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How the Humanities Can Protect India Against the Attacks On Its Freedoms¹

Humanities departments in public universities are under attack across the country for their potential to spawn dissent. We need them to take the fight to the powers that be.

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We are all profoundly shocked by the fatal shooting of professor of Kannada literature, writer, epigraphist and rationalist MM Kalburgi in his home, allegedly for his outspoken views on Hindu religious practices. It is part of a pattern emerging in South Asia – the elimination of writers and thinkers who speak out against bigotry in their societies and religions. We are disturbed by the raid on Gracious Temsen's house by campus security on a flimsy pretext: Temsen is an associate professor of applied linguistics and translation studies at the University of Hyderabad, and she was allegedly targeted because she comes from a minority community in the north-east of India.

There is a teachers' movement connecting across universities in the country fighting against alarming new reforms proposed for higher education. Student protests and strikes, big or small, sporadic or sustained, have been mushrooming over the past couple of years: at Jadavpur, Delhi, Pondicherry, Shimla, Madhya Pradesh, and are ongoing at FTII, Burdwan and Presidency Universities. We must note that most of these protests are at public institutions, and that the majority of students leading, and participating in, these movements are from the humanities and social sciences; even when not, the constituents of protests are from the various arts: poetry, song and dance; satire and parody; posters and murals; street theatre, flamboyant costumes and cross-dressing.

Do we see the connection of these random but repetitive instances of surveillance, censorship, punishment and protest, rage, strikes and agitations in and around universities today with the future of the humanities in India? If we do not, we are in big trouble.

The silencing and censoring

It is not a coincidence that most resistances are igniting in public educational institutions – those large unruly rampaging white elephants that are the bane of the national exchequer and wise policymakers, primarily because they are still the sites

¹ *This is the transcript of a talk presented at a panel discussion on "The Future of the Humanities"*

which produce students who protest, destabilising the aggressive pursuit of a “new India” sporting mindless developmental agendas in an ethos of conformism and capital. It is also perhaps not surprising that the bulk of those students who do protest are not often from the disciplines of the sciences, technology, management and business studies, but from the humanities and the social sciences. There are studies worldwide that spew numbers proving that the former are more ambitious, more studiously committed to achieving academic excellence, and concomitantly more conformist and conservative.

Indian policymakers and administrators in higher education are therefore probably correct in believing that the threat to achieving a global economy lurks, like a ticking bomb, in whatever young people encounter in the mysteriously irreverent classrooms and texts of the humanities, in particular, at a passionately impressionable age. They know they must defeat it, which they undertake first by direct methods of identifying, curbing, threatening, disciplining and purging – from installing CCTVs on campuses to deploying the state police force to deter the noncompliant; then by more insidious methods of cutting back on funds, changing the content of textbooks, college syllabi, graduate programme orientations. Their third way is the most wily: to defeat by appropriation, convincing the humanities and social sciences that their true calling is to make of the youth good, amenable, responsible human beings, worthy denizens of this globalised, glamorous, incredible new India in the 21st century.

This last is not a gift that the current dispensation has freshly brought to our disciplines, though it has brought with it a new heightened Hindutva vigilantism. In late 2012, during the tenure of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's government, the UGC sent out (under instructions from the MHRD, its parent ministry) a curious missive to all affiliated institutes, asking that science and technology students be given compulsory courses in the humanities and social sciences as there was a dire need, in the face of increased terrorist activities, to “deradicalise the youth”. There are many mistaken assumptions here, ranging from the ridiculous to the dangerous – but that they were clearly agreed that a solution for rooting out the possibility of breeding radical thinkers would be found in a humanities education is significant.

