

India: Adhocism and its discontents: Waiting for the modern Yuyutsu

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This is the first part of a two-parts article on the issue of job insecurity of ad-hoc teachers in Delhi University.

A little close to a decade ago, when I was working as an ad-hoc teacher, I recall a particular incident which left me extremely disturbed and sad. I was walking through my college car park and came across a young ad-hoc female colleague who was breast-feeding her baby in her car. Her baby was not keeping well and she looked quite hassled. I was taken aback for a few seconds as I quickly gauged the arrangement that she had been forced to make - her new-born infant in tow with her mother-in-law, cramped into a car! Unable to avail of adequate leave post her delivery and with no creche in college, my colleague was juggling childcare in this awkward manner. Her lack of options left me with a sickening and a very hollow feeling. A feeling which keeps returning, for sadly, very little has changed since then.

Indeed, Delhi University (DU) has been home to a constantly expanding crisis involving scores of ad-hoc teachers who are employed in its numerous colleges and departments. At present, the 5000-odd ad-hoc teachers constitute approximately half the faculty strength in the University. To those with an iota of concern for the teaching profession, the sheer size of this workforce of teachers, employed through short 120-days contracts, represents a gigantic anomaly in the functioning of a public-funded institution. Worst still, a heartrending situation now unfolds with the displacement of a bulk of long-serving ad-hoc teachers, who fulfil all the required eligibilities and have contributed to the functioning of our DU system.

Projecting the recent drive at permanent appointments as its entrenched 'commitment' towards weeding out the ad-hoc system, the DU administration and some quarters of DU teachers are strategically concealing the victimization of serving ad-hoc teachers. The present celebratory din regarding permanent appointments seeks to divert attention away from the surgical displacement of a vast majority of serving ad-hoc teachers, as well as the strategic administrative move to remove ad-hoc positions altogether through the appointment of even more vulnerable contractual guest teachers to fresh teaching positions that are emerging.

Damocles sword

Notably, successive DU administrations have been party to the serious violation of the University's own statutory norms on ad-hoc appointments. For example, DU's own Executive Council (EC) Resolution No. 120 (8) of 27.12. 2007 states that:

"i) In case there is a sudden, unexpected and short vacancy, arising out of a sudden sickness or death, on medical grounds (including maternity leave), abrupt leave or any other situation that may disrupt the normal process of teaching-learning, an ad hoc appointment may be made....

iv) The ad hoc appointment shall only be made for a period of more than one month and up to four months (i.e., 120 days) in accordance with the provisions contained in clause 3(1) of Ordinance XII.

v) Whenever the vacancy arises for the duration of more than four months, the same may be filled up on temporary basis as per due process and procedure i.e., through a duly constituted Selection Committee.”

In the backdrop of this EC resolution on the emergency or transient nature of ad-hoc employment, and the corresponding stipulations to convert such positions into temporary and eventually permanent ones post a period of four months, it is a criminal apathy that well-qualified ad-hoc teachers have been teaching continuously without being made permanent. Permanent employment not only ensures access to several employment benefits but also greater parity within the workforce of teachers. However, precisely when DU's ad-hoc teachers could have entered into this domain of greater job security and parity, a sizeable number of them have been displaced and rendered unemployed. Now the Damocles sword of displacement is hanging on remaining ad-hoc teachers in DU.

Part of the problem stems from the fact that the DU administration strongly seeks to dismantle the ad-hoc employment system. This is not out of any genuine humanitarian concern about vast contractual employment within the teaching cadre, which is evident given the DU administration's concerted endeavours to fill teaching vacancies increasingly through an army of paid-by-hour guest lecturers. This replacement is a strategic manoeuvre considering that ad-hoc teachers have won certain benefits akin to permanent Assistant Professors, i.e., with respect to the same entry-level pay, certain number of guaranteed leaves, summer salary, and more recently, an end to periodic displacement based on semester-wise or yearly interviews for renewal/reappointment.

An army of vulnerable and insecure ad-hoc teachers in colleges and departments has simply swelled over time; reaching a figure that is now half of the University's faculty strength. This is due to the fact that ad-hoc teaching positions have not been converted to permanent positions with DU's recruitment process grinding to halt post 2009-10. As permanent faculty retired, intake of students increased over time, and workloads were enhanced under the Choice-Based Credit System (CBCS), new substantive teaching positions have grown significantly. But for a long time, the process of permanent appointments has been derailed since 2010. Only a small number of permanent appointments were made in a few colleges and departments in 2014-15 and in 2018-19. As a result, what are supposed to be very short vacancies have translated into the situation wherein a growing number of qualified teachers have been languishing for years as ad-hoc teachers.

