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From Pedagogy of Pain to Pedagogy of Care: Interpreting the Discursive Shift

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Abstract

This paper traces a discursive shift in South Asian educational discourse from a pedagogy of pain—grounded in discipline, punishment, and emotional repression—to a pedagogy of care, framed increasingly through empathy, affect, and relationality. Drawing on personal narratives and theoretical insights from Foucault, hooks, Freire, Noddings, and Tronto, it argues that these pedagogical models are shaped by broader structures of power. While traditions of care and pain have historically coexisted, the contemporary emphasis on care must be seen in light of neoliberal appropriations that redefine it as emotional labor, personal responsibility, and a means of institutional control. Through a sociological lens, this paper examines how both pain and care function as technologies of power—either reinforcing conformity or fostering critical consciousness, depending on their deployment. Ultimately, it argues that care retains radical potential, though this is increasingly constrained by its commodification and depoliticization in neoliberal regimes.

Keywords

Kashmir, power, corporal punishment, Delhi, India, academic freedom, pedagogy of pain, pedagogy of care, militarization

Introduction

Institutions of higher learning cannot be understood in isolation; the pedagogical practices they cultivate are deeply embedded in wider social structures. These include disciplinary regimes that operate in homes, workplaces, religious spaces, and political

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organizations; social hierarchies such as caste, class, and gender, as well as institutional and representational forces such as media, literature, and the military. While pedagogies evolve over time, they remain tethered to historical and cultural legacies that continue to shape their purpose and form.

Universities are often idealized as democratic spaces committed to critical inquiry and liberal values. Many public intellectuals of the last century saw universities as sites of critical reflection, democratic possibility, and moral responsibility. Hannah Arendt (1971) regarded the university as a sanctuary for the "life of the mind," where thought could flourish independent of instrumental concerns or societal pressures. Similarly, Herbert Marcuse (1969) envisioned the university as a potential site of resistance, particularly during the 1960s, where students and scholars could cultivate critical consciousness and challenge dominant ideologies. Edward Said (1994) emphasized the university's responsibility to foster intellectual dissent and uphold democratic values, while Noam Chomsky (2000) has long argued that universities should serve as spaces for independent inquiry and moral responsibility, not merely as instruments of state or corporate power. While this vision may have been partially realized at specific historical moments, it remains precarious. These utopian ideals, fragile as they are, endure as aspirational frameworks—offering both hope and potential for renewal.

This paper reflects on how ideology and power shape pedagogy within formal educational settings and the broader social world, emphasizing how these forces intersect and reinforce one another. It examines the discursive frameworks that inform pedagogical approaches—ranging from those rooted in discipline and discomfort (pedagogies of pain) to those oriented around emotional well-being and mutual responsibility (pedagogies of care). While grounded in personal experience, the analysis is attentive to the wider cultural, political, and historical narratives that legitimize these practices and determine what are deemed effective or acceptable modes of instruction in specific contexts.

The paper also traces how power operates at multiple levels—from classroom interactions to administrative structures—revealing both overt authority and subtler mechanisms of everyday control. Building on the work of scholars such as Pierre Bourdieu (1990), Michel Foucault (1977), and Paulo Freire (1970), it approaches educational and societal institutions not as discrete domains but as mutually constitutive sites where power, ideology, and subject formation are continuously negotiated. This perspective resists overly compartmentalized analyses of educational institutions as a site by emphasizing how broader social hierarchies and institutional logics shape pedagogical practices and educational outcomes.

To ground this inquiry, I draw on autoethnographic reflections based on my experiences as a student and teacher in different parts of the Indian subcontinent—Srinagar, Bangalore, and Delhi. These personal vignettes serve as situated and embodied entry points into broader theoretical questions about power, pedagogy, and institutional life. Through this autoethnographic account, I foreground the relational and affective dimensions of educational experience, while situating them within their specific sociopolitical contexts. Finally, this paper examines the origins, uses, and neoliberal appropriation of the discourses of pain and care in pedagogy, locating them within the shifting political and institutional landscape of the present.

Formative Experiences: Corporal Discipline and Militarized Pedagogy

I was born in 1970s Kashmir—a time and place where corporal punishment was not only common but also socially sanctioned. Pain and humiliation were widely accepted pedagogical tools, deployed in both schools and homes. Boys' schools, in particular, operated through regimes of physical punishment, while girls' institutions relied more on surveillance, moral regulation, and bodily control, reflecting the gendered nature of pedagogical discipline in South Asia (Paik, 2009; Sanyal & Farah, 2018; Sur, 2021).[1] The punishment was often framed as care, justified as a means to instill discipline and moral rectitude. The narrative of "pain-as-love" was internalized by students, who were taught to be grateful for the violence inflicted upon them.[2]

Militarized discipline within educational institutions preceded the overt militarization of Kashmir's public sphere in the late 1980s. During the colonial period, schooling across the subcontinent—including in princely Kashmir—was shaped by regimes of order, loyalty, and moral discipline enforced through rigid curricula, surveillance, and coercive pedagogies. In Kashmir, so-called Jabri schools (Zutshi, 2004)—established after the Glancy Commission Report (1932) to address Muslim educational marginalization—operated through compulsory enrolment and rote-based instruction, often reinforced through humiliation and violence, thereby reproducing hierarchy under the guise of reform. These disciplinary logics built on and transformed earlier pedagogical norms from precolonial Islamic and Sanskritic traditions, which emphasized rote learning and hierarchical teacher–student relations. In the postcolonial period, these systems persisted and, in many cases, intensified—often aligning with state-building agendas that privileged obedience, national integration, and control. Seen in this light, the militarized ethos of contemporary Kashmiri schools reflects a longer genealogy of discipline shaped by overlapping colonial, postcolonial, and militarized imperatives, also visible in cultural forms such as *Bhand Pather*, where satire and humor stage authority through scenes of humiliation and punishment, simultaneously critiquing and normalizing punitive pedagogies (Kaul, 2004).

