

# The thought processes on a private university campus

Pandemic changes perceptions, with students feeling that state is needed for collective good and their well-being

**Khinraj Jangid**

Teaching at a private university for the past seven years has been a strange and strengthening experience for me. I consider it a fortune to have a job in Indian academia, more so for the fact that I

teach subjects such as Israel studies and international politics which are important to me. Such subjects are very limited in the Indian context.

Being part of a private university is strange too as I never studied in one and so I find myself kind of an outsider here. I have only been to government schools and universities.

If I were a student today, I could not afford education in a private university and all its opportunities. Language, culture and class of a privileged private university is not the world I experienced much. Being part of the OP Jindal Global (Private) University does make me more privileged now than my friends who teach at government colleges and universities across India with less academic autonomy and resources.

Teaching about politics and its concepts such as state, democracy and society, I often encounter resistance to caste-based reservation or any affirmative action (such as reservation for women) among the undergraduate students who think merit and competition are more productive values for us as a society and for the sake of development of In-

dia. In my regular class exercise, I ask students around the age of 18 or so what will they vote for when they get to vote in a national election. Their usual answers are development, infrastructure, employment, accountability, women's empowerment (safety or equal rights not included), foreign policy and so on. Each semester, the quality of answers remains the same as people who come to study at a private university represent their world views formed primarily at home that are upper caste and higher class who think merit and competition are the most important things to do and India has wasted resources and time over welfare schemes or affirmative actions for long.

Most students have been to private schools only; they go to private hospitals when they need to and they think state should privatise most of its aspects. Private entities augur efficiency, accountability and professionalism and hence state shall wither away. Thus their assumptions and views are organic and hence legit when we take them based on their lived experiences.

## Existential crisis

The pandemic compelled a rethinking of many things, and I have gathered a change among my privileged students when it comes to public health and the responsibility of the state. Though such students did well, as usually, when it comes to their education during the last one year, they have been taught for the full semester through online classes, with courses not shortened and degrees and exams completed on time.

Personally, they went through the pain and agony of the pandemic as some of them lost their loved ones, and some caught the virus and

felt helpless. The worst realisation was that their regular private hospitals failed to deliver services this time. It might not have happened ever before because money always could ensure a safe world. Suddenly access to a private hospital, a health insurance or access to the best of the country's doctors did not matter and they needed to go through vulnerability and fear like the masses. The state was expected to step in but it wasn't there.

Socially, they went through some hard realities when they witnessed that the Indian state (something that they believed to be "a rising power") collapsed and people managed to survive on their own during the second wave. The bodies left to rot in rivers of North India or the constantly burning crematoriums were too much for their tender age. Such an existential crisis is transformative and it did compel many to think of public health facilities as a more important issue than let us say a bullet train or economic development.

Rather than wishing away the state, they have felt state is needed for not only collective good but also for their personal well-being. They might now appreciate the principles of reservation as it is the responsibility of the state to protect the vulnerable and weak.

John Locke, liberal political philosopher, said people need the state as a "nightwatchman" so that they can go on with what they choose to do and there is a state to protect them. Long live the welfare state, we may do better without the obsession of meritocracy.

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kjangid@jgu.edu.in

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## FEEDBACK

Letters to the Magazine can be e-mailed separately to mag.letters@thehindu.co.in

### Cover story

True, the millennials are trustworthy nation builders. ('Great expectations'; Sep. 5) Ushering and harnessing them in the right direction towards nation building is the mandate of policy makers and bureaucrats. As the main players in the ICT-enabled services both in India and the Silicon Valley, and also in the recently-sprouted gig economy at home, they are the real heroes. Sandwiched between India's parenthood-imbuéd culture and a diverse tech education, millennials should try to reach their high aspirations.

K. BALAKRISHNAN

■ India hasn't been able to truly capitalise on its youth potential. The issue is two-pronged: one, the government and private entities are unable to create employment, and second, young people don't have employable skills. Reorienting educational curricula and skills training will help.

V.L. ADHITYA  
KAARTHICKHEYAN

■ Unless the government invests more in generating employment and skills development, achieving a \$5 trillion economy will remain a far dream.

S. HARITHA RAO

■ India's educated young have been battling crippling unemployment for decades; it has worsened after the pandemic. Jobless growth is what defines India's economic story today.

M. JEYARAM

### Nomads in crisis

The government must ensure that a social and economic safety net is provided to all nomadic tribes.

DIMPLE WADHAWAN

■ While NRIs are showered with dual citizenship and sometimes with tax exemptions, tribal people and nomads are denied even basic documents like ration cards or Aadhaar cards. The snake charmers, Narikuravas and



fortune-tellers are also a part of our rich social fabric. They need to be seen.

T. ANAND RAJ

■ Establishment of a nomadic communities welfare department and issuance of ration cards must be taken up by the Tamil Nadu government on a priority basis.