This does not square with the contemporary markers I started out with: the silencing and the censoring. Those penal actions signal a very real fear of the power of the arts and humanities to be anti-authoritarian. There are clearly frantic efforts underway to rein in disciplines that are impossible to contain, by whatever ploy possible. The public institution, having always offered the one democratic space for dissent, is therefore always on the radar for the state. An Ministry of Human Resource Development vision document on higher education released online for public perusal and comment in April 2015 says in a section titled “The Pace Setting Role of Central Institutions”:

The most explicit role they need to play is in research and in the production of highly skilled personnel to meet requirements of the production sector. This crucial role

should not keep them away from their role in the building of new institutions of civil society, encouraging and facilitating new cultural values and training and socializing new social elites.

Freedom of thought and action

These proscriptions for the future of the public university are alarming because they do not speak to the spirit of the humanities. The humanities must work explicitly against “meeting the requirements of the production sector” and work as much through risk, experiment, failure, hopelessness, anger and dissent as through exhilaration and joy. I am not sure what exactly is meant by “facilitating new cultural values” or “training and socializing new social elites”, but they sound ominously classist and nativist, especially in the current climate. Even with a “liberal” slant, the proscription sounds like a blueprint for private institutions that are in a position to offer an Ivy League education in India at Ivy League prices for a select few. At the public university which has achieved 50% reservation for the socially underprivileged, the impetus for the humanities cannot be the manufacturing of highly-skilled personnel for the production sector and socialising new social elites. Such goals render the humanities at our locations completely crippled, burdened with the impossible task of contributing to a knowledge economy with a set of pre-determined skills, and the responsibility of preserving and creating a set of elite values.

To contend with this crisis, we must repeatedly hold up to the light the connection between freedom of thought and action which is now increasingly under threat in India, and which is the life – and future – of the humanities. The new future in this new India for public universities must be built upon this caveat: that the humanities does, and ought to, thrive in situations of adversity and crisis. That is where the mettle of the humanities is best proven, rather than in the lap of wealth, privilege, indulgence and comfort. This new India not only needs the humanities in public institutions as never before, but it needs a humanities that is embattled and enraged. Not conformist, not turning the other cheek and hiding forlorn among the marigolds.

As some of us are aware, our policymakers are about to ink a game-changing open-door deal for more foreign and private investment in higher education this December. They clearly do not consider it the government’s duty to offer the taxpayers’ children basic amenities of education – either in infrastructure or in intellect – in the only institution that the majority of our population will ever be able to afford or access, the public university.

Let us for a moment consider the scale of comparison. In this city, the Delhi University alone has over 4 lakh undergraduate students with almost 50% reservation, as in all government-funded institutions, for socially underprivileged students, with average fees of Rs 10,000 a year with stipends and fee waivers under various categories. The fees of Ivy League-equivalent private universities in India hover

around Rs 5 lakh a year and admit a few hundred students who are individually nurtured with love and care. The latter is perhaps the stuff that the bureaucrat's dream is made of. But the good fight is being fought by the Rest of India team in sweaty classrooms with broken desks and chairs and not enough teachers and unteachable new systems like the CBCS. This is a rough daily challenge but it is better than being cocooned in plushness under the unbearable weight of training new social elites, I would wager. I think we would rather fight and struggle and be punished for it instead, as Professor KS Bhagwan has said when threatened as being next on the list after Professor Kalburgi's murder.

Interstitial reading

Nothing in the humanities teaches us that its value lies in conservative morality, healthy licit love, loyalty, care and safety: on the contrary, we go to the humanities for grit and dare, for the monstrous, diabolic, fantastic, the searing and the unsettling – for passion, delight, distress and the thrill of transgression. And so the fight for those spaces in the humanities that perhaps threatens India's pursuit of a place in the global economy must be sustained, holding recalcitrantly to an idea of freedom: for the meek are not going to inherit the campus, let alone this earth.

But how do we make what we encounter in the humanities real for ourselves, and battle the current multipronged attack upon freedoms intrinsic to the humanities? I would suggest that we keep it threefold: first, outside the classroom and campus, taking to the streets in continuing protests and agitations and picketing and strikes; second, inside the classroom in our reading, discussion and writing practices which must not only contend with the political but be political; and third, in the interstices of the inside and outside worlds – in the corridors, the grounds and paths, around the water coolers, in canteens and cafes on campuses.