Further, as reported by some ad-hoc faculty, there are colleges which have been running self-financed courses for years and employing mostly ad-hocs to the teaching positions. In the recent permanent appointments made in these colleges, either no positions have been advertised at all under these self-financed courses or a miniscule number have been advertised through formal inclusion in the teaching roster via questionable means.

Now with permanent appointments being made through a so-called 'open' recruitment process that has seen massive displacement, there looms in many ad-hoc teachers a sense of betrayal as they have been rendered without a livelihood after having taught in colleges/departments and contributing to the University for years. They have been falsely promised that they will be retained and regularized in open interviews, which of course has remained a hoax. In majority of these interviews, it has been felt that merit and past experience do not count, and that it is rather non-merit factors like nepotism, cronyism, favoritism, adherence, liaising, influencing and obeisance that

are at play.

A close examination of the faculty appointments recently made across colleges reveals the displacement of nearly 72 percent of serving ad-hoc teachers – a fact reported by the national media. Over 300 plus ad-hoc teachers have been displaced out of approximately 425 appointments made up till early January 2023. The unfolding situation clearly contradicts the principles of parity and natural justice as serving ad-hoc teachers have been ascribed absolutely no advantage or special consideration for the years they have put in as DU teachers. Those displaced from colleges where they have been working also rightfully argue that if their own employing institutions did not hire them as permanent faculty, their chances in other colleges are abysmally low.

The call for regularization by the pro-government clique currently heading the Delhi University Teachers Association (DUTA) amounts to thuggery, more so given the corruption influencing recent appointments. Their claims of facilitating the appointment of serving ad-hoc teachers as permanent faculty in colleges and departments ring hollow. Theirs is a position which merely implies the retention of *some* serving ad-hoc teachers, and conveniently propagates that those displaced will be reemployed in subsequent interviews. The fact that those displaced and “adjusted” elsewhere has been possible only by displacing other serving ad-hoc teachers is, of course, brushed under the carpet. The vicious circle of displacement therefore continues unabated despite the ruling clique’s tall claims.

The enforced ‘permanency’ of insecure ad-hoc positions and appended career stagnation is just the tip of the ice-berg. There is much more to the heartburn of this large cadre of DU teachers. Confronted with numerous inequalities and discrimination, DU’s ad-hoc teachers clearly constitute an underclass of teachers. Ad-hoc teachers are burdened by high job insecurity, higher workloads, ever-expanding volumes of official college/departmental work, and are denied several service benefits like adequate leaves, medical reimbursements, etc. Typically, even though on paper they are to be assigned just 16 hours of classes, their spread-out timetables and their placement in various college/department committees that are involved in admissions, NAAC accreditation work and NIRF-related data collection, ensures that they are putting in many more hours per week. Many such teachers end up working from home beyond the work hours stipulated by the UGC Regulations.

It is also a known (mal)practice in certain colleges to calculate the break-day and re-joining of ad-hoc teachers in a manner that often leads to the denial of salary of more than a day. Further, up till recently, many colleges conducted semester-wise or yearly interviews for the renewal of ad-hoc teachers; using the occasion to often discontinue the services of serving ad-hoc teachers or to deny summer salary by postponing their re-joining beyond the first day of the new academic session.

Of course, as the number of ad-hoc teachers has grown within DU, they have wrested certain concessions from the system. Some crucial battles proved victorious, such as in the grant of summer salaries and maternity leave, the discontinuation of semester-wise/yearly interviews for reappointment, etc. However, these provisions have continually been undercut, as is evident in the persistent struggle of female ad-hoc teachers to easily avail maternity leave for the period requested, the tendency in some colleges and departments to hire only guest teachers even before the current Vice Chancellor’s verbal farmans were issued, and more recently, with respect to the denial of additional earned leave for the pandemic-cum-lockdown period in which it was largely ad-hoc teachers who worked throughout the vacations under intermeshed academic calendars.

The longue durée of adhocism

Ad-hoc teachers within the DU system have for a long time been weighed down by massive job insecurity and offloading of a lot of work onto their shoulders under a sickening patron-client culture

that has lured them with the promise of permanent jobs. Despite the routinized overwork, belittling and harassment, majority of these teachers have not lost heart, and have consistently contributed to the academic enrichment of their students and departments. Many have also consciously carried out rigorous research, actively published, and completed PhDs and faculty development programs.

