

MY VIEW | VOX HETERODOX

Assault on public universities: don't mortgage India's future

Turning universities into homogenized teaching shops would stifle independent thinking and hurt the nation's prospects



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There appears to be a systematic assault on public universities in India that seems to have gathered momentum in the past six months. In the past four weeks, following the passage of the divisive Citizenship (Amendment) Act, or CAA, this assault, which has now been transformed from the metaphorical to the literal, has reached alarming proportions.

On the evening of 5 January, 70-100 masked goons, armed with metal rods, sledgehammers, wooden rods and stones, stormed the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) campus in the national capital, thrashing students, beating up teachers, ransacking hostels, vandalizing property and smashing cars. The mob ran riot for three hours and injured 35 students and teachers.

Yet, around 250 police personnel assembled at the campus gate were silent spectators, who did nothing to intervene. Strangely enough, streetlights outside the JNU gates were switched off. In the darkness, the mob walked away shouting abusive slogans, as police personnel watched. It was only thereafter, once the damage was done, that the streetlights were switched on and the police carried out a flag march. Throughout this shameful episode, the vice-chancellor and his administration were conspicuous by their absence, abdicating their responsibility altogether.

The identity of the masked goons has not yet been established. However, their slogans did convey something about their beliefs, if not identity. JNU has been targeted for its intellectual tradition, critical thinking and questioning spirit, ever since 2014. The sedition row three years ago was part of that process. The siege continues unabated. It is shocking that not a single person from the masked mob has been arrested so far. The police inaction during the episode is inexplicable and unacceptable.

This provides a sharp contrast with the events at Jamia Millia Islamia just three weeks ago, when Delhi Police entered the campus, without university permission, stormed the library and mosque, beating up scores of students in a lathi charge. More than 50 students were injured then. This coincided with a similar story at Aligarh Muslim University, where the Uttar Pradesh police went on a rampage on the campus and more than 60 students taking part in an anti-CAA protest were injured in the violence that followed.

The past month has, thus, witnessed a physical assault on three central universities, where the police unleashed the violence in two, and was a silent spectator in the third. However, the assault on public universities across the nation, as a metaphor, has now been discernible for five years and runs deep.

The list is long and extends much beyond JNU to the University of Hyderabad, Banaras Hindu Uni-

versity (BHU), University of Delhi, Jadavpur University, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, and so on. The political intrusion in universities as autonomous public institutions, though not altogether new, is now far more extensive, and seems to have taken new forms driven by the ideology that is ascendant, and now becoming dominant, in the country.

It is about who can and who cannot be invited to speak at universities, what should and what should not be on reading lists, and what courses should be taught and what courses should be discontinued.

These are entirely academic decisions that must remain the prerogative of universities. A significant erosion of autonomy in the appointment of faculty members in universities can be observed, as ideology-driven or pliant vice-chancellors push for appointments of those who seem to conform to the ideology of the ruling party—often without the requisite, even minimum, academic credentials. In a new twist, appointments made through due process, as in the department of Sanskrit at Banaras Hindu University, are effectively set aside under pressure.

Such occurrences negate the essential concept of universities as autonomous spaces, where freedom of expression, exploration of ideas and advancement of knowledge are an integral part of the learning process. Universities are places for raising doubts and asking questions about everything. There are bound to be differences in views, but these must be addressed through discussion,

with open minds. In this, there must be respect, not contempt, for the other. Universities are, above all, about reason and tolerance.

It is a serious mistake to think of universities as campuses or classrooms that teach young people to pass examinations, obtain degrees, and become employable, where research does not matter. Universities are about far more. They make students good citizens of society. They nurture intellectuals who can provide an independent, credible voice in evaluating governments, legislatures, or the judiciary. This role is essential in a political democracy.

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As many as three central universities have seen instances of physical assaults on campus over the past month, though metaphorical attacks have been discernible for half a decade.

Universities do not exist simply to teach students how to pass exams and get jobs. Their role is far greater. They are part of a wider project of nurturing values that are vital to a democracy.

We must remember that the spread of education in society is at the foundation of success in countries that are latecomers to development. In this process, universities provide the cutting edge of creativity and innovation in advancing knowledge and technology.

