of that digital experience within my research. At the same time, I noticed that Malay Muslims and Malaysian students pay a

lot of attention to these kinds of digital networks and digital footprints that I don't have and that I struggle to build for my research.

Amanda Oliveira: Let's proceed with Abdullah Athayi, who is researching the Afghan diaspora and participation, integration and transnational engagement within the community.

Abdullah Athayi: I started my PhD studies on "Understanding civic engagement among the Afghan diaspora in Germany" during the pandemic. I landed in this research area when I came to Germany. The question was, where should I start? I had noticed that a lot of Afghan refugees and migrants established associations, engaging migrants, refugees and dissidents. I enquired about various aspects of their participation in social life in Germany, which basically formed my PhD journey. My main topic is how Afghans in the diaspora get engaged with social and political issues, what are their concerns, challenges and maybe opportunities as well.

In a second part, I focus on how they contribute to social and political development in their country of origin, applying grounded theory as a methodological approach, which is usually driven by grounded data instead of theory-testing. This requires me to always be in the field, to engage in interviews and participant observation, thus to collect data on voice, space and organisational structures. When I started my PhD in the winter semester of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic caused schools, universities and workplaces to shut down. It was during that time that we had to work from home. Education was a sector that suffered a lot during the pandemic. Seminars, workshops and events were online. Since I was a novice PhD candidate, I started to engage with reading and redefining the research questions and proposal apart from attending some seminars. The new communication tools such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Meet and others came into being. For me, these tools were new. I had to download Zoom and WebEx and they sometimes confused me. It took time for me personally to become accustomed to such tools. But now I see that these communication tools have become a platform for digital cooperation and collaboration between researchers, scholars and institutions. However, they do not replace face-to-face meetings, but rather supplement them in many ways. […]

So, which concerns did I personally face during the pandemic? First of all, switching from a physical presence-based mode to a digital mode was difficult. It took time for me to become accustomed to such tools, but now they are on my mobile phone like many other communication tools. During the pandemic, interview arrangements were very difficult as interviewees either cancelled appointments or took time to arrange them. […] Observation was also tough for quite some time because events and conferences got cancelled. However, I conducted a few observations online. In terms of participant observation, there

was no real communication between me as a researcher and the interlocutor. It's not the real world and I have to acknowledge that. There were two formats: first, there were formal online events, where there was no interaction or communication between the participants. Second, in informal online events, for example, there was little communication between the discussants in the beginning. People were also controlling what they said. Furthermore, home office was a nightmare and I could not work efficiently. One of the problems was that public libraries were inaccessible, restricted or fully booked. I could only book one slot in a public library over three to six months. In conclusion, apart from the frustrations the pandemic imposed on us, the pandemic also taught us a lot about different ways of working and collaborating among researchers, scholars and founders of institutions.

Amanda Oliveira: Thank you so much, Abdullah. Let's move on to Mateeullah Tareen, who is researching community affairs in transition, with a focus on educated youth's civic engagement in Balochistan. His research looks into young people forming *anjumans* – committees to voluntarily help their respective communities.

Mateeullah Tareen: […] My research specifically deals with community affairs in transition. When I say "young people" in my research, I mean young men, as cultural and partially religious conventions limit the contributions of women within the community. My research question deals with how young men between 15 and 34 years of age who seek education outside their own cities, villages and areas, return to these places, and in what ways the *anjumans* that they create transform the community affairs in the region itself. I belong to the region, was born there, was educated there and also got involved with these communities and *anjumans* myself as well in the research area: the district Pishin, which borders Afghanistan in the northwest of the province of Balochistan, Pakistan. The data collection was conducted continuously for three years between 2017 and 2020, prior to the pandemic. Earlier in 2022, I was able to return to follow up on institutions, actors and stakeholders involved in how these community affairs are viewed, facilitated and assisted by civil society organisations, public offices, etc.