Notably, brushing aside meritorious and hardworking ad-hoc teachers, several of the appointments that took place under the recruitment drive of 2014-15 also smacked of nepotism. In these handful of colleges that held interviews, there were plenty of instances of long-serving ad-hoc teachers being superseded by junior ad-hoc colleagues. Ironically, some of the long-serving ad-hoc teachers remained as ad-hocs in the same colleges. It brings us to the following questions, which have been conveniently brushed aside. For one, why were all substantive posts *not* advertised. Secondly, why weren't several serving ad-hoc teachers made permanent if they were still considered worthy enough to be continued in their colleges as ad-hoc faculty even after being denied permanent appointments in those institutions.

Clearly then, irrespective of their services rendered, several ad-hoc teachers in the past have routinely lost employment during earlier cycles of recruitments to permanent positions. Of course, the numbers were never what they currently stand at. Moreover, the chances of displaced ad-hoc teachers re-entering the DU system on the same entry-level pay as permanent Assistant Professors still existed up till recently. Till the start of the 2022-23 academic session, at least displaced ad-hoc teachers could hope for a re-entry as ad-hoc faculty in other colleges that had new vacancies emerge. Such re-entry has now been snatched away with only guest lecturer positions being advertised against new vacancies emerging in colleges and departments.

More importantly, the woes of this cadre of teachers has grown exponentially in the context of various manoeuvres of successive regimes heading the DUTA. The emotions, anxiety and insecurity of ad-hoc teachers have been used to galvanize these vulnerable teachers under the banner of one teachers' group or the other. Meanwhile, the system of ad-hoc employment has been allowed to persist and grow. It has of course bred a desperate, relatively captive vote bank, and the culture of subletting a lot of work onto ad-hoc teachers. Indeed, all 'big' teachers' groups have milked the structure of *ad hocism*, some of course more than others.

At the current juncture, we know what is the exact perception about the existing ruling clique in the DUTA, and many speak eloquently against their machinations, but we tend to forget that the ongoing crisis of *ad hocism* has been brewing for long. This is akin to what I remember as a very interesting concept from my school Physics class, called *parallax vision*. It refers to a situation, for example, when we are driving, things closer seem to move faster compared to things further away, which might otherwise be moving faster.

While there may be some exceptions to the norms and a few recruitments post 2010, the overall trend has been to sustain this underclass of teachers within the university system. In other words, irrespective of the sloganistic politics of various groups in the DUTA, there has been a vested interest in keeping them there in *permanent ad hocism*. It has largely been through self-assertion and due to the support from strong local staff associations that ad-hoc teachers have managed to access some parity in their work conditions.

Needless to say, in and around elections, the rising figures of ad-hoc teachers within the university system has had a certain signalling effect. With their growing numbers, their electoral significance for teachers' groups has escalated; leading to an opportunistic raising of their issues and mere rhetoric. Since 2016, for example, when the demand for absorption first surfaced, the laying down of its precise modalities has been consciously avoided by teachers' groups; resulting in action programs that are at best piecemeal and merely symbolic. In real terms, no teachers' group has

worked towards building a proper movement for legislative action on the demand of absorption.

Conniving groupism

The situation involving ad-hoc teachers has rapidly translated into an acute crisis since the tenure of the then Vice-Chancellor, Professor Deepak Pental. As is well known, regular permanent appointments against substantive teaching positions were put on hold by 2010. What subsequently unfolded was a painstaking process in which eligible candidates would be repeatedly filling out forms for positions that were advertised, but for which interviews would rarely materialize. At the time, the DUTA was led by a teachers' forum backed by the ruling Congress government at the Centre. This group was more interested in justifying and operationalizing devastating reforms; a marked contrast to the appearance of opposition which it currently projects when out of power. Rather than pressing forth with regular permanent appointments, they began to increasingly throw in their lot with a slew of so-called 'reforms' that the ruling government sought to push through in the higher education sector in line with its compliance with World Trade Organization's General Agreement on Trades in Services (WTO-GATS). The imposition of the semester system in 2011 and the brief introduction of a four-year undergraduate program (FYUP) structure in 2013-14 were detrimental alterations that were possible due to the increasingly collaborationist line of union politics that was steadily becoming the norm. Meanwhile, many concerned teacher-activists who argued for concrete modalities to stem the tide of the growing adhocism and to allow for transparent permanent appointments were simply ignored. Unfortunately, endeavours to finetune modalities for retention of serving ad-hoc teachers were repeatedly defeated in the DUTA Executive and University AC meetings.