School routines were already organized around drill-like regimens—rituals designed to inculcate bodily discipline, control, and obedience. Pain, fear, and humiliation served multiple functions: they fostered order, aided memory retention, and reinforced hierarchies. The use of violent punishment was not only ideological but also functional—a quick, low-cost response to the perceived disorder of childhood and the structural deficiencies of the education system. Overburdened and underpaid, teachers—often themselves in socially precarious positions—lacked the resources and institutional support necessary to adopt empathetic or dialogical approaches even if they were inclined to do so. Their primary task was to impose order, not to cultivate critical understanding. Within such constraints, intimidation became a professional tool, even a necessity. Teachers who failed to instill fear were frequently mocked at and sidelined regardless of their pedagogical skill. In this context, a particular kind of teacher was *produced*—just as a student of particular kind was in turn shaped by them.

While effective in some cases, these techniques often produced unintended consequences, spilling into peer relations and shaping informal social hierarchies within the

institutions. Some students internalized submission, others developed immunity to punishment, thriving in defiance, a third kind—those who neither conformed to nor resisted force effectively—became misfits, struggling to find their place within institutional logic. By no means exceptional, I belonged to this third category. I was among those students who spent much of their schooling years trying to stay invisible—avoiding the teacher's gaze, steering clear of trouble, and fearing the possibility of being singled out to perform, only to risk embarrassment or humiliation in front of peers. I mostly gravitated toward others on the margins—fellow misfits who, like me, struggled to find a place within the social order of school.

It was not until much later, largely outside the confines of formal schooling, that I began to reckon with the psychological and emotional toll my educational experiences had taken on me. It eroded my confidence and instilled a lingering sense of self-doubt, making it difficult to imagine an expansive or fulfilling future—academically, professionally, or personally. In response, I often overcompensated through reckless pursuits, driven less by conviction than by a need to prove my worth, shaping how I related to myself and others long after leaving school. In spaces beyond the institutional classroom, I gradually processed the damage and began to recover a sense of self-worth that had been eroded over time. However, along this journey, I encountered a handful of exceptional educators who profoundly altered my perception of what a classroom could be.[3] Their presence illuminated the potential of educational spaces not merely as sites of knowledge transmission, but also as environments capable of fostering intellectual vitality, critical inquiry, and personal transformation. Perhaps my pursuit of teaching as a profession is an unconscious attempt to prolong that experience and share it with others.

To put this reflection in perspective, I would like to make my academic trajectory and the choice of autoethnography as a method explicit. Though my academic training began in political science, I gradually found its disciplinary boundaries limiting—particularly in addressing the micropolitical realities and affective textures of everyday life that interested me. This led me to sociology and eventually toward anthropology with a focus on ethnography of political emotions. Having lived through the political turbulence of Kashmir during my late childhood and early youth, I have long been conscious of the risks of over-relying on personal experience. As a result and also due to my early academic training, I have come to embrace autoethnography as a mode of inquiry rather reluctantly. Given this background, my research and teaching are shaped by a commitment to critical, reflexive engagement—an approach rooted in social sciences but informed by interdisciplinary crossings that foreground the political and affective dimensions of knowledge production.

The reflections that follow are not meant to serve as mere anecdotes or testimony, but as a way to theorize institutional life from within (Ellis et al., 2011). They serve as empirical and analytical tools to illuminate how caste, class, gender, community, and neoliberalism are experienced, negotiated, and contested in everyday university life. While cautious of the risks of self-indulgence and the challenge of maintaining rigorous self-reflexivity, I appreciate the radical potential of autoethnography to disrupt hierarchical modes of knowledge production. The method can give voice to silences and stories we as academics often ignore, self-censor, or suppress within institutional spaces

(Denzin, 2014; Wall, 2006). In this paper, the method enables me to attend to the affective and relational dimensions of pedagogy—how care and pain are distributed, withheld, or weaponized—in ways that other modes of inquiry perhaps would not.

The broader ideology of what education signifies—and what an ideal society should look like—has long influenced the functioning of educational institutions, from schools to universities, shaping the forms of discipline and pedagogy deemed acceptable. At first glance, linking the operations of schools with those of higher education may seem like a stretch. However, while their immediate goals may differ, the ideological foundations that inform pedagogy and institutional authority are deeply interconnected.[4] On a personal level, future educators, parents, and authority figures carry the embodied imprint of their own schooling experiences into various spheres of life. This dynamic resonates with Alice Miller's (1983) concept of "poisonous pedagogy" in *For Your Own Good*, where she critiques the normalization of authoritarian and punitive practices—such as corporal punishment—under the pretext of moral or character development. Miller contends that such methods not only inflict psychological harm but also perpetuate cycles of repression and obedience that shape individuals' lifelong relationships with power and authority which they also pass on to the future generations.

At the social and institutional level, Foucault (1995 [1977]) shows how disciplinary mechanisms—such as surveillance, normalization, and hierarchical observation—shape educational spaces by producing docile, regulated subjects. Separately, Bourdieu (1990 [1977]) emphasizes how schools reproduce social hierarchies through symbolic violence and the uneven distribution and recognition of cultural capital. Together, their insights suggest that these processes operate across educational levels not as fundamentally distinct processes, but as differences of degree rather than kind.

