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Syndicates, mafias, and extortioners: The guerilla leadership in the higher education institutions in India

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Abstract

With the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, the higher education systems in India are subjected to rapid infrastructural, cultural, and pedagogical transformations. Due to the rapidity, the quality of the changes is highly questionable, and the quantity of academic productions is getting increasingly incentivized. To institutionalize a fast-paced development syndrome, it is essential to embrace brutal, abusive, devastative, dictatorial, and unauthorized approaches. To ensure that the leadership committees in the higher education institutions are filled with syndicate owners, mafias, and extortioners, who, with fake or paid and purchased degrees, make themselves look qualified for posts like chancellors, pro-chancellors, vice-chancellors, deans, program directors, registrars, and other relevant posts. In the name of quality management and intellectual rigor, they develop 'stick and whip' and 'hire and fire' systems and compel the staff and students to conform. Anyone failing to conform is subjected to verbal abuse in front of their colleagues and students, penalized with unethical salary cuts, and threatened with job losses. Due to the political connections of the leadership management, the workers and students feel discouraged from taking legal action against them. In this way, the institutions, from an intellectual and knowledge-making resource, are transforming into an operational ground for mafias, syndicates, and extortioners. They treat the staff and students as private money-vending, profitmaking, and promotion-making machines. Through different personal and collective workplace experiences, this opinion piece unfolds how the mafia culture of 'threat-fire-silence' is normalized and the irreparable damage it is causing to the higher education culture in India.

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Introduction: Universities as mafia syndicates

While working in my previous institution in Bangalore, I learned that a colleague had been fired on short notice. Half an hour before the conclusion of the office hours, a member from the Human Resources Department (HRD) called him to the office, ordered him to surrender the identity card, and showed him the door. When asked why, he was informed that his department and the university were not satisfied with his academic and professional conduct and, therefore, with the order of the higher administration, he was fired. Stunned, he left the campus. He was not allowed to defend himself. Before leaving, when he asked the HRD to show him the termination order, he was threatened that he would not receive his remaining payments if he asked too many questions. This is how a lot of universities in India function as a 'guerilla' university, where threatening, annihilating, and abusive behaviors are normalized as quality management and workplace discipline. This is not only his experience, but several other teaching and nonteaching staff underwent similar experiences. They were fired on short notice without sufficient justifications. A deeper investigation and analysis from the concerned staff by personally conversing with the people who have been fired revealed that their hiring process was a mere gimmick to achieve specific accreditation goals.

According to the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC), one of the many parameters for measuring a higher education institution's academic and research quality is a balanced student-teacher ratio, which was absent from the previous workplace. Like many other revenue-based private institutions, the number of teachers is much lower than that of students. To hide that, irrespective of a lack of subject-matter expertise, a large number of faculty members with meagre salaries were hired to showcase a balanced teacher-student ratio. Once the process was completed, they were fired. Deeply concerned, I and many staff raised complaints against this 'hire and fire' culture, but they were silenced through threats and rebukes. We were told that we had to conform to the collective vision of the university or else we had to find a different workplace. To further systematize such abusive workplace approaches, the year-end appraisal parameters are fixed based on the extent to which staff has abided by the top-down, dictatorial attitudes of the university management.

Within a few weeks of my joining the university, the Pro-Chancellor's Office organized a university-wide meeting to explain to the teachers how the performance appraisals of the faculty are determined. The Pro-Chancellor started the meeting with a boastful smile about how the university has 'successfully' established uniform operational procedures and how the staff have extended their 'generous support' towards its future vision. During the meeting, many staff raised concerns about excessive teaching hours, poor administrative support, the crisis in research grants, and the compulsion for rapid publications and attending conferences. All these complaints were silenced by blaming the staff for not wanting to work sincerely for the overall development of the institution and warning them that they would be penalized if they did not align with the vision of the university. Such normalizations of arrogance, pretensions, and manipulations are not limited to my previous workplace

but can be observed in other higher educational institutions as well, where the values of mutual respectability, caring, and sharing are obliterated through conformist, dictatorial, abusive, intellectually suffocating, and guerilla norms and conditions (Clark, 2008; Sokhey & Hanson, 2022).