In this light, it is important to note the discussions on the often-quoted DU Ordinance XIII-A of 1977-78, which is projected as a precedent and as an example of successful absorption of ad-hoc teachers in some quarters of the teaching community. Importantly, there exist two positions regarding this Ordinance. One is that we can use this Ordinance format to attain absorption of serving ad-hoc teachers. The other position argues that the Ordinance has been rendered infructuous by a Supreme Court ruling of 1994 in the case of Raj Singh vs University of Delhi, and thus, the DUTA GBM held on 27.02.2018 decided unanimously to press for a one-time regulation for absorption through the UGC/Union government.

Importantly, this 2018 DUTA GBM resolution was not reached because of any magnanimity of the then ruling group in the DUTA, but was due to the sheer groundswell of pressure built up by common ad-hoc teachers. How can one forget that the seriousness and commitment towards the realization of this 2018 DUTA GBM resolution has been missing almost from the beginning. The lack of commitment was most evident in the active curtailment of strike action in December 2019 - early January 2020 by the then DUTA leadership. This strike action was precipitated by ad-hoc teachers following a DU notification of 28.08.2019 which proposed contractualization of teaching positions in the University. The proposed measure triggered panic across the board among ad-hoc teachers, amounting to a serialised effect and a (temporary) rupture from routinized subservience and passivity.

In the initial days, the then DUTA took tokenistic measures in response to the troubling notification, but the threat to ad-hoc teachers across the board prompted unprecedented mass action that took the leadership by surprise. Many hailed such self-action as hooliganism, foolhardiness, etc. However, the discontent and anger of ad-hoc teachers, though reprehensible to some, was understandable. The DUTA leadership strove to constrain the groundswell whilst trying to project that it would not compromise the interests of teachers. Teachers' groups in the opposition opportunistically threw in their lot with the strike that emerged; of course, doing precious little to sustain it by ensuring maximum participation. Many of the prominent members of these teachers' groups in the opposition

took a militant position in the EC and GBMs of the DUTA, but in their colleges played a dubious role with respect to the strike.

The brief capture of the Vice-Chancellor's office by a sea of agitating teachers, nonetheless, brought the Government and UGC to the negotiating table at lightening speed; resulting in a written agreement on 05.12.2019, also referred to as the 5th December Record of Discussions. As per these negotiations, the Government and University agreed to amend the UGC Regulations 2018 so as to give weightage to the past service of ad-hoc/temporary teachers at the level of screening for appointments to permanent positions. In this way, ad-hoc teachers officially gained the right to be called for interviews conducted for permanent positions. Further, the 5th December Record of Discussions stipulated the continuation of ad-hoc teachers on their current positions till permanent appointments were made, which marked a huge relief, given the administrative push towards replacement of ad-hoc tenures with forms of contractual and guest lecturer employment. The concerns regarding displacement of serving ad-hoc teachers due to introduction of the EWS roster were also addressed in the 5th December Record of Discussions. In this regard, the Government and UGC agreed to sanction additional teaching positions due to the 25 percent EWS reservation expansion. This meant that in the eventuality of the roster changing, the additional posts granted along with EWS expansion would ensure that existing ad-hocs would not be displaced.

With immediate relief at hand, the union leaders inched towards compromise, eventually making the strike difficult to sustain. Deliberations on modalities of absorption as per the correct DoPT roster continued to be pushed into abeyance by all teachers' groups, and although a sit-in continued outside the DU VC's office, hardly any measures were taken to channelize energies against the Government, which alone has the authority to grant a one-time regulation for absorption. Despite the majority of ad-hoc teachers wanting to continue the strike, it was shamelessly withdrawn; sabotaging the momentum gained and the movement launched against adhocism. Since then, it has been a downward spiral with the University-Ministry combine successfully chipping away at teachers' unity, and the self-assertion-cum-confidence of ad-hoc teachers in the concerted bid to dismantle the DUTA and the core structure of the public-funded university. No interviews materialized in the new session of 2020-21, as stipulated in the 5th December 2019 Record of Discussion, and to date, neither have additional teaching positions been sanctioned in the wake of the EWS reservation expansion.

Beyond the impasse?