From Fear to Care

Over the course of my life, discourses on pedagogy have shifted significantly: while corporal punishment persists in some contexts, particularly in South Asia and elsewhere, its normative legitimacy has substantially eroded and it has been widely condemned internationally, banned in over 60 countries, and legally prohibited in Indian schools though still unevenly enforced (Gershoff, 2017; UNICEF, 2014; Vazir, 2011). What accounts for this shift? In part, it is driven by legal prohibitions—such as those in India—which reflect broader global shifts in pedagogical discourse toward more "modern" and ostensibly less coercive forms of social control (Tiwari, 2014).

Ironically, in Kashmir, this shift from pedagogy of pain and fear to one of care coincided with the rise of militancy and militarized violence. Collective corporal punishment and public humiliation became normalized tools of state control, even as educational discourse began advocating more compassionate approaches. In the early 1990s, the locus of violence and control seemed to move from classrooms and homes to streets, military camps, and interrogation centers. The armed insurgency and counterinsurgency operations subjected entire populations—including children—to new public forms of "discipline and punish." Yet the educational institutions were not spared: campuses were militarized, student hostels converted into garrisons, and student unions dissolved under

the pretext of security (Ahmad, 2013; Fazili et al., 2002). In such a context, the boundary between disciplining children and enforcing mass obedience blurred, with pedagogical and political violence becoming deeply entangled.

This transformation in Kashmir—and, to varying degrees, across South Asia—reveals a deeper paradox. While overt physical violence in educational settings appears to be declining, particularly in metropolitan areas, institutional cultures of deference, sycophancy, and coercion remain deeply entrenched. In urban centers, these dynamics have merely assumed more covert and insidious forms. Students and teachers who demonstrate compliance or proximity to power continue to be rewarded, while dissenters risk marginalization or punitive consequences. Although the discourse of care has gained institutional currency, its implementation is often superficial—coexisting uneasily with longstanding structures of hierarchy and control. In peripheral regions, by contrast, entire populations are increasingly subjected to collective forms of corporal punishment.[5] This reflects a broader project of mass disciplining—an effort to enforce submission to authority through fear, bodily harm, performative violence, and public humiliation, all under the pretext of restoring or maintaining order.[6]

The question, then, is not whether corporal punishment and related methods of exerting power in educational institutions and broader societies have declined, but what new modalities of power have replaced them—and where. How deep is this transformation—in attitudes, desires, and everyday practices? Where change is apparent, have the underlying ideologies of control merely been displaced, disguised, or truly dismantled? How do these dynamics manifest differently in metropolitan and peripheral contexts, in times of peace and in times of political crisis?

Autoethnographic Vignettes

I offer a series of biographical vignettes drawn from my experiences as a student, researcher, and teacher over the past three decades. Though partial and subjective—and largely centered on my engagements with two institutions as a teacher—these fragments localize and contextualize the broader reflection on the question of how power functions within educational spaces. Each episode reveals the underlying structural dynamics and cultural codes that determine who is permitted to belong, to speak, and to teach within that context.

As Foucault reminds us, power is not merely repressive but also productive—it circulates through institutions, discourses, and relationships, shaping the boundaries of what can be said, done, and imagined. These reflections seek to uncover how power operates within the domain of education, how it is shaped by both regimes of pain and care, and how educational spaces are continuously remade by changing circumstances and by our modes of engagement with them—just as we, in turn, are constantly shaped through this engagement.

Being Weeded Out

Two episodes as a contractual lecturer stand out in my experience: one was my quiet removal from a college in Srinagar, and the other, years later, from a university in

Delhi. Though similar in outcome, the two incidents differed in their methods of execution and justification—each revealing both brazen and subtle ways in which personal and institutional power is exercised.

Having been sent away from Kashmir by my parents during the onset of militancy—a period marked by counterinsurgency violence, disappearances, and the targeting of young boys (HRW, 1991, 1993; AI, 1993)—I returned to Srinagar after completing my Bachelor's degree at St. Joseph's College of Arts and Sciences, Bangalore, and my Master's at Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi, to teach Political Science as an ad hoc lecturer at a government degree college in Srinagar. Energized by the intellectual atmosphere I had recently experienced, I felt I had much to contribute. The curriculum in the college was predetermined, but there was freedom that emerged largely out of neglect of the authorities, who concerned themselves with monitoring the hours clocked in teaching, and left surprising room for maneuver for faculty to structure how and what to teach in class.

Before I delve into these experiences, I want to describe what colleges in Kashmir looked and felt like back then.

Colleges in Kashmir: Everyday Surveillance and Violence

Girls' colleges in Kashmir often resembled fortresses—students were confined to the campus from morning until evening, while their male counterparts enjoyed greater freedom, moving in and out of college gates at will. Uniforms were strictly enforced for girls, whereas boys faced no such requirements. Girls' bags were routinely subjected to surprise checks for "vanity items" or extra clothing, driven by the fear that they might stray away from home after classes to spend time with friends. No such intrusive scrutiny was imposed on boys.

Within the faculty, institutional hierarchies were stark. Senior permanent staff, particularly those with tenure, frequently abstained from teaching, preferring the comfort of the staff room over the classroom. Meanwhile, a large number of ad hoc lecturers carried the bulk of the academic load, often taking up to four classes of around 70 students each a day with little recognition or support.