The purpose of writing this opinion piece and sharing these experiences is not to rant bluntly but to provoke collective and systematic anger as a tool of resistance (Fink et al., 2022) to interrogate mafia-like, extortionist leadership structures and bulldoze them. I would also like to clarify that by using anger as a form of resistance, I do not provoke any form of physical violence. On the contrary, my opinion piece invites people with similar experiences and others to generate resistance beyond personal grudges in well-researched, ideologically aggressive, structured, and logical ways so that the unethical profit-oriented guerilla syndicates in higher education institutions can be publicly exposed and staff and students can be efficiently warned against being entrapped. The opinion piece does not intend to outline a list of solutions. However, the 'Postscript,' apart from sharing the painful experience of writing this piece, outlines a few possibilities through which we can "learn and grow" (Brookfield et al., 2024, p. 181) as teachers, workers, and administrators in collective, respectful, and human ways.

Research methods

The arguments in this research have been shaped through personal interviews with teaching staff from my previous university in Bangalore and other parts of the country, like New Delhi and Hyderabad. The participants who have been chosen are ex-teaching staff of universities who have been victims of the mafia-like leadership system of private universities in India through unethical job terminations and pay losses. Based on my expertise and experiences, the conversations have been limited to participants from private universities in India. The participants were chosen based on their consent, and pseudonyms were used to protect their identities. Four individuals (one from Hyderabad, two from Bangalore, and one from New Delhi), three males and one female, have participated in the conversation, and their ages range between 35 and 45 years. The interviewees were chosen based on their consent and availability and their names have been anonymized. The experiences shared by the participants overlap with many of my colleagues in my previous workplace and other private higher-ed institutions in India. However, out of fear of job losses and legal consequences, they could not consent to the conversations. All four participants were asked open-ended questions, and the conversations started by asking them to share their working experiences with their previous employers and on what basis their jobs were terminated.

The discussions with the participants in Bangalore took place in person, and online interviews were conducted for the rest. The in-person interviews were conducted through walking research methods. Walking interviews focus on life stories and "ethnographic, visual, and participatory approaches" to explore "lived experiences ('lived lives') within the broader social structures, contexts, and processes of our social worlds" (O'Neill & Roberts, 2020, p. 1). While

conversing, we (the participants and I) walked around the university campus and nearby cafeterias, which enabled us to document the perspectives in physically and emotionally relatable ways. Walking conversations helped us understand the experiences within specific institutional and situational contexts.

Personal and collective experiences

Sawant (name changed), a 38-year-old, was terminated from his job within less than 24 hours. He worked for six years at a private university in New Delhi as a sociology faculty member at the School of Social Sciences. His professional conduct at the university was deemed 'unacceptable', and the "institution leadership felt that it was harmful to the university's future" (personal communication, 2024). The actual reason was that he questioned the management about their violation of job contracts of the faculties in the university by compelling them to work beyond office hours, converting public holidays and weekends into workdays, and not paying salaries on time. Initially, the management ignored his complaints, but as he started receiving support from the faculties, he was threatened with pay and job losses. Eventually, the management started harassing him with unethical pay cuts, cancelling sick leaves, and deliberately delaying his salaries. He shared: "One day, I was called by the registrar's and vice-chancellor's office and was threatened with severe legal and career consequences. The registrar told me that if I do not stop complaining and provoking other staff, then they will not only terminate me but also make sure that I am blacklisted from this profession altogether. They threatened me with the destruction of my career" (personal communication, 2024). After Sawant was terminated, his last working month's salary and his experience certificate were held back. As a result, he cannot seek a new job and has been pushed into a severe financial crunch. Like many others in India, Savant is a victim of the extortion-based, revenue-centric, guerilla university system of India, who, through flagging off genuine concerns, functioned as a barrier to the "banking rationale" of his university, where "knowledge, prestige, and privilege are deemed to be the currency to be accumulated" (Robb et al., 2024). His consistent resistance worried the university because it would publicly spill their money-making syndicates and may impact the volume of student registration.