N. RAMA RAO

### Bound wonders

Once at a literature festival in Kasauli in Himachal Pradesh, I bought 10 books one by one, simply to get 10 'carry bags', because they had a beautiful sentence printed on them in big bold letters: 'You can't buy happiness, but you can buy books, and that's kind of the same thing.' ('The warmth of a book'; Sep. 5) I gifted nine of the bags to other book-lovers who thanked me for a rare, beautiful gift.

B.M. SINGH

### Amusing advice

Agony Akka's advice column was satire and sarcasm personified and I loved it. It made me spill my morning coffee in laughter. This is why I have loved *The Hindu* since 1983.

C.P. ANANDSUBRAMANIAN

### Cultural connections

Rock-cut Ganesha temples are found not only in Japan but Thailand, Tibet, Cambodia and even China. ('Oblations to the palate'; Sep. 5) It's heart-warming to see so many countries so beautifully connected via food, heritage and history. Ganesha invokes optimism in day-to-day life by showing that even a small vehicle like a mouse cannot stop you from making international tours!

SHUBHI NEGI

**Correction:** The *Lokame Tharavada* exhibition date mentioned in the article 'Birthing an art ecosystem' (Sep. 5) should have read 'till November 30', and not as printed. The exhibition can be visited in Alappuzha and Ernakulam.



## More on the Web

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### AI and education

Will edutech firms be able to tap on to sophisticated AI technologies?

AKANKSHA JAISWAL

### Hot off the oven

No more store-bought cakes; rather exotic cakes baked by family members are the norm now

SUMA ZACHARIA JACOB

### Craving the brew

Coffeeholics never call it an addiction, for only a true coffee lover knows what every sip of it means

SUJITH SANDUR

### Morning scene

Generations of walkers come on to the streets, taking in the freshness of dawn

J.S. RAGHAVAN

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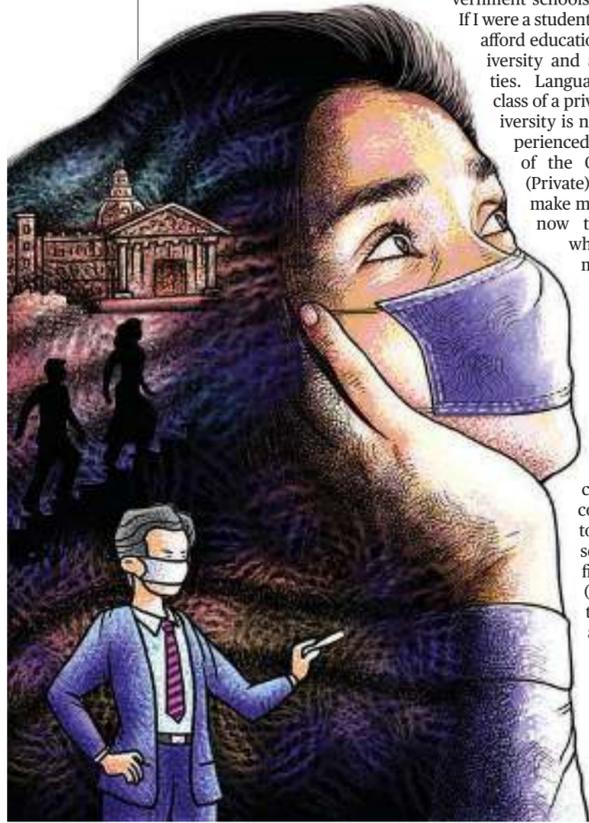


ILLUSTRATION: J.A. PREMKUMAR

## A sweet victory

**Priyan R. Naik**

In the early 1980s, after sightseeing in Udaipur, we packed our bags to go home to New Delhi, about 700 km away. At the station, we searched for an "unreserved" coach on the train. We scrambled into the compartment making our way through several men, women and children sprawled all over, most with their legs resting on the opposite seat, trying to be as comfortable as possible preparing for the nine-hour journey.

Too busy trying to get a seat for ourselves, we hardly noticed a young foreigner couple, already ensconced next to a window, going through a *Lonely Planet* guide, exclaiming as they recognised various sights they had just seen. Is this train always so crowded, they wanted to know.

Every traveller on an Indian train wants to know even small details of fellow travellers. Foreigners especially are the centre of attention. But here, the fellow passengers knew very little English and soon, everyone got tired of speaking to the couple in sign language.

The train started off, the stations were few and far between and it wasn't long before we started making desultory conversation with the couple, who told us that they lived in Notting Hill, a neighbourhood of London, and were touring

India taking in as many sights and cities as they could during their short holiday.

They had taken out a board of Scrabble, and were surprised when we offered to join them. Only English words must be used, they emphasised displaying a dictionary which would be the ultimate arbiter.

Though playing against

the English and that too from London would be a major challenge, we timidly agreed.

The beginning was tough, they obviously knew how to maximise points. The train sped on, the four of us oblivious to the delightful scenery, the broad expanses of the Aravalli range, the picturesque sand dunes, glimpses of wildlife and scattered settlements. The man sat smugly with his letter set perched neatly, while I nervously cradled mine on my lap concentrating, both of us determined to win. Was he getting desperate? He spelt the word "bitten" with single "t" whereupon I challenged him. The dictionary confirmed I was correct and after this, there was no looking back. Some deft moves and I won!