The intellectual climate on campus, especially among faculty, often resembled the conservative social world of Kashmir more than a space of critical inquiry—a reflection of the region's institutional history, where modern education evolved through personalized authority, patronage, and social conformity rather than autonomous critical reason (Rai, 2004; Zutshi, 2004). This was particularly evident in the treatment of the social sciences and humanities, which were routinely disparaged—even by their own instructors—as frivolous or suitable only for students deemed not "bright enough" for the sciences. Principals presided over this environment like *Nawabs*[7]—enthroned behind grand desks, constantly flanked by a circle of idling loyalists and aspiring power brokers among the faculty, lounging on sofas and vying for influence. The university in Kashmir, though marginally better, was not immune to these patterns.

It was in this environment that I tried to connect political theory to the everyday concerns in Kashmir, exploring how politics shapes family life, social relationships, and

surrounding institutions including the college, religion, and the state. I used accessible language and drew on examples from everyday life to engage students, many of whom had little or no prior exposure to the social sciences. Over time, the classroom evolved into a genuinely dialogic and participatory space grounded in what may be described as a "pedagogy of care" (hooks, 1994; Noddings, 2005).

Yet this pedagogical approach increasingly came into tension with a deeply entrenched institutional culture structured around hierarchy, deference, and obedience to authority. In many postcolonial educational settings, respect is often conflated with submission, while authority is expected to remain unquestioned (Freire, 1970; Kumar, 2005). In the European context, such authoritarian forms of education have been conceptualized through the notion of "dark pedagogy" (*Schwarze Pädagogik*), associated with modern projects of discipline, rationalization, and moral reform aimed at regulating perceived deviance, unruliness, and particularly the bodies and sexuality of children (Miller, 1983; Rutschky, 1977). Rather than cultivating critical thought, these pedagogical regimes seek to produce obedient and self-regulating subjects through fear, shame, punishment, and the internalization of authority (Foucault, 1977).

In the context of Kashmir, what I understood as openness, participation, and critical engagement was at times perceived as a lack of discipline, excessive informality, or even a challenge to established authority. My "pedagogy of care" lasted for a couple of years—until these tensions began to generate problems.

At first, the issues seemed trivial—like a senior faculty member stopping me in the corridor to object to my wearing a *khadi kurta* and jeans instead of "formal" attire. There was also an unexplained resistance to faculty participating in seemingly harmless activities, such as playing table tennis with one another or with students during breaks. In another incident, a newly appointed principal—whom I had previously known as a social activist who once treated me as an equal—blocked my salary for several months, reportedly because I had not visited her office to formally congratulate her on her appointment.

Upon her retirement a year later, another senior faculty member from the college was promoted to principal.[8] The very next morning, she paraded around the campus with her entourage and abruptly shouted at a former peer—who happened to be chatting with me—"Keep moving!" Having seen them as equals just the day before, I found this sudden assertion of authority astonishing and deeply distasteful. A few days later, she entered the canteen where I was sitting with colleagues. Still unsettled by the earlier incident, I chose not to rise and greet her as others did. She took note of it—and did not forget.

By the following term, I was transferred to a college in a remote village. By then, our relationship had somewhat improved, so I called to ask if she could intervene to stop the transfer—a power she held.[9] Unaware that she had orchestrated it, I was taken aback when she replied, "Gowhar Sahab! You may be bright, but you must learn to respect authority." It became clear that this was a lesson in deference to power. Feeling humiliated and disillusioned, I withdrew from formal teaching and turned my attention to informal activism.

A few days later, two young men claiming to be college students came to my home and fired at me. I survived after undergoing multiple surgeries. To this day, I do not know who sent them—or why. I can only speculate that it may have been linked to

my efforts to question dominant political narratives through my teaching and pedagogical activism, or perhaps my involvement in initiatives aimed at fostering dialogue across communal, political, and geographical divides.[10]

In a politically charged environment characterized by ideological rigidity, deep suspicion, and personal rivalries, I may have unknowingly crossed an invisible line. In hindsight, I now understand the risks of appearing to pose a challenge to established institutional, moral or political authority under such conditions. However, the experience revealed a troubling continuum between the authority exercised within educational institutions and the broader mechanisms of control operating throughout society. Both the college principal and the individuals who orchestrated the attack on me were enacting a pedagogy of pain—each, in their own way, attempting to teach me deference to power, whether institutionalized or diffused across society. In both instances, my body became the terrain on which these pedagogies were inscribed—through humiliation, threat, fear, and damage. The violence was not merely disciplinary but formative, shaping how I learned to navigate authority, vulnerability, and survival in spaces ostensibly designed for learning or belonging.

These experiences in a degree college were not isolated institutional anomalies but part of a wider continuum of everyday surveillance, disciplinary authority, and coercive power that also shaped life on other campuses in Kashmir.

While running an informal learning platform on the lawns of Kashmir University, I witnessed an incident that starkly revealed how everyday life in militarized Kashmir is policed through surveillance, disciplinary authority, and normalized fear (Parashar, 2018; Varma, 2020; Zia, 2019). A proctor, flanked by armed personnel, descended on a couple sitting quietly under a tree near us. When they were unable to produce university identity cards, the proctor slapped the boy, forced him into a military-style open hooded vehicle, and drove him away—leaving the girl behind. This public display of power was a crude lesson in what he and the institution deemed "appropriate" interaction between men and women, using the boy as an example to assert control. In such an atmosphere, the very idea of fostering open, dialogic engagement felt absurd. Not long after, we raised funds to rent a private space where we could continue our work with a degree of safety and autonomy.