What does this sliding slope tell us? Apart from the compromised politics of the 'big' groups on the question of adhocism, conditions amply reveal how job insecurity breeds a certain degree of intellectual subservience among ad-hoc teachers. This is best captured in the 'keep quiet', conformist mentality that many of these teachers harbour. We also see subservience at play in terms of the unrealistic optimism with which many ad-hoc teachers have thrown in their lot with various ruling cliques in the DUTA. It is only at particular conjunctures that ad-hoc teachers' self-assertive initiatives and mobilization have materialized. Such self-assertion and mass mobilization was recently seen during the December 2019 strike. Sadly, as in this case, and in several other instances, the self-activity of ad-hoc teachers soon gave way to passivity. This passivity was intermeshed with a marked confusion around the whole argument of absorption. Reassured of the continuity of their tenures as ad-hoc teachers until permanent positions were filled through interviews, and convinced that the modalities of absorption could be clinched post the formal approval of this demand by the government, the struggle of ad-hoc teachers soon abated with the lifting of the strike. Thus, the concerted movement required to wrest a one-time relief for retention of serving ad-hoc teachers was not launched and consolidated. With no movement for a one-time regulation, nor ad-hoc teachers' self-activity coming to the fore, absorption remained a mere tokenistic slogan.

Since then, we have seen a new ruling clique take charge of the DUTA leadership in 2021, and ad-hoc teachers fall trap to its slogan of regularization of serving teachers. Since the collapse of the 2019-20 struggle, an unreasonable optimism has prevailed within ad-hoc teachers that the pro-government group when voted into power will push through long-awaited interviews to permanent positions, along with the regularization of those working in ad-hoc/temporary capacity. In recent months, the earlier slogan of absorption has been superseded by claims of regularization of serving ad-hoc teachers. This has been possible given the cynicism surrounding the issues of whether and how absorption through a one-time regulation will materialize. In general terms, most ad-hoc teachers are now skeptical of absorption, considering the concerted, massive struggle needed against the ruling government for such a demand to be actualized. Thus, most have gravitated towards seeing absorption as simply the 'second-best' solution.

Expectedly, ad-hoc teachers' unreasonable optimism has jaded over time. A sizeable number of long-serving ad-hoc teachers, who otherwise fill all the criteria and have worked very hard for their institutions, have been displaced in the recent interviews. This despairing situation has not prevented opportunists from milking the issue for electoral gains; as evident in the 26.01.2023 circular issued by the Deputy Chief Minister of the Aam Admi Party (AAP)-led Delhi Government, assuring absorption of serving ad-hoc teachers. While such assurances by the local AAP government, which funds several DU colleges, is a welcome move, one suspects such gestures because of the recent large-scale displacement of serving ad-hoc teachers in Delhi Government colleges.

At this juncture we need ample recognition of the years put in by serving ad-hoc teachers in DU. This dimension has to be given the weight it deserves *during the process of interviews*, and not just relegated to miniscule points in the screening process. We need to move beyond slogans to effectively protect our colleagues, and to ensure appointments as per the correct 200 points DoPT roster. Moreover, as an academic community we also need to recognize the threat of growing contractualization of teaching positions across the country. In this regard, it is important to press for the recognition of all forms of tenures as teaching experience, and to evolve appropriate modalities for the same; thereby, ensuring that all qualified teachers in the country can avail the chance to accumulate teaching experience so as to be eligible to appear for interviews in public-funded universities.

Job security, as well as parity within the workforce, requires a consistent struggle from the base. Such a struggle is crucial for both workplace democracy, as well as to effectively challenge the powers that be, which together will ensure that DU teachers are not doled out some favours, but achieve what must be a matter of their *rights*.

In the time of passivity, ad-hoc teachers are simply seen as camp-followers of different ruling cliques, hoping to be rewarded with permanent appointments. However, all ad-hoc teachers are not pliable, inert and inanimate objects. Many of them can help rejuvenate the struggle for ad-hoc teachers' rights. In this regard, one remembers lessons from the *Mahabharata*. I refuse to believe that there is a homogeneous bloc of camp-followers. There are definitely Dhritarashtras amongst us, who are power-oriented (satta unmukhee). There must be many like Vikaran (the self-righteous son of Dhritarashtra), who despite being aware about the morally repugnant ways in which the regime is working, will continue to close their ranks. However, there must be many Yuyutsus as well.

Before the onset of the battle of Kurukshetra when the armies of Kauravas and Pandavas were facing each other and the battle was about to commence, Dharmaraj Yudhishtira exhorted all the warriors to still consider choosing their side if they felt that righteous is on the *other* side. While Vikaran stayed back, Yuyutsu forewent his family bonds to side with *dharma*. In the ensuing battle of *dharma*, our contemporary *Mahabharata* of ad-hoc teachers' rights awaits many such Yuyutsu.

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