Though I was lucky that my data collection in terms of interviews and participant observation was completed by 2019, there was a part of my research focus that was aimed at understanding how religious affairs affect community affairs in these rural areas of Balochistan. How does religion take into account these educated men and the impositions of religion itself and hence affect some areas of community functioning? That was the part where I needed to go into *madrasas*, which are religious institutions, and talk to some madrasa students who are involved in community affairs while also being educated in these religious institutions, as well as talk to madrasa scholars and leaders of religious

political parties. After discussions with the faculty team of our working group, I was convinced that I needed to move on in my PhD process even though the pandemic made travelling to the field difficult and restricted. So, I had to abandon this part of my research. The pandemic, in a way, made up my mind to focus on something that was already there [the existing/collected data] and work with that rather than expanding the research and going for an additional round of data collection. This was one impact that the pandemic had on my PhD research. Secondly, within the data I had already collected, talking to young men, elders, tribal chieftains, NGOs, civil society actors, political activists […], I still had to engage with online means to stay updated and to follow up on questions emerging from the data collected. Some anjumans were showing prospects of growing, prospects of doing more (read: different) community work. To follow up on that, I still needed to have a communication channel open.

One confession: my approach to social media or online means of communication was not very structured or organised. Partly because I never had any kind of training or any kind of conceptual knowledge of doing research online, I relied more on in-person interviews. Moreover, participation and/or observation plays a big role in my research as well, in terms of seeing community members work and talking and interacting with them in informal settings in the field. That was something that stopped me from doing online research before the pandemic. When the pandemic had already hit, this "online unpreparedness" with regard to tools or methodology for online research data collection meant that I was very scattered in my approach, going through a lot of Facebook pages, following a lot of community groups, a lot of WhatsApp groups and Telegram channels. It actually made it more difficult to understand things.

Number one, the amount of data was huge and tough to navigate. Number two, the interviews that I managed to do had a different tone to them, partly because I was used to in-person interviews and the online space/field has its own realities. I noticed that there were certain points in my interviews that could touch upon some controversial topics, like banned religious "outfits" or the political activism of youth groups regarding the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) or cross-border issues that affect these borderland communities. These were issues that we had to be conscious about: that these online conversations were being recorded. This made it very difficult for me to gain the trust of interviewees, to bring them into a comfort zone and talk with them openly.

One strategy I improvised after the second or third interview was to call them in advance, two or three times, and make small talk, talking about some other things in the area, and getting some updates about community affairs from them. We would talk about cricket, sport events, the weather, food or something else. That brought the trust a little further than just having an email or a message and then an interview. These one or two small talks made it much easier. Apart from that, I reached out to news groups on WhatsApp; some inter-

viewees would add me to groups themselves while I was recommended to other groups via a snowball technique. So, I would ask who they would recommend and then they would recommend me another group or negotiate on my behalf so that I could follow that community's news and collect some data.

But above all, I still am more committed to the in-person interviews because of the nature of my work. The online world has a lot of invisibilities in the kind of work that I do. There are internet connection problems too. From 2014 to mid-2017, two and a half years, there was no internet in the region because of an ongoing military operation, which meant a lot of people would not have been included in the fieldwork itself if it had been conducted online. It was the same case with electricity outages, [lack of] internet accessibility, people not having smartphones, literacy and language issues, etc. That's why, in an anthropological, sociological field, I prefer to do in-person fieldwork than relying on online [means and spaces].

AMANDA OLIVEIRA: Thank you Mateeullah. Now we'll go to Laurent Glattli, who is analysing conservation policy in post-colonial India.

LAURENT GLATTLI: I work on heritage conservation policies in South Asia and I base my research mostly on archival work, which is different from the previous speakers. I also do some interviews, but the biggest part of my research is analysing archives. My initial project was to do a comparison of heritage conservation policies after independence in both India and Pakistan to study how they developed in parallel after the partition of the subcontinent. Due to the pandemic, I had to focus on India only and this was probably the biggest change the pandemic caused me to make to my research project.