In another incident, a colleague of mine was physically attacked on campus by a well-built, bearded man, ironically affiliated with the International Committee of the Red Cross, who took offense to a piece of writing we had published—one he perceived as ideologically offensive. The man attempted to incite religious sentiments from a crowd that gathered against my colleague. Had a few bystanders not intervened, my colleague might have been lynched that day.

These anecdotes provide a personal account of the sociopolitical milieu of Kashmir during the early 2000s.

Teaching in Delhi: Erasure through Bureaucratic Error

Twelve years later, after completing my M.Phil. and Ph.D. in Sociology at the Delhi School of Economics, I joined a public university in Delhi as visiting faculty. In contrast

to Kashmir, the campuses and classrooms of most public universities in Delhi at that time appeared markedly more engaging and democratic. The intellectual discourse was notably more vibrant and elevated. As visiting faculty, I was largely insulated from the inner workings of administrative power. Although such institutional distance is often experienced by precarious academic workers as a form of alienation and powerlessness within increasingly stratified systems of academic labor (Bousquet, 2008; Rhoades, 1998), it afforded me a degree of pedagogical autonomy. As long as I fulfilled the required assessments, I was largely free to teach as I wished. The classroom thus became a fulfilling space of engagement, particularly with students seeking critical and contextually grounded approaches to knowledge. This continued for five years, even as the political climate in India was steadily deteriorating (Chatterji et al., 2019; Savani & Mandal, 2021).

One notable event outside the classroom was a public teach-in organized by students and a few faculty members in protest against the ongoing communal riots in East Delhi.[11] It was a peaceful effort to assert the need for public accountability and social responsibility toward the vulnerable, even as we tried to intellectually engage with the situation unfolding around us. Again, being part of this as visiting faculty may not have been wise. Before I could fully comprehend the implications, the campus shut down due to the COVID-19 lockdown, and teaching shifted online.

My contract extension, still under review, inexplicably went missing, leading to my salary being withheld for several months. My application for a permanent position was rendered unacceptable through a bureaucratic maneuver passed off as an inadvertent clerical lapse. Although no one said it directly, it soon became clear that I, along with a few other politically engaged faculty members, were no longer wanted in the university.

Meanwhile, a field trip proposal—an integral part of the course—was effectively "black-boxed." I found myself repeatedly responding to vaguely worded queries from the Dean, hastily scribbled in the margins of administrative documents, until the term quietly came to an end. The entire process felt deliberately obstructive, designed to exhaust. I continued to engage, fully aware that no substantive outcome would emerge. Eventually, I turned the experience into a teaching moment to demonstrate how bureaucratic power operates within educational institutions through opacity, delay, arbitrariness, and quiet forms of control—forms of domination that scholars have identified as central to the everyday functioning of modern bureaucracies (Auyero, 2012; Graeber, 2015; Gupta, 2012).

These shifts within the university unfolded alongside a rapidly transforming political landscape in Delhi. The BJP's return to power in 2019 consolidated a broader shift toward Hindu majoritarian nationalism (Jaffrelot, 2021), reshaping institutions, public discourse, and norms of dissent while narrowing secular and pluralist space. This ideological realignment became visible even among many self-identified liberal colleagues and institutions. Faced with the imperatives of a politically regressive and increasingly punitive order, many were forced to quit, others adapted with surprising ease, and in doing so, often reaped professional benefits (for the context, see e.g., Jayal, 2022; Hasan, 2025; Sundar, 2026) Silence became a strategy of survival; dissent gave way to quiet complicity. Petty injustices, arbitrary rules, and creeping authoritarianism on

campus were met with indifference, if not tacit approval. Those who resisted—or carried a legacy of resistance—were slowly sidelined, their work made increasingly untenable. Many eventually moved to private institutions, which, despite their own limitations, offered greater autonomy and room to breathe. However, these institutions—largely serving elite populations—are relatively estranged from the lower- and middle-class demography that many such faculty members aspired to engage. In doing so, they subject both educators and students to neoliberal regimes of care that depoliticize pedagogy and reconfigure teaching as commodified affective labor, ultimately reinforcing the interests of the privileged (Gill, 2016).

Although traces of resistance still flicker on the campus, the university today is a pale shadow of what it once was. The difficult, critical conversations that were possible just a few years ago—even amid an already hostile political climate—have all but vanished (Martelli, 2019). Campuses that once encouraged debate and dissent now echo with silence. Meanwhile, the continued incarceration of several student activists stands as a stark and sobering reminder of the narrowing space for intellectual freedom and political expression (AI, 2021; HRW, 2021).

Locating the Personal within the Political

These vignettes, though grounded in personal experience, reveal the institutional logics that structure everyday life across diverse educational settings. Universities and colleges are often idealized as spaces of critical inquiry, yet they simultaneously function as arenas where power is enacted through snobbery, surveillance, exclusion, and bureaucratic opacity. Moral codes governing interaction, dress, and deference, along with rigid disciplinary boundaries and procedural evasions, quietly reproduce the very inequalities these institutions claim to contest. Taken together, these memories offer not just recollection but evidentiary traces of institutional life, illuminating the precarious terrain where pedagogy, politics, and power intersect.

