

On Being a Critical Scholar in India Today

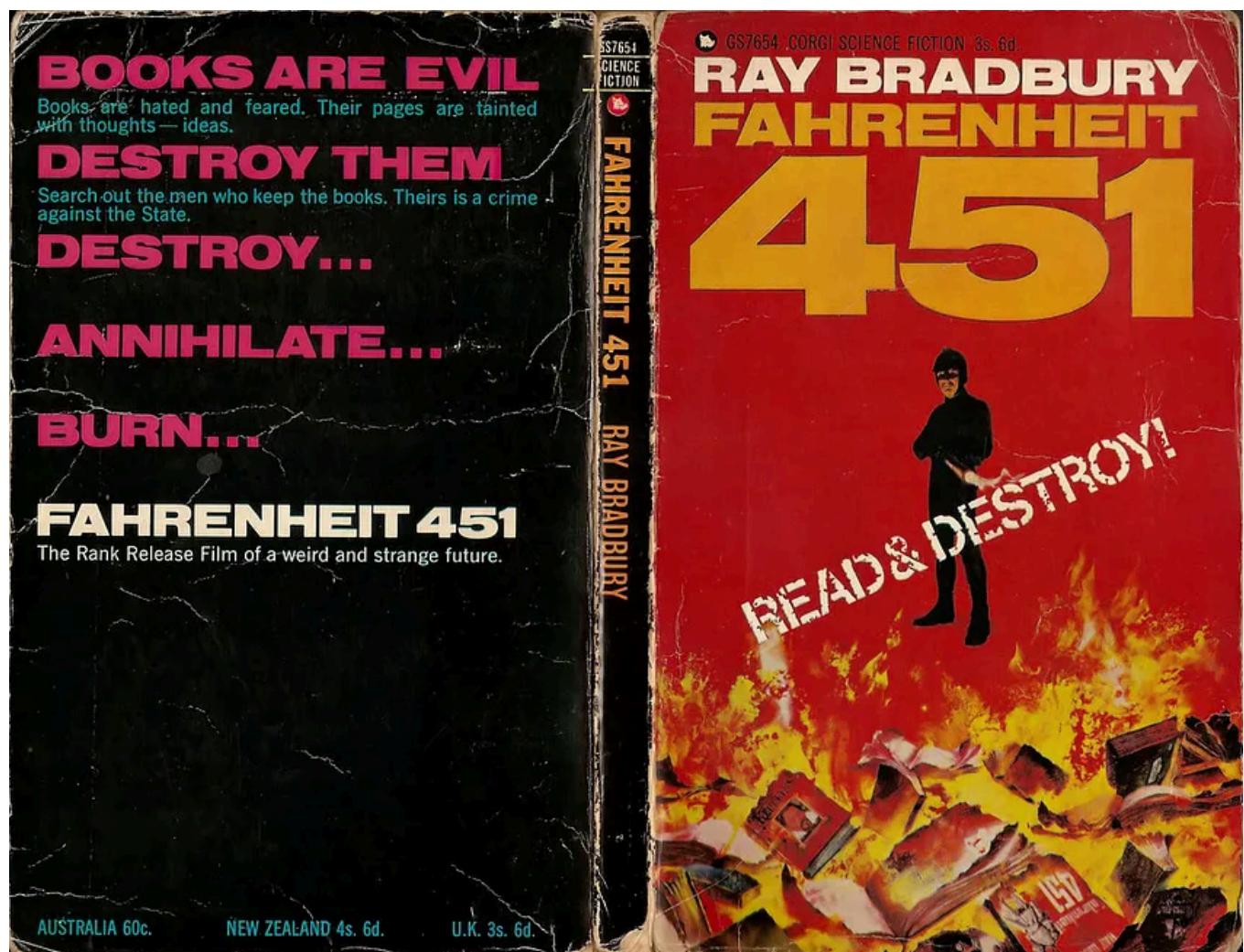
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Note: *This is the first in a four-part series on the contradictions of practicing critical scholarship in Indian academia today. Across these essays, I reflect on the performance of critique, the conservatism of [elite private liberal arts institutions](#), the [hollow promise of meritocracy in public universities](#), and what it means to imagine solidarity from home.*

How do you pursue critical scholarship in a society where critique is itself under siege, from the family WhatsApp group to the university? What happens when your ideas are celebrated in theory but punished in practice? You might have spent years honing language to ask questions about justice, but in job interviews, it becomes about “are you flexible with your teaching” or if you “could make your work sound less political”?