Everywhere, we must continue to assert our right to read, write, translate, perform and debate all that is available to us as texts in our disciplines. We can neither view them as dead texts that we leave behind on our desks to then accept diktats from autocratic regimes of government or institutional administrations or nurturing advice from caretakers of our professional futures, nor can we live schizophrenic lives torn between the fabulous inspiration of all that the humanities promises and the bored reality of social elitism. We need not crave comfortable spaces, either physically or metaphorically, because the humanities would perish in them.

I have been working on a lengthier rumination on what I call "interstitial reading" as a strategy for political action in the university – which I will set beside Sharon Marcus's well-known formulation of "surface reading" as well as Franco Moretti's idea of "distance reading". I offer this as a strategy of resistance and protest for and from the humanities: that we should consciously and in a slow, quiet and sustained manner occupy the spaces between and outside what are legitimately and institutionally offered to us, on site in campuses and in our syllabi in our classrooms

and tutorials. Since the legitimate spaces are shrinking, it is ironically possible that we may find more room in the interstices to grow and think.

The idea of “interstitial reading” emerged from contemplating the physical location of a reading group I was a part of at Delhi University last year called Campus Politics. In the context of various oppressive measures upon public universities the group was convened to discuss “the idea of the university” (in Stefan Collini’s term), past and present. A room was requested in the arts building by the English faculty member who was organising it, for reading group meetings after class hours on week days, which was denied by the head of the department. It was in fact a dramatic and ludicrous experience to witness the palpable fear that those in authority now have of the uncontainable within the institution, but that is another story. What transpired was that we sat on the floor in the corridors of the building for weekly meetings through an entire semester, reading the history of Campus Politics and relating it to our everydayness, and were possibly the more determined and the more invested because of the impediment placed in our path.

I do not of course mean that we can meet all our challenges by sitting in reading groups in corridors or gardens that would make up the “undercommons” of the university, to use the aspirational term Fred Moten and Stefano Harney have given us. But I do believe that we must constantly conspire to think up ways of resisting the imposition of the banal and the safe and the utilitarian upon the humanities, and that it can perhaps only be achieved in the public university where the dream of the building a social elite through catering to the production sector is yet completely irrelevant to most of its stakeholders, to use a term now in currency. In his fine piece, “Teaching as Provocation” (1990), Professor Upendra Baxi extolled the virtues of hedonism as an educational method, where pleasure both in learning and teaching cannot be disciplined because its joys are marked by the absence of policing, benevolent or aggressive. The university at large and the humanities in particular in India today are experiencing the onslaught of both kinds of policing. But indeed there is hope in that too. The hedonist in the university, exults Baxi, “has passionate commitment to altering the conditions and institutions in which knowledge is ‘produced’. The hedonist does not take conditions and processes of democracy as given but as ones created through acts of struggle. For her, knowledge and power are related...”

We must locate our hedonistic struggles in the interstices of our campuses, between our many campuses and their outliers where we live, play, work and fight at and for the humanities. We have no time to lose. To borrow Jacques Derrida’s words of warning in his outline of the “unconditional university of the future”:

I do not know if what I am saying here is intelligible, if it makes sense. I especially do not know what status, genre, or legitimacy the discourse has that I have just addressed to you. Is it academic? Is it a discourse of knowledge in the Humanities or on the subject of the Humanities? Is it knowledge only? Only a performative profession of faith? Does it belong to the inside of the university? Is it philosophy, or literature, or theatre? Is it a work, *une oeuvre*, or a course, or a kind of seminar? I

have numerous hypotheses on this subject, but finally it will be up to you now, it will be up to others to decide this. The signatories are also the addressees. We don't know them, neither you nor I. For if this impossible that I'm talking about were to arrive perhaps one day, I leave you to imagine the consequences. Take your time but be quick about it because you do not know what awaits you.

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