These episodes also point to differing aesthetics of institutional authority (Ahmed, 2014; Bourdieu, 1990). In public institutions at the margins of the state, particularly in contexts shaped by conflict or insecurity, control is often exercised through overt coercion and physical force (Mignolo, 2011; Subramanian, 2019). By contrast, metropolitan universities tend to operate through more codified performances of civility, procedure, and liberal restraint. Yet in both settings, pedagogies of pain are frequently directed at those who attempt pedagogies of care—educators and students who practice critique, empathy, or relational accountability. Such acts of care, especially when expressed as dissent or refusal, are often recast as threats to institutional order. In this sense, critique itself becomes a form of care (Fernando, 2019): a refusal to reproduce harm, even when such refusal carries consequences. Across these contexts, institutional logics converge in their capacity to regulate dissent, assign belonging, and sustain authority.

While aesthetic forms of power differ between peripheral and metropolitan institutions, they are linked by a broader ideological continuum. Both rely on mechanisms of control, though one tends toward overt coercion and the other toward concealment. In elite metropolitan settings, authoritarianism often masquerades as collegiality: the

performance of liberalism—of inclusivity, transparency, and intellectual openness—can obscure entrenched hierarchies that must be carefully navigated rather than openly named. This is particularly evident in patterns of academic gatekeeping along caste and community lines, which persist across faculty hiring, peer networks, and institutional recognition (Deshpande, 2013; Gopal, 2021; Rege, 2006). Advancement frequently depends on managing these informal structures through silence, deference, and affective labor. By contrast, institutions in peripheral contexts often display power more bluntly, rewarding visible compliance while punishing dissent without procedural disguise.

These dynamics resonate with broader critiques of neoliberal academic culture, where institutional commitments to meritocracy and inclusion frequently mask enduring hierarchies. Ahmed (2012, 2021) shows how diversity work becomes both a site of institutional labor and exhaustion, while Gill (2016) highlights the affective precarity of academic life under neoliberal conditions. Readings (1996) similarly diagnoses the university's shift toward managerialism, in which institutional value is increasingly detached from intellectual or ethical commitments and reorganized around performative metrics.

In many private schools, a comparable logic structures relations between administration and teachers, producing quasi-feudal forms of dependency in which intellectual autonomy is limited and performance is measured through rigid, quantifiable targets. Drawing on both personal experience and the accounts of colleagues across institutions, dissent is often actively discouraged, and even minor acts of questioning may be reported or instrumentalized, leading to the marginalization of those who advocate change. Although corporal punishment has become less visible, psychological coercion—through surveillance, shaming, and subtle threats—continues to shape the affective environment of many schools (Kumar, 2005; Nambissan, 2010). In contexts such as Kashmir, government schools and colleges are also routinely incorporated into performances of state power, with teachers and students drawn into nationalist spectacle, particularly in the period following the de-operationalization of Article 370 in 2019 (Andrabi, 2023; Zia, 2020). Across India schools often reproduce the ideological and hierarchical logics of universities, even when they appear more orderly or apolitical.

Despite recurring claims to liberalism, many Indian educational institutions—public and private alike—remain structurally authoritarian. Bureaucratic cultures tend to reward compliance and penalize critique. Junior faculty defer to seniority, nonconformity is discouraged, and dissent is frequently managed through exclusion, both formal and informal. In such settings, belonging itself becomes conditional on the ability to perform loyalty.

Shifting Pedagogical Paradigms

Returning to the distinction between pedagogies of pain and care introduced at the beginning, it is useful to briefly consider their genealogies and contemporary reproduction. The pedagogy of pain has deep roots in religious, philosophical, and political traditions in which corporal and psychological punishment were long legitimized as instruments of moral formation and social order. In its modern articulation, this logic is also bound up with Enlightenment rationality and the "disciplinary" project of modern institutions,

including schooling and the state, where coercion is rendered technical, efficient, and normalized (Foucault, 1977; Kumar, 2005). In its most extreme form, these rationalized pedagogies of control have been associated with authoritarian and fascist regimes, where education becomes a site for producing obedience, conformity, and exclusionary political subjectivities (Arendt, 1951; Marcuse, 1969). Yet, even within these same traditions, counter-ethics of compassion and care persist as enduring moral resources. The pedagogy of care likewise draws on longstanding ethical and spiritual traditions, but in its contemporary form it emerges more explicitly through feminist and decolonial critiques of authoritarian and technocratic models of education—models grounded in violence, surveillance, and emotional repression (hooks 1994; Noddings, 1984; Tronto, 1993).

Thinkers such as bell hooks (1994), Carol Gilligan (1982), Nel Noddings (1984, 2005), and Paulo Freire (2000 [1970]) have been central to this shift, challenging oppressive educational paradigms and advocating for pedagogies rooted in empathy, mutual respect, and critical consciousness. However, despite the growing prominence of care as a pedagogical ideal, it has not remained immune to the influence of prevailing systems and logics of power.

In recent decades, as education has become increasingly privatized under neoliberal regimes, the language of care has been appropriated and repurposed. Rather than fostering justice or deep relationality, care is often instrumentalized—to enhance productivity, regulate emotion, and enforce compliance. Institutions recast care as a form of emotional labor, demanded of educators without corresponding institutional support or recognition (Hochschild, 1983; Lynch et al., 2009). As Megan Boler (1999) argues, this co-optation depoliticizes and privatizes care, turning it into a managerial strategy that pacifies dissent and upholds institutional control.