If universities are turned into straitjacketed homogenized teaching shops that stifle independent thinking, it will only deprive young people of opportunities to learn and mortgage the future of the nation.

The assault on public universities in India is senseless and self-destructive. It will impose an unimaginable cost on our society in the long term. For those who rule, it will not be without political consequences. There are already widespread protests by university students across India. Over time, governments everywhere have learnt that the anger or wrath of students is something that even authoritarian regimes cannot afford. India is a vibrant political democracy.

MINT CURATOR



The night sky over Exmoor National Park in the UK

GETTY IMAGES

Houston, looks like star gazers have a problem

The spectacular view of the heavens on a clear, dark night is under threat from plans to launch tens of thousands of satellites that will be visible tearing across the sky, astronomers have been told. Tech firms have begun to place a number of satellite "mega constellations" into low Earth orbit in a move designed to expand internet access and open new markets in the developing world. But while companies need permits before they can launch their satellites there is no global body overseeing the impact that a surge in visible spacecraft might have on the appearance of the night sky. "We stand to lose our connection with nature," said Ruskin Hartley, executive director of the International Dark Sky Association, before raising his concerns at the American Astronomical Society meeting in Honolulu.

The Guardian

Twitter acts on Jack Dorsey's health promise

Twitter has said it will test new features that allow users to control who can reply to their posts—or block replies entirely. "We want to help people feel safe participating in the conversation on Twitter," the company said. The move comes as social media companies are under increasing pressure to address so-called "cyberbullying". The firm has already launched a feature which allows its users to hide replies to their tweets. Twitter unveiled details of the experiment at the annual Consumer Electronics Show, in Las Vegas... Social media companies are facing intense scrutiny over how they are dealing with harassment—which has led to firms and governments introducing measures to tackle the issue... In 2018, Twitter's chief executive Jack Dorsey promised to increase the "health" of public conversation.

BBC

Faeces and fake rubber hands to cure OCD?

A new type of therapy using faeces and fake rubber hands may be able to help patients with obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) overcome their fears of touching contaminated surfaces, according to new research. "OCD can be an extremely debilitating condition for many people, but the treatments are not always straightforward," said Baland Jalal, a Cambridge University neuroscientist who was part of a team assessing if rubber hands could be a potential new type of exposure therapy. Traditional exposure therapy often involves instructing OCD patients to touch contaminated surfaces, such as a toilet seat, and then to not wash their hands. It aims to help patients control their fears in a safe, managed environment but many find it too difficult and cannot even begin therapy.

Reuters

A pilotless flying taxi takes to the air in America

A flying taxi with no pilot made its first U.S. test flight in North Carolina with an audience of about 100 people, including several state officials. Gov. Roy Cooper, state lawmakers and North Carolina Department of Transportation officials were among the more than 100 spectators at Tuesday's demonstration of the EHang 216 autonomous aerial vehicle. The two-seat drone is designed for use in cargo delivery and human transportation. "Autonomous connected vehicles of any type are where transportation is headed," North Carolina Transportation Secretary Jim Trogdon told *The News & Observer*... Officials said they were particularly interested in EHang's project because the company is also developing an airspace management system designed to handle hundreds of flying taxis at once.

UPI

A seismic hum that boggles the world no more

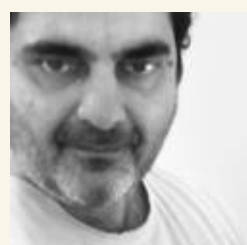
Mysterious seismic hums detected around the world were likely caused by an unusual geologic event—the rumblings of a magma-filled reservoir deep under the Indian Ocean, a new study finds. These odd hums were an unconventional geologic birth announcement. A few months after the sounds rippled around the Earth, a new underwater volcano was born off the coast of the island of Mayotte, located between Madagascar and Mozambique in the Indian Ocean... Although the volcano is now formed, earthquakes may still rattle the area. "There are still possible hazards for Mayotte today," study senior researcher and head of the section Physics of Earthquakes and Volcanoes at the GFZ Torsten Dahm said. "The Earth's crust above the deep reservoir could continue to collapse, triggering earthquakes."