The experiences of Anshul, a 40-year-old from a private university in Hyderabad, was no different. He worked as an Associate Professor at the School of Business Studies for a year. Like Sawant, he was terminated within a day because the university opined that he could not live up to the university's academic, intellectual, and infrastructural visions and ambitions. According to the guerilla management, his 'mistake' was to highlight aspects like overwhelming working hours, poor pay structures, imbalanced student-teacher ratio, and lack of research incentives. Initially, the management tried to ignore him by saying that his demands did not conform to the terms and conditions of the institution. But when he highlighted that his demands comply with the terms and conditions of the job contract and are categorically outlined in the contract papers which he was made to sign, he was subjected to legal threats.

Anshul said: "I was told that I should be silent and happy with whatever facilities have been provided and not complain too much. And if I am not happy with the workplace, I should simply leave and find a new job" (personal communication, 2024). He continued: "When I loudly protested against their threatening attitude, I was immediately fired, and my salaries and relieving documents have been held back till now". Anshul has been trying to use his legal connections to seek justice. Yet, it has been useless because his former employer has successfully bypassed the charges using political connections and bribery. Also, Anshul has received several threatening calls to drop the case against the institution. Anshul's experiences unpack the "organizational issues of power and control" (Hodgins et al., 2024, p. 2) that many higher education institutions in India face today. Threatening and conformist workplace environments convert educational institutions into real estate business zones, where workload models are "tweaked upwards, forcing even more hours into spreadsheets" (Andrew, 2023b, p. 395). To compel the staff to be a part of the real estate vision, the definitions of full-time work hours are consistently revised to "reduce hours for preparation, marking, research, scholarship, and service" (Andrew, 2023b, p. 395). To work in such intellectually clogged workplaces, one must celebrate and incentivize moneymaking schemes, or they would be subjected to threats, abuse, and terminations. This is how 'hire and fire' systems have normalized within India's corporate higher education institutions.

Revathy (name changed), a 42-year-old woman, and Prasanna (name changed), a 45-year-old man who worked in my previous workplace as Assistant Professors in the School of Engineering, are other victims of the 'hire and fire' system. They worked for five months and were fired without any reason within a 30-minute notice period. As they were preparing to complete their day, an HRD person barged into their staff room, pulled out their identity cards from their collars, and ordered them to leave. When asked why, they were informed that the university management was unsatisfied with their performance. When asked to share further details and show the order of the higher management, they were threatened by the HRD to keep silent; otherwise, they would not be paid their last working month's salary and would not be given the experience letter. Their termination was followed by a spree of terminations across the university in the following weeks, and all were shown the door under the excuse of "upgradation [sic!] of quality teaching faculty" (Revathy & Prasanna, personal communication, 2024). However, many colleagues closely linked to the university management revealed that despite a lack of requirements, individuals under the label of teaching faculties were hired to do the work required to visit the accreditation council. Instead of hiring administrative staff, the university hired teaching staff to do administrative work to kill two birds with one stone. On the one hand, they could showcase to the accreditation examiners that the university has a balanced teacher-student ratio, which, in reality, they do not have. Conversely, they could save on the costs of hiring dedicated administrative staff. To avoid ethical complications, the whole process was executed in a hushed way. Revathy and Prasanna revealed: "We had no idea we were scammed. Initially, we wondered why we were involved less in teaching and research and more in administrative

paperwork. However, our colleagues informed us that this is quite normal in private institutions. Therefore, we regarded it as something normal. Now, we understand that it was not" (Revathy & Prasanna, personal communication, 2024). These corrupted practices are strategically hidden under the vocabularies of 'cutting-edge development,' 'quality management,' 'infrastructural enhancement,' 'intellectual rigor,' and various others documented on display boards, job contracts, and policy books so that any kind of interrogations against the abusive and unethical approaches of the institutions can be systemically silenced (Osipian, 2008).