This neoliberal framing shifts the responsibility for student well-being from structural systems to individual educators—frequently contingent and precariously employed—thereby obscuring systemic inequalities and weakening care's transformative potential (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005; Gill, 2016; Gill & Orgad, 2018). Michel Foucault (2008) might interpret this as a function of governmentality: a recalibration of power through the internalization of market logics that reshape educational institutions. Under this regime, care becomes a biopolitical tool—an affective technology that fosters self-regulation and individual accountability while allowing institutions to appear compassionate, even as they perpetuate hierarchy and exclusion.

Pain and care are not inherently liberatory or oppressive. Both can be mobilized to sustain conservative social orders or to disrupt them. Pain often functions as a disciplinary tool—imposed through punishment, humiliation, or exclusion to enforce conformity and obedience. However, within a psychoanalytic and feminist framework, pain can also become a site of critical consciousness: when it is confronted as psychic resistance to knowing and emancipation (Rose, 2007); when it is voluntarily embraced as labor on the self, or acknowledged, narrated, and politicized as part of collective memory and struggle. This is reflected in ethical and spiritual traditions that treat suffering as transformative practice, including ascetic strands in Buddhism, Gandhian self-suffering as ethical and political force, Sufi devotion, Christian narratives of Christ's passion, Shia

remembrance of Karbala, Socratic acceptance of death, and Sikh traditions of martyrdom and righteous resistance (Uberoi, 2015).

As such, pain and care may function as instruments of compliance or serve as frameworks for individual transformation and collective resistance (Ahmed, 2014; Foucault, 1977; Tronto, 1993). The emancipatory potential of pain and care depends not only on how they are conceptualized but also on the political and institutional contexts in which they are enacted (Freire, 2000 [1970]; hooks, 1994).

Persistence of Pain

At the college in Kashmir, a front-bencher once told me at the end of the term, after I had invited critical feedback: "You are an excellent teacher, but there's no discipline in your classes. There should be more discipline." Her response prompted me to reflect on what she meant by "discipline" and why its absence felt troubling.

There was indeed a degree of disorder in my classes—but it was intentional. Inspired by one of my own college teachers, I often began sessions by provoking debate around contentious issues, encouraging students to express conflicting views with passion. Only afterward would I draw connections, identify patterns, and relate them back to the prescribed text. For me, teaching was less about transmitting information than about helping students think and articulate themselves through active engagement. A class filled with laughter or disagreement felt intellectually alive. Yet what I experienced as productive engagement was perceived by the student as chaos. Her desire for discipline, I suspect, reflected the structured environments she had internalized as normal and desirable. Its absence therefore felt disorienting.

The persistence of pedagogies of pain and authoritarian order—and the desire for them, even where subtler forms of control are available—can be traced to ideologies that legitimize hierarchy and punishment. In societies shaped by caste, patriarchy, majoritarian nationalism, and other conservative social values, discipline, submission, and suffering are often treated as necessary for moral and intellectual growth. Pain becomes not merely a tool of control but also a cultural ideal. In such contexts, the absence of pain can itself feel unsettling. Universities that encourage critical thinking therefore emerge as sites of danger. Nostalgia for order and certainty fosters attachment to authoritarian pedagogies, especially when egalitarian approaches are perceived as permissive or chaotic. Moreover, when education is reduced to credentialing and social mobility, conformity increasingly displaces critical inquiry. Thus, even where overt violence declines, the cultural logic that sanctifies hierarchy—and the pain it demands—remains deeply embedded in educational life.

Pain and care must therefore be treated as critical categories: whose pain, desired by whom, and toward what end? Care for whom, by whom, and to what end? Such questions must shape the institution as a whole rather than reduce care to the customer-service logic of a provider managing consumers.

These commitments to hierarchy become especially visible during political crises, when the liberal language of care recedes and the coercive foundations of institutional order reappear. Moments of crisis expose forms of violence that liberal institutions

ordinarily suppress. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, states across the world intensified surveillance and control, using emergency as a pretext to reassert disciplinary authority (Tréguer, 2021). In India, drones used to monitor lockdown compliance epitomized this shift, where disciplinary control eclipsed genuine care (Sharma, 2021).

Universities in Delhi similarly used the lockdown to entrench disciplinary regimes. Political graffiti was erased permanently, and spaces associated with assembly and dissent were dismantled or barricaded. The logic of control extended beyond the pandemic. During the 2020 attack on students and faculty at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNUTA, 2020), the return of physical violence on campus revealed a deeper commitment to punishing dissent. Just months earlier, police had stormed Jamia Millia Islamia and violently cracked down on protesting students inside libraries and classrooms (PUDR, 2019). Widely condemned, the assault demonstrated how swiftly state power could be deployed to suppress student activism under the guise of maintaining order.

These moments reveal the persistence of hierarchical ideologies that equate disruption with disorder and justify repression as discipline. In such contexts, care becomes less a transformative ethic than a selective mechanism of governance. By 2019–2020, educational institutions in Delhi had begun to resemble those in Kashmir during the 1990s and early 2000s: campuses once imagined as spaces of critical inquiry increasingly came under surveillance and coercive control. What was once exceptional in the periphery had begun to echo in the metropolis, revealing a broader authoritarian turn.

Conclusion: Rethinking Power, Pedagogy, and Possibility

This paper began with the argument that pedagogy is not confined to classrooms or universities but circulates through everyday practices, institutions, and social relations. Drawing on experiences across educational spaces in Kashmir and Delhi, I have argued that contemporary institutions are shaped by an uneasy coexistence between two pedagogical logics: one rooted in discipline, hierarchy, and suffering, and another articulated through care, inclusion, and well-being. These logics are not simply oppositional. Pedagogies of pain, rooted in overlapping colonial, caste-based, and institutional regimes of discipline (Das, 2007; Dirks 2001; Foucault, 1977; Kumar, 2005), continue to persist beneath modern institutional life, resurfacing most visibly during moments of political crisis or institutional strain. At the same time, the language of care, once associated with feminist and critical pedagogical interventions, has increasingly been absorbed into managerial vocabularies in ways that often dilute its transformative potential.