If I had to summarise how the pandemic affected my research, I'd say the first thing was a long delay in getting to the field. I started my PhD in October 2019. The pandemic happened when I had just secured funding. I was getting ready to go to India in July [2020] to start my archival work, but I couldn't travel until the next year, in March 2021. It was a very long delay. I kept postponing my departure to India before realising it would not be possible for a while. In the meantime, I focused on the literature review, on taking some Zoom classes on heritage studies online, and on improving my writing skills and my methodology.

It was good for me to do all these theoretical and methodological courses before going to the field, but nevertheless it was a difficult time coping with the uncertainty of not knowing when I would be able to finally leave. I think that as an early career researcher, it is hard to believe that you are a PhD student until you've been in the field. There's a transformational aspect of the experience of being in the field itself. It's when you start getting rid of the imposter syndrome of "What am I doing?". When you start actually doing research and start seeing results through meeting people and talking to them

about the research you're doing: that's when you start considering yourself a researcher. Having this delayed for so long didn't help sustain my motivation in this uncertain phase. On a mental health basis, it was a difficult time coping with low motivation and difficulties focusing on classes or Zoom conferences that were sometimes hard to follow.

This first year of delay was difficult emotionally, also in terms of projecting myself as a researcher. Finally, in March 2021, I managed to go to India for my first field trip. There was still a lockdown in Germany, while in India the government assumed that they had defeated COVID and they would teach the world how to do it. When I reached Delhi in early March, I could go to restaurants, cafés, bars, hairdressers, parties. [...] I could finally work intensely because the archives were open. It felt really good, until the second COVID wave started. [...] It was a very dark time in India. Nevertheless, I could finally get some work done.

Accessing the National Archives of India during this time was an interesting experience, because it's usually a heavily bureaucratised institution that does not grant access to researchers very easily. It seemed to me that the COVID protocol that was in place, which allowed only a certain number of researchers at a given time in the research room, added another layer of control. I felt more vulnerable as a foreign researcher working on a topic that is sensitive in India today. For those who are not familiar with the Indian context: many monuments are targeted by the party in power, by Hindu nationalists who want to rewrite history. Someone working on monuments and especially being a researcher, a foreign researcher, is bound to attract some scrutiny. So, I had to be careful when I applied for my visa and make sure that I did not raise suspicion when I was working in the archives and ordering files. Whenever I found a file I would find interesting that referred to a contested monument, I made sure I would drown it in a sea of other files, because every day I had to ask for permission to come back the next day and I felt that I was vulnerable because the access could have been denied for no reason. I managed to get a lot of work done despite the inherent slowness of the archives, which is something I could confirm during my second trip. The slowness was made even worse by the COVID protocol at the time.

I also did some interviews. Since I am a historian working on the 1960s, I tried to contact people who are retired, who are often over 75 or 80 [years of age], which meant these people often were not familiar with Skype, Zoom and other [digital communication] technologies. They preferred to receive me at their homes. At the same time, they were also part of the most vulnerable group. It was always a dilemma: should I meet them, should I not, should I wear a mask? Of course [I should wear a mask]. But once you enter their homes and they offer you a chai, for instance, it is very rude to refuse it, so you take off the mask. They don't wear masks because some of them don't see the

benefits, even though there has just been a very bad COVID wave. So, there's a lot of questions going through your mind at this time, like: "Am I putting these people at risk?" But then again, I am following their guidelines. "Should I meet them for the sake of my research or is it better for me not to interview them?" It's a lot of questioning at this point. At the same time, I also had people tell me: "Oh, you should absolutely meet these people because they are old, and we are in the middle of a pandemic so you shouldn't wait too long before meeting them." So, you have to keep all these very contradictory injunctions in mind. I think because of all of these dilemmas, I was always more comfortable working with archives, knowing they are here to stay and it's easier and less risky to work only with paper.