Although this opinion piece documents the experiences of four diverse participants, the experiences of several staff associated with other private universities are eerily similar. These experiences lead to irreparable damages in the form of mental traumas, withdrawal from academic professions, and intellectual sterilization. Since I started my teaching career at a university in 2018 in India, there have been innumerable times when I felt that the professional spaces in higher education did not belong to me. Due to my vocal attitude, in almost every institution where I have worked in India, I have been marginalized, and my viewpoints, feedback, and critique have been ignored in the name of 'greater welfare.' Also, my sick and emergency leaves were scrapped several times, preventing me from visiting my family during emergencies or taking leave during a health crisis. Being disappointed with the abusive, threatening culture of the university, when I sent my resignation to the university management, I flagged off the concerns that provoked me to take such a step. The letter was ignored entirely. The attitude of the management was that the letter had never been sent. Whenever I reminded the management about my concerns and that I would like to have a conversation with them, they pretended they were unaware of my email and would check and get back to me. Nobody wrote back to me. Moreover, as per the order of the leadership management, my last month's salary was held back without any prior notification, which made my exit process challenging. It was only after warning them of legal consequences that they paid my salary. Unlike the research participants and many others, I was not subjected to termination and threats. Yet, I cannot deny the level of mental harassment and trauma that I had to go through during the entire process, which once again provoked me to question my intellectual value and position in the higher education sector. Today, in India, we live in a time when brutal behaviors and psychological harassment of higher education staff are considered a usual part of the guerilla training processes in workplaces to achieve 'extraordinary' volumes of metrical achievements like rankings, student enrollments, and revenues.

Conclusion: Impacts on higher education systems

The mafia-like, extortionist, guerilla leadership is erasing genuine scholars and their scholarships from the education systems and replacing them with revenue-generators, converting universities into breeding zones of threat, trauma, and destruction. The higher education workplaces in India are getting increasingly neoliberalized by "corporatising and commercialising universities and bringing with it corporate

cost-cutting" (Andrew, 2023a, p. 18). Neoliberal universities are "building real estate empires instead of funding academic positions" (Andrew, 2023a, p. 18), giving birth to a state of inescapable "stuckness" (Hage, 2009, p. 467). According to Hage, stuckness is a situation "where a person suffers from both the absence of choices or alternatives to the situation one is in and the inability to grab such alternatives even if they present themselves" (Hage, 2009, p. 467).

Despite being qualified to explore job opportunities in other institutions, the research participants either felt reluctant to explore due to their traumatic experiences or could not explore because of the relieving documents held back in their previous institutes. Their experiences have caused irreparable damage to their careers and the higher education system of India. The neoliberal dictatorial work cultures have gained further impetus with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-run government in India, which, through the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, has been incentivizing quantity, rapidity, and revenues over quality, humanity, and intellectual growth. In the name of internationalizing and globalizing its higher education institutions, India's accreditation and education councils have chosen the pathway of quantity and mimicry rather than quality and originality. To elaborate further, to generate a fast-paced transformation process, higher education institutions have been encouraged to blindly mimic the infrastructures, curricula, and pedagogies of the Western higher educational institutions and implant them in India, without taking into consideration the local challenges and contexts (Kulal et al., 2024). To apply these visions, the only way out is to compromise with the quality of intellectual growth and dictate quantity, which has eventually invited mafias, syndicates, and extortioners within the higher-ed leadership management systems.

The frenzied and superficial roadmaps for development have given birth to cultures of trapping, threatening, and erasing opinionated people who do not conform to the extraction, exploitation, and revenue-generation practices the NEP has streamlined. As a result, gradually, academia is replacing academically and intellectually sound people with extortioners, mafiosi, and syndicates who can hire, fire, stick, whip, threaten, terrorize, and exploit workers as they please. My opinion piece intends to sensitize higher education professionals across India and the world against the abusive work culture of neoliberal educational institutions in India and why they should reconsider their decisions before getting affiliated with them. I am not sure what social, cultural, and professional consequences I may face in India for penning this piece, and honestly, I do not care. It is high time to expose the critical workplace conditions of neoliberal higher education institutions in India that are being systemically masqueraded under the sham of professional development, intellectual progress, and metrical extraordinariness as realistically as possible.

Postscript

While writing this opinion piece, I encountered multiple mental breakdowns. The nightmarish experiences of working in my previous institution were continuously hitting back at me. Whenever I heard that a faculty member had

been terminated without notification, I feared the next turn would be mine. Who knew if I was also hired to fulfil some scam marketing and revenue-making project? On the one hand, I wanted to fearlessly flag off genuine infrastructural, cultural, and ethical concerns. On the other hand, I realized that my position in the institution was becoming increasingly vulnerable with every passing day. The anger and frustration in this opinion piece result from these experiences.

