Symposium on Early Career International Law Academia: Pursuing a PhD in International Law: Some Epistemological and Existential Challenges in the Indian Context

By:

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Academic inquiry can be varied, but some of the most streamlined and institutionally regulated ones are those which we conduct during our doctoral studies. The challenge with doctoral studies is not only in bringing out novel findings to disciplinary knowledge but also to present a likeable, marketable, and innovative piece of work. The whole doctoral experience is further enriched but also complicated by the life of the candidates, the geographical location they are working from, and, obviously, the issues that they are studying. In this post, I would like to highlight how international law as a subject is perceived in

India, the academic processes surrounding the completion of a PhD, and some of the structural issues and problems faced by the candidates at various stages of the degree.

I formally registered my PhD proposal in 2017, submitted my thesis in 2020, and received my degree in 2021. My department happens to be one of the few prominent publicly funded institutes from India that specialize in international law. It enjoys a reputation of having produced significant scholars in the discipline, such as R.P. Anand, Rahmatullah Khan, and Bhupinder S. Chimni. Studying and researching international law here was an experience of its own kind because of the critical approaches and methodologies that were part of the official curriculum. The campus also provided an excellent space for having ideological and political debates on issues past and present. While these aspects provided the ideal environment for thinking, discussing, and writing, I shall discuss some of the challenges that come with writing a thesis and conducting research in international law in the Global South, specifically in India

The way a particular subject is pursued at the undergraduate level influences its advanced level studies and practices. With a focus on the domestic legal system and on commercial aspects of laws at the undergraduate level, the theory of international law has somewhat suffered in India from a lack of attention and so has the inculcation of in-depth understanding of the same in students. The number of candidates pursuing a PhD in international law, and especially those with a focus on theory, is comparatively lower than other field of law. This could be due to a variety of reasons. First, the practice of international law in India is, arguably, a limited professional domain- meaning that apart from teaching and research one can engage with international law in the country only through a few other channels, and after many years of legal amassing expertise or by being in the civil service. Second, there are not many resources supporting the discipline. For example, libraries that have literature covering all aspects of the subjects, especially historical and critical, are spread across the country. The most comprehensive ones are located in New Delhi, away from the reach of many students located in different parts of the country. This makes a comprehensive literature review a challenge. Third, the size of the PhD cohorts is quite small, and even smaller are the academic circles where processes like voluntary peer review groups, consultations, proof-reading, etc. can take place.

I faced the third issue the most. While I am grateful to all my colleagues, peers, and supervisors for their irreplaceable inputs, I did feel acutely the absence of a larger cohort. Another issue that doctoral candidates face is the prevailing epistemological narrowness. Proposals within the formalist traditions of international law get higher visibility and more encouragement. Further, research that is always welcomed is related to an empirical inquiring quantifying or justifying the national interest. This is definitely changing. However, very few institutions pay attention to critical theories of international law. Hence, after the completion of similar works, it is difficult to find teaching positions that involve the application and utilization of these critical approaches. The fact that teaching in law schools at times undermines areas of expertise does affect the sustenance of the future interest in one's area. Most of us end up teaching various subjects completely beyond our area of expertise. This clashes with the expectation of constantly producing publications and multiplying one's scholarly achievements. Right after the submission of the thesis, I taught law in a private law school. While it is important to have a broad understanding of the law, asking someone with a PhD in international law to give lectures on Hotel Management Law is arguably unfair, especially when there are not many ways to voice your preferences.

Last, I would like to identify the issue of financing a PhD. Not all candidates are well funded or receive stipends. Stationery and literature allowances are limited and therefore, the competition for funds and grants is very strong. A full-time PhD candidate is not able to manage all the expenses and part-time study makes it near to impossible to freely do the thinking and contemplating of the thesis content. Most part-time PhD candidates undergo severe stress during their terminal phases of writing. The quality of the work suffers, and so does the mental and physical health of the candidate. As the typical span of a PhD would be between 4 to 7 years, many personal and professional changes come up during this period and need to be tackled by the candidates. And an absence of space ensuring the mental and emotional wellbeing of the candidate becomes a huge affecting factor. All these issues become even more complex in the case of female PhD candidates.

Obviously, the global pandemic further complicated the situation. During the nationwide lockdown, the successful submission of drafts seemed more challenging than ever. I had to cope with the sudden changes by the university

administration which resulted in the submission process going from physical mode to online overnight, owing to COVID protocols. In absence of any assistance, shut stationaries, administrative staff working from home getting all the academic clearances and paperwork done became nothing less than an ordeal.

All in all, writing a PhD may not be a homogenous experience for everyone in the Global South, but there are certainly some macro level, infrastructural and existential realities that complicate it. The matter is further complicated for critical scholars. However, overcoming most of the above issues is challenging, but not impossible.

First, I would like to mention how keeping up with academic discussions by means of conferencing was important. Conferences, symposiums, and workshops can be one place where research scholars can get a breather, not only from the mundanity of thesis writing but also from their immediate academic environment. The exchange of ideas with other scholars through ideas enriches the writing experience. Good conferencing is also where you can manage to interact with leading authors and experts.

Second, campus-level interdisciplinary study circles and informal discussion groups were a great way of testing thesis arguments. Creating such groups for contemporary discussions and applying the take-away ideas back into your work can be very productive. These groups are also ways to seek interdisciplinary help. For example, one of my chapters raised issues of history and historiography. Talking about my work to one of the study group members from the history department went a long way toward answering the question. The study groups can be fine spaces for sharing thesis-related solidarity as well.

Third, planning and disciplining the writing cycles is another important practice. Setting daily pages/word targets for writing may save one from a lot of procrastination towards the final stages. Planning week's work beforehand should be preferred.

In conclusion, thesis writing can be an excruciating process but looking back on the perseverance and endurance that one manifests is irreplaceable.

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