I came back from India in July 2021 and went for my second field trip from February until May 2022. This time, the COVID situation was much better, as most restrictions were lifted and it was much easier to access the archives. So, this regime of access control I mentioned was still in place, but much easier to manage. They were granting passes for one week instead of asking for permission every day. I felt less vulnerable. What changed as well was that I could meet and talk to other researchers working at the national archives. The first time was a very solitary experience as I was just there ordering files, trying not to talk to the archivists because I was afraid of attracting too much attention. The second time I could meet people who are used to accessing the archives, who know which archivists to talk to and who to avoid. All this knowledge you would easily get in normal times, but it took me almost a year to get hands-on know-how of how to go about the archives. I realised how valuable it is to just get to know a place and the people who work there, and how we take this know-how for granted and how we only realise this in exceptional times. The second time was much more productive than the first one. I did not suffer much from COVID restrictions and I could get a lot of work done. I think it helped me get back on track, catching up on the lost time of waiting during the first long period of uncertainty.

I still feel delayed and, as I mentioned, my biggest takeaway from the pandemic was that I had to completely change my research topic and drop the whole comparison, which was about half of my PhD. I took this decision after careful reflection, after noticing how much time it takes to research on just one country and doing that same work of getting to know the archives, developing a network in the country. Doing this in a second country would cause my PhD to be extended by at least three or four years, which is something I couldn't afford, unfortunately. I blamed COVID for this because in an ideal world I would have been able to do this comparative research. In a way, it's one of the missed opportunities that COVID cost.

AMANDA OLIVEIRA: Thank you so much. I think both Mateeullah and Esra made a really important point about the difficulties of making connections, be it online or offline, during the pandemic. We do not know how to use these social media tools for academic purposes. This is also something that I was discussing with other colleagues from this MA class. Because you meet a lot of people, but how do you keep in touch, how do you approach them? It's not really appropriate to follow them on Instagram most times because you [as a researcher] are not going to be posting about your day-to-day life. I think Mateeullah made a good suggestion here with a bit of a script: he would some-times start with small talk, introduce his topic of research when talking to new connections and then follow up. I think that's a good point to brainstorm on: How do you approach new connections when researching? Do you follow them on LinkedIn, do you follow them on social media? How do you stay in touch?

SHULAGNA PAL (MA class participant): I think this is one of my long struggles, I struggle even now because of this. What Mateeullah suggested is definitely […] going beyond your research and what questions you want to ask but just trying to get to know them on a different level. That definitely helps to build trust to move forward in those kinds of situations, especially when you are discussing issues that are sensitive and could be a recurrence of trauma memory for them or for the researcher. In terms of social media, I think I was also not so used to education on social platforms. Even before the pandemic, I took my time getting used to the German system of education, coming from India. These digital tools that help with research, like Zoom or WebEx, they take some time, but when it comes to accessing certain areas or people who probably don't even know about LinkedIn, then it doesn't help. Some of the tools that we are using don't matter unless we are discussing them with interlocutors or fellow peers in the region who are also working with this tool or social media to gain ac-cess to the field. Some basic methods of communication have definitely been used there and are available depending on the region that you are working in. But again, there are issues of safety and security. These are really important questions that we have to deal with on a subjective, contextual basis. What works in a particular regional, local environment? WhatsApp may not be safe, so what about Signal or Telegram? What about other channels like Abdullah mentioned, Google Talk or one of the many other kinds of channels, for get-ting access to the sites? Then there are also some security points that we have to keep in mind that interlocutors or interviewees might not be aware of.