Live Science

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How post-traumatic stress disorder can be overcome

VIKRAM ZUTSHI



is a filmmaker, author and cultural critic

I came across Shaili Jain while researching a condition known as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) for which I had been diagnosed. I have always wanted to understand how my adult life was shaped by certain childhood experiences, and while PTSD has become part and parcel of the contemporary lexicon, it remains steeped in confusion and hearsay.

"I wrote *The Unspeakable Mind: Stories Of Trauma And Healing From The Frontlines Of PTSD Science* to tell the complete story of post-traumatic stress disorder, deconstructing its impact on many levels: Cellular, emotional, psychological, behavioural, societal, cultural and global," says the Stanford psychiatrist about her first book. "I wanted the reader to emerge with a precise sense of PTSD and why it is an inescapable part of all our lives and the world we live in." Today, Dr Jain is regarded as one of the world's leading trauma scientists. "When thinking of PTSD, the most obvious image that

comes to mind is the soldier back from war, but it is important to recognize that PTSD goes far beyond the horrors of war," she says. "Many traumas, such as rape, intimate partner violence, childhood sexual abuse are also closely associated with PTSD."

Humans are no strangers to trauma. The odds are that most of us will be touched by trauma at some point, and a subset among us will experience multiple traumas. While it is true that humans, by design, are naturally resilient and most will heal naturally with the passage of time, a significant minority won't. So, at any given moment, there are millions who are suffering from active symptoms of PTSD. Of further concern is the fact that only a fraction of sufferers receive treatment because PTSD is tough to diagnose and a challenge to treat. Also, sufferers are often hard to reach. In all, this makes PTSD a pressing public health issue.

This problem is particularly acute in India, which, according to a World Health Organization-sponsored study, is the world's most depressed country, with the highest suicide rate in Asia. Undiagnosed or untreated cases of bipolar syndrome, anxiety- and trauma-related disorders could run

into hundreds of millions. There is also an extreme shortage of qualified mental health professionals in the country, with only 10% of sufferers having access to psychological care in their place, since it is usually available only in the major cities.

What we call PTSD today has gone by various names over the centuries. Shell Shock, Irritable Heart, War Neurosis, Rape Trauma Syndrome, Battered Women syndrome are just a few of these terms. Researchers found that the human response to trauma was essentially universal and, since 1980, PTSD has been the term mental health professionals use to describe this condition regardless of the type of trauma. "PTSD is a constellation of symptoms that have been described since ancient times, yet the condition has remained elusive," says Jain. "It cuts to the heart of the life of a trauma survivor, interfering with one's capacity to love, create, and

work-incapacity brought on not by poor lifestyle choices, moral weakness, or character flaws, but by a complex interplay among biology, genes, and the environment."

In recent years, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) has emerged as the most effective treatment for PTSD. It is a form of talk-based treatment that encompasses therapies such as Cognitive Processing and Prolonged Exposure (full recall of traumatic events). These treatments include exposure exercises, cognitive restructuring, and anxiety management skills, like breathing retraining and muscle relaxation, and learning techniques of grounding. Because it can be unbearable for many people to directly face their traumatic experiences, the dropout rate for such treatments is high. This is where gentler mind-body approaches such as mindfulness, yoga, tai chi, massage, acupuncture, hypnosis, art therapy and dance can help.

QUICK READ

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There are various therapies that are recommended by experts, such as Shaili Jain, but sometimes, relief lies in simply turning off that phone screen.

Jain warns of the toxic atmosphere created by constant negative news and opinions received via smartphones, tablets and social media that are known to trigger latent or pre-existing conditions. "It has become very apparent, in recent years, that social media, 24-hour news channels and other online forums are being used more as echo chambers to intensely amplify or reinforce preconceived ideas, as opposed to a source for unbiased data," she says. "The mental health community has certainly seen a surge in cases of addiction, depression and anxiety related to such activities."

It may be hard to imagine life without our various devices, but not being dependent on them is vital to our mental and emotional well-being. "Screen-free leisure time has never been so important as it is today," says Jain. "Spending big chunks of time in real life relationships, out in nature and engaged in restorative activities e.g. art, music or sport are the basic components of a healthy psychological life. In this stress-fuelled world, we need to stick to these fundamentals more than ever."

Sometimes, the key to good mental health can be as simple as turning off the screen.