Source: Gino d'Achille's cover for Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*

I will try to not make this a personal lament. But it's easier to identify a structural failure when it is explained in terms of one's experience which is the opposite of my training in economics.

The Making of a “Professional”

I grew up middle class, in a country where “professionalism” meant engineering, medicine, or the civil services. I don’t include law because I didn’t see it where I grew up. I studied economics instead of political science which I frankly find more interesting. I believed, perhaps naively, that to understand society meant being able to change it for the better.

Instead of going corporate, I chose the long route: NGOs, freelance research, then a PhD. My research was on software engineers and BPO workers, two groups performing nearly identical cognitive and linguistic labour, but positioned worlds apart in terms of social status. What separated them? Language, caste, institutional pedigree, posture.

Professionalism was not merit. It was a performance of one’s caste and class. The same logic extended to academia.

When Institutions Discriminate, But Don’t Say So

During my PhD, I spent years sending applications, attending interviews, and having “conversations” with potential employers. At a major college in Delhi University, I was told I couldn’t teach there because I wouldn’t be able to manage Hindi despite being fluent thanks to my Kendriya Vidyalaya education. The excuse was the message: *we have already chosen our candidate.*

I don’t want to attribute this to some form of caste or class discrimination, as I am at the end of the day, from a privileged community. But 2016-17 was not a great time to be a south indian studying in JNU applying for jobs in Delhi. It teaches you something, how exclusion feels like, when you have no control over how people decide to perceive you.

Let’s also get something straight here. There’s nothing meritorious about the hiring process. It is about being at the right place at the right time. Universities that create a brand value around degrees and charge a premium on it are the worst. Both private and our public autonomous institutions are guilty of this. But this process also allowed me to learn something about personal branding in the job search process. When I finally landed a teaching fellowship at a private university, I learnt how to clean up my Google trail, reword my thesis abstract, and quote the “right” journals. I didn’t lie. I just learnt what not to say.

The “Emotional” Scholar and the Disciplining of Dissent

In universities, especially in student politics, one way in which students are disciplined is by referring to them as emotional or irrational. They are accused of making things personal, of being angry, of making others uncomfortable.

What else is critique supposed to do?

When you as a student believe this rhetoric, or worse, make it a part of your identity, you end up in a workplace where people who are the equivalent of LinkedIn SEO gurus tell you how the world works. You swallow the rage when your ideas are rejected, which resurfaces when someone else who had the same ideas as you did wins a research grant or a promotion. But they knew how to package it.

The performance of being composed, reasonable and non-threatening is exhausting. How does it look like? There you go:

You learn to erase parts of yourself just to stay employed. But at some point, the mask slips. And all you want to do is:

But of course, I live in the real world with real consequences.

The Crisis of Critical Scholarship

To be clear. This is not my personal crisis. Since 2014, social science scholarship has been battered. Rohith Vemula's 'institutional murder', Najeeb's disappearance, and the incarceration of Umar Khalid, Sharjeel Imam and countless others, all point to a systematic attempt to criminalise critical thought.

Inside universities, student radicalism is policed or ridiculed. Outside, it is crushed. And those who flee abroad often return to private campuses where the aesthetic of critique is welcome, but its politics is not.

Meanwhile, critical scholars are asked to publish in SCOPUS-indexed journals, secure grants, and package their trauma into "diversity"-friendly webinars. Rankings reward "impact", not critique.

What is to be Done?

This is also not a call of some form of martyrdom or misanthropy. It is a call to think politically, even in the everyday. It is a call to see how caste, class, and capital shape our institutions, who gets to speak, who gets silenced, and who gets paid for saying the right thing at the right time.

It is a refusal to pathologise what is political. I don't suffer from "mental health issues". I suffer from being alive in a society that gaslights dissenters, rewards conformity and sells self-help instead of solidarity.

What This is, and What It is Not

I have done my best not to make this a memoir or a plea for attention. It's an attempt to think through what it means to do critical and radical scholarship in a time of repression, not as performance or branding, but as praxis, as survival. For those of us still in the university, we must build pockets of resistance, courses that unsettle, conversations without closure, and writing that doesn't seek institutional rewards.

I would like to teach my students not to become us. But to aspire for more.

Up next: "The Institution Does Not Care"

In [Part II](#), I look at elite private universities in India where the language of diversity, critical thinking and inclusion masks a deep conservatism. What does it mean to teach critique inside institutions that are essentially branded commodities?

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