AMANDA SERWAH (MA class participant): I haven't done research apart from school, as a student. I think one thing that Esra mentioned people in Malaysia are very interested in is how many people follow you, right? They are interested in [digital/social media] prestige. Of course, people are more interested in people

who have more followers but also, because they like security, they like to know that you are a credible person and not someone who doesn't have a face [as a profile picture], which is kind of dubious. I wouldn't use my own profile [photo] because it's not secure, but I would try to find a middle way, maybe put a picture of myself that is not too revealing and that is not personal to me. […]

LAURENT GLATTLI: When it comes to keeping in touch with the people I met online, this forced push towards digital contact made everything harder. Part of the experience of doing a PhD is also building your scientific network, meeting other PhD students and finding informal mentors who can help you with points that you may have difficulties with, and who might enlighten you with their expertise on a specific topic that your supervisor cannot help you with. This shift towards digital interactions made all these encounters much more difficult. It is still possible, but in a way, every interaction becomes more purpose-driven. You set a time slot and you tell them the reason why you're meeting them. The off-topic, informal chat interactions that may help in building these relationships are much harder to develop through Skype, Zoom or WhatsApp. For me, it felt like a hindrance in developing contacts, because I felt like I did not have enough time to chat with people to sustain a deeper relationship.

I was fortunate to stay at a research centre [in India], and that at the beginning the COVID protocol was already quite light, so I was surrounded by other researchers. Having other people to talk to was extremely helpful. This is something I didn't get while living in Berlin during the lockdown with universities closed. We've all been there, right? I think there were a lot of missed opportunities in terms of going to conferences, going to workshops. It hindered my development as a PhD student and I am working hard now to make these occasions happen.

After a point I got Zoom fatigue and decided to opt out of all online conferences. On the one hand, you managed to see very famous speakers online, but after a point I was fed up and could not focus. I missed the simple fact of sitting in a conference hall, dedicating my whole attention to what was happening in the moment and not doing a thousand things at the same time. I missed the chit-chat that happens between [sessions], between talks. It's only starting to open up again now. My social development as a researcher has been delayed by maybe two years.

MATEEULLAH TAREEN: I think this is the point that Laurent already mentioned: the Zoom fatigue happening in the academic world. Everybody can relate to this in their social life. It becomes very difficult at one point and there is no other recipe for it but to push yourself. For example, I had to go to this conference, from where I am zooming with you now, and go through the pain of travelling long-distance as the target was to push myself to come to this physical place to build up on that opportunity. When it comes to the problem of writing,

the impact of COVID was pushing our procrastination rather than actually doing something. This procrastination combined with what Abdullah presented in his presentation of not having the comfort, of working at home, not feeling the environment around and the comfort zone, pushing us sinking into our couches and not really letting us work. Yes, I think self-discipline is very difficult to come by, at least it didn't really work for me. To be very stereotypically German about it, I think it is very important to make a schedule and stick to it.

Esra Sözalmaz Tiryaki: Laurent talked about this imposter syndrome before going to the field. I really relate to that, because while losing touch with universities and seminars with in-person interactions, it is really hard to believe that you are writing a PhD thesis and that you are a researcher. You keep asking yourself: Is it legitimate to make that claim? I realised that I am having these kinds of questions myself. Thanks for sharing that.

Andrea Fleschenberg: Having listened to your academic testimonies, about the struggles you have, so many big fish in so many diverse and strong currents, I'm actually in awe. You have all been through a lot and there is still a lot ahead of you, and I say this in a positive way. Because what I would flag here as well, which also came out in the questions and comments we got, is that "self-discipline" and all these words are easy. There is hardly anything that is available to allow us to read through all those failures and challenges that are actually a part of every research encounter. I think if someone goes to the field and comes of age in the field, what Laurent said, this transformative moment, if there is no such transformative moment in such a research journey, I think Laurent is right: something is wrong – and not just as a PhD scholar, but we rarely read about it. This is why we are documenting this. I would like to thank all of you for your honesty in an academic setting, where this is usually not done. This is what I would like to highlight here, sitting on the other side of the table, what I read out of your stories is actually "resilience" – and that's a buzzword of the pandemic. You're still navigating it, you're still in the water, you didn't drown. You were thrown out of the water and jumped in again. I would really like to salute you for this. I mean this from the bottom of my heart as a fellow academic, supervisor and mentor […], which I have been to some of you so far, and I look forward to continuing this journey with you and I hope some of the fellow travellers listening in, reading in, were able to obtain some food for thought from this experience-sharing.