Educational institutions reproduce social hierarchies not only through formal curricula but also through everyday practices that normalize authority and obedience. As Bourdieu and Passeron (1990 [1977]) argue, schools reproduce dominant social values while presenting them as neutral or meritocratic. In societies shaped by long histories of caste, colonial authority, patriarchy, and militarization, authoritarian pedagogies remain culturally intelligible even when formally disavowed. Humiliation, discipline, and deference continue to carry moral legitimacy within many educational and familial contexts.

Foucault's (1977) analysis of disciplinary power helps explain how these forms endure through transformation rather than disappearance. Modern institutions

increasingly govern through surveillance, evaluation, and self-regulation rather than overt punishment alone. Attendance systems, continuous assessment, bureaucratic monitoring, and reputational hierarchies encourage individuals to internalize discipline. In this context, the shift from punishment to care often masks rather than dismantles underlying structures of control. Discourses of well-being, resilience, and emotional management may soften institutional authority while leaving unequal power relations intact.

This tension is particularly visible within contemporary universities. As Gill and Orgad (2018) argue, neoliberal institutions increasingly frame structural precarity as an individual psychological problem to be managed through resilience and self-care. Feminist scholars of care similarly remind us that care is not merely an administrative technique but also a political and ethical relation grounded in responsibility and attentiveness to power (Noddings, 1984; Tronto, 1993). Yet institutional invocations of inclusion and care often coexist with the silencing of dissent and the reproduction of hierarchy (Ahmed, 2012, 2021).

The cases discussed in this paper illustrate these contradictions. In Kashmir, universities function within a deeply militarized social world where surveillance, fear, and restrictions on mobility shape everyday academic life. In Delhi, campuses increasingly experience ideological policing, bureaucratic pressure, and shrinking spaces for dissent. In both settings, moments of crisis reveal how quickly institutional commitments to dialogue, care, and democratic participation can give way to pedagogical logics grounded in coercion and conformity.

The persistence of pedagogies of pain therefore reflects not a return to a premodern past but the continued interaction of historical hierarchies with contemporary forms of governance. Colonial legacies, caste structures, religious conservatism, militarization, and authoritarian nationalism intersect with newer managerial regimes to produce institutions where care and control coexist in unstable ways. The result is a fragile educational public sphere in which critical pedagogical practices survive only unevenly and often precariously.

Reimagining pedagogy under such conditions requires more than replacing punishment with the rhetoric of care. It demands confronting the broader institutional and political arrangements that normalize hierarchy, suppress dissent, and reproduce inequality. Pedagogies of care can retain emancipatory potential only when tied to structures that genuinely redistribute authority, protect critical inquiry, and sustain democratic participation within institutions.

The central argument of this paper therefore returns to where it began: pedagogy exceeds the classroom. It shapes how authority is imagined, how obedience is normalized, and how possibilities for critical thought and collective freedom are either expanded or foreclosed within everyday social life.

Author Note

This manuscript is an original work and has not been published or submitted elsewhere. I affirm that all sources have been properly cited and that the content complies with the ethical guidelines of the journal.

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Notes

1. This account draws on the author's schooling experience in Kashmir and corroborating discussions with peers and family, reflecting broadly shared practices across public and private, English- and Urdu-medium schools during this period. Observations on girls' schooling are based primarily on accounts from women in the author's family who attended relatively privileged private schools, though practices likely varied by class and setting, with greater use of corporal punishment in government schools in smaller towns and rural areas.
2. Narratives that justified corporal punishment were widespread across homes, schools, and broader cultural discourse. I recall, in particular, stories shared by my father and grandfather describing the severe punishments teachers routinely inflicted on students.
3. See Acknowledgments.
4. On the history and legitimation of corporal punishment elsewhere, see Scott (2016 [1938]).
5. By "metropolitan areas" and "peripheries," I refer not simply to geographic locations but to the underlying social, economic, and political inequalities that structure them (Mignolo, 2011; Subramanian, 2019).
6. More recently, strategies of repression have emerged on university campuses in both the United States and India, including the criminalization of student protest, intensified surveillance, arrests, heavy policing, and the labelling of dissent as "anti-national" (Chauhan et al., 2016; HRW, 2016). These practices target specific student groups while also signaling a broader normalization of authoritarian control and the suppression of dissent.

7. *Nawab*: a title for South Asian Muslim rulers, later used in Orientalist discourse to denote a wealthy, extravagant Indian ruler associated with luxury and display.
8. As a result of its social prestige, the position of college principal was highly coveted and typically secured late in one's career by those with strong political connections.
9. Transfers of ad hoc faculty in government colleges were formally overseen by the Controller but effectively guided by institutional recommendations.
10. Alongside college teaching, I was involved in SPACE, an informal initiative linking lived experience with intellectual engagement.
11. In 2020, following the Northeast Delhi riots (Datta, 2020), the university continued functioning for three days despite many students being from affected areas. While violence unfolded in parts of the city, campus life proceeded as normal until concerns were raised and classes were suspended. Students and faculty then mobilized for relief work and organized teach-ins outside the classroom.

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