However, no matter how much we are intellectually and emotionally beaten, battered, and tortured by toxic teaching-learning environments, we need to take a deep breath, rise on our feet, embrace each other in tears, anger, and laughter, and co-build avenues of radical resistance and pedagogies. To stay engaged and navigate such problematic work ethics, it is crucial to learn “politically, ontologically, somatically, and emotionally” (Brookfield et al., 2024, p. 181) by working within “constraining structures, negotiate institutional barriers, and advocate for change that threatens institutional identity” (Brookfield et al., 2024, p. 181). Personally, every time the institution warned me how ‘professionally threatened’ they felt because of my outspoken approach, I felt more and more assured that my pedagogical and intellectual approaches were on the right track because, in neoliberal institutions, a critical mind is a threat to their blinded development visions.

More and more, our criticality is threatened; more and more, we need to advocate for it and voice it out loud – loud enough to be verbally, visually, and emotionally heard. To put it out straight, the increasing “top-down managerialism and the metrification of the academic work” (Fleming et al., 2021, p. 111; see Dey & Chakraborty, 2024) need to be permanently halted, and I believe that one of the initial initiatives is to identify the correct problems and expose the mortal dangers within the “privatised, corporatised, marketised, financialised neoliberal universities” (Fleming et al., 2021, p. 112).

Some of the ways in which problems like top-down managerialism can be identified and bulldozed are by establishing unofficial inter-faculty grievance cells and performing collective acts of refusals. The inter-faculty grievance cells need to be unofficially established in the forms of WhatsApp and telegram groups and online and physical meets outside the institutional spaces so that the perpetrating bodies within the institutions do not get a scope to interfere in the name of pseudo concerns and care. Every institution has officially established grievance cells that, theoretically, claim to address the concerns and grievances of the staff. However, such spaces are deeply clogged with the politics of exclusions and hierarchies. As a part of such politics, incidents that may publicly put the institution’s reputation, ethics, and prestige at stake are systemically shelved and submerged by either ignoring the complaints or threatening the complainants to remain silent. So, such official spaces are highly reliable. Therefore, to counter such spaces, it is crucial to generate unofficial online and offline locations of solidarities that are disentangled from the surveillance and censorship of the institutions, where individuals can unburden their concerns without the fear of being patrolled. These spaces can prove more effective than officially established bodies and can compel

the institution to surrender its corrupted stances and take action. For instance, in my previous workplace, once a series of emails from the registrar’s office dictating the faculties about abiding by mandates on dresses, working hours, and leisure time caused a massive stir.

At the beginning of one of the semesters, in the name of disciplining the faculties, the registrar’s office fleshed out strict guidelines for what qualifies to be formal wear for staff, designated times for lunch, breakfast, and snacks, and how staff at leisure hours are not allowed to sit in the canteens and cafeterias and relax. The emails also contained information about how staff may get fined and fired if found violating these norms. The language of the emails was profoundly concerning as it consisted of words and phrases that were arrogant, unprofessional, and threatening in nature. Some of the institution’s faculties collectively flagged this issue with the Human Resource Department, which did not pay any heed. Then, a group email led by senior faculty members who have been associated with the institution for over a decade was sent to the highest leadership of the institution, who highlighted how such norms and languages are detrimental to the intellectual and professional health of the institution. This email forced the registrar’s office to change its dictatorial attitudes, relax the norms, and communicate emails more humbly and professionally. This initiative was shaped by generating solidarities in privately and unofficially built discursive spaces.

Another effective way in which the syndication of academic institutions can be challenged is through silent practices of collective refusals. In connection to the abovementioned incidents, besides writing emails, several faculties decided that in their leisure hours, they would continue sitting in the cafeterias and canteens outside the designated time and let the institution act as they wished. Gradually, the act of silent refusal and defiance (Dey, 2023) multiplied with more and more faculties violating the norms, and the institution very soon realized that it could not convert an academic institution into a concentration camp of threats and dictatorial disciplines.

These initiatives are not sufficient; and more intra-institutional and inter-institutional refusals and resistance need to be generated. However, these possibilities at least open up pathways to how we should not fear and strategically navigate through the “heightened surveillance” (Brookfield et al., 2022, p. 132; see Diamantidaki & Kefalaki, 2021) of the peers and instructors. Let us not compromise from being critically reflective beings; let us do whatever needs to be done to ensure that.

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