It was delightful beating a Londoner in a game of English language skills. Victory was sweet indeed that even 40-odd years after the trip, I remember the game so vividly.

India is the second-largest English-speaking country after the U.S. English has helped unify the Subcontinent, as a common tongue for administration and education. And Indians take special delight in proving themselves better than the English in their own language.

priyannaik211@gmail.com

## The trekker never ages

And in a long trek, it is the tortoise, not the rabbit, that has the last laugh

**E.P. Pavithran**

It was a cold night at Athirumala in January 2019. We trekkers, weary from the trudge to this base camp of the Agasthya mountain, some 60 km from Thiruvananthapuram on the lap of the Western Ghats, were getting ready to hit the sack after a quick supper of rice gruel and green gram.

We had started from Bonacaud, about 50 km from Kerala's capital city, around 8.30 a.m. The murmur, music and silence of the forest were mesmerising. As I had befriended a few engineering students from Thrissur, we shared food, took bath at every stream and waterfall and reached the base camp around 4 p.m.

The ascent to the peak would begin next morning. The camp was a couple of sheet-roofed sheds. It was there that I met Kulandai Velu from Trichy. I was doubtful if this 71-year-old lean man, a retired engineer, could make it to the peak.

But trekking has been a way of life for him, visiting Amarnath, Vaishno Devi and Sabarimala several times. This was his second trip to Agasthyamala. Even his trekking trips to the North were mostly unorganised, tak-



ing the easiest available transport, staying where it is safe, and joining a compatible group. He was greatly disappointed that he could not make it to Mansarovar as the upper age limit for that expedition is 70.

### Hit refresh

In a long trek, it is the tortoise and not the rabbit that has the last laugh. After a successful trek, you should be able to follow your daily routine the very next morning with renewed vigour, he says.

We had a disturbed sleep that night. The thick blankets did not fend off the cold. The cement floor felt like an ice block. Chilly wind crept in through every crack.

At 7 a.m., the steep ascent began, and we crawled and moved on all fours at times. It took almost four hours to the top. The view from more than 6,000 feet above sea level just could not be described in words. On the one side at a distance was the Ambasamudram river and on the other, the Peppara and Neyyar dams in Thiruvananthapuram. I surrendered to the magical aura of the mighty mountain.

After spending a couple of hours atop, we began our descent. On the dense forest path, we heard trumpets of elephants at two or three locations. Back at the camp around 3.30 p.m., the gruel and green gram were waiting for us. The next morning, around 8 a.m., after a frugal breakfast, I enquired about Kulandai Velu. He had but left early.

Two years have passed, but we maintain our friendship through occasional phone calls. A few weeks ago, I called him. There he was, healthy and energetic as ever. As trekking sites are closed because of the pandemic, he has adopted brisk walking for about 10 km each morning. Well, that is simple for this wonderful young man of 74.

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eppavi@gmail.com

## Not meme, it's a cruel joke

**Sai Krishna**

In April 2021, Ursula von der Leyen, the first woman President of the European Commission, was left without a chair at a summit in Turkey, in what is now known as so-fagate. It was a startling display of how we still have a long way to go before women are treated as equals.

If this is how men deign to treat women on an international platform, I shudder to think of the plight of ordinary women in their daily lives. Ms. Von der Leyen, in an impassioned speech post-summit, made her take on the incident pretty clear – she deemed it as sexist.

There are millions of women across our nation who do not have the privilege that she has – women are unseen and unheard, until the abuse they are subject to escalates into some dastardly deed that shocks society. Soon, everybody springs into action – WhatsApp statuses are updated; poems are composed; Twitter and Insta "warriors" make themselves relevant; candle-



light vigils are held; and of course, let us not forget the "not all men are predators" group and their ardent denials. As days pass, the furore dies down and people return to posting clichéd, sweeping sexist memes about wives and girlfriends.

They may say that after all, it is just "innocent" fun. No, it isn't. The underlying issue is that most of these memes portray women who speak their mind or stand up to men as overbearing. It is just patriarchy wrapped in so-called humour. It is lamentable that a major section of our comedy industry still rests on the misguided notion that misogyny, homophobia, body shaming, poking

ridicule at mental disorders, and rejecting anybody and anything non-conforming, different or unique are hilarious.

"The business of being funny is no laughing matter." Seriously, comedians, meme makers and content creators need to pause and think about what they say and how they say it. Nothing sexist can be swept under the rug as a joke. Not when women face abuse in their own homes; not when women are subject to oppression and suppression at the workplace; not when women are still judged as "asking for it" if they dare to wear something revealing, even if it is just a sleeveless top; not when the so-called freedom women possess is just a polished veneer.

In this era of cancel culture, where a simple hashtag wields the power to make or break a person, it is time we made an informed choice not to propagate memes against vulnerable sections such as women and non-binary people.

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saikrshn@gmail.com