IMP #2. The Institution Does Not Care

thirdworldecon.substack.com/p/the-institution-does-not-care

Rohith Jyothish July 12, 2025

How do you speak of labour, or ecological justice when the land beneath your classroom was once farmland acquired through coercive state facilitation?

When the university's chancellor is a billionaire and a ruling party MP?

When critical thinking is part of the brand, but not of governance?

Being able to answer these questions shapes every decision I make as a teacher and scholar inside one of India's premier private liberal arts universities. And they signal broader contradictions that are now foundational to India's expanding private higher education sector.

The Branded University and the Aesthetic of Critique

The elite private university markets itself as a clean alternative to the dysfunction of public education. It borrows its architecture from American liberal arts colleges, its faculty from global PhD markets, and its brochures and social media strategy from startup culture.

It speaks the language of critique. But this is still a business.

So, critique is contained. You can teach against neoliberalism, but not question the donor-endowed chair funding the course. You can assign readings on agrarian distress, but not ask how the land was acquired to build the university itself. You can assign readings on caste, class and gender, but only rarely reflect on how they structure interactions between faculty and the housekeeping staff, or between administration and contract workers. You certainly cannot embarrass your trustees with your political views. Academic freedom is allowed, even celebrated, as long as it does not interfere with the university's strategic goals.

They Don’t Say No, They Just Don’t Say Yes

Control doesn’t arrive through censorship or state diktat. It comes in the form of a soft institutional discipline: performance metrics, internal grant eligibility, access to sabbaticals, or invitations to committees. No one tells you not to speak. But you know it’s better if you don’t speak up.

In some departments, colleagues who once raised hard questions would get promoted, and then become very quiet. Whether this is an explicit strategy or the outcome of soft co-optation, it closely resembles what Jonathan Parry describes in *Classes of Labour*, where workers who led protests in Bhilai’s steel plants were selectively absorbed into the permanent workforce to fracture worker solidarity. The same logic drives industrial relations in Haryana’s industrial belt.

The university, like capital, knows how to “incentivise” discipline.

How the Elite Stay Ahead

Elite private universities often provide some of the highest quality undergraduate teaching in the humanities and social sciences in India. I can certainly vouch for my colleagues in political science, sociology, history, economics, geography, english literature, or anthropology. The content is richer and more current than in many public institutions because the faculty who teach decide the syllabus themselves.

But what makes these universities attractive is not just teaching quality. It’s the pipeline. The promise of upward mobility through elite pathways: study abroad semesters, master’s admissions to global universities, and internships or capstone projects with your future employer. These pathways are not guaranteed by pedagogy, but by a set of cultivated networks, money and cultural capital that gives one access to global academia and job markets.

Foreign universities understand this. India’s elite is part of their financial model. The elite private university serves as a reputational intermediary, a curated space that de-risks Indian students for international admissions offices.

At an event I attended almost a decade ago, a faculty member at an elite private university put it bluntly: “Our students mostly don’t need jobs after graduation.” That may be less uniformly true today, but the structure remains. It’s an education system designed to reproduce the elite.

What Non- Elite Private Universities Offer

Most private universities in India are not elite. They lack capital, clout, and international networks. What they share is the exploitation of highly skilled academic labour.

They are built on the surplus value extracted from teachers trained at public universities, who now have nowhere else to go because central and state universities hire much less than they used to. These institutions overload faculty with 16-20 hours of teaching in a week compared to 6-9 hours in an elite private university. Teaching 16-20 hours a week may not seem unreasonable, until you factor in what that actually entails. These are contact hours, not

preparation or grading time. For each hour of classroom teaching, most faculty spend at least 2-3 hours preparing lectures, meeting students, designing assignments, and evaluating work. Multiply that across several courses, and you are already averaging 40-50 hours of teaching-related work. Now add the expectation to publish in high-ranked journals, contribute to unpaid administrative duties, attend meetings, mentor students, respond to their phone calls and messages, and somehow still be available for your family. The workweek spills over, invisibly into weekends, late nights, and what are euphemistically called “vacations”.

What kind of academic life is even possible under such conditions? Teaching becomes hurried. Research becomes a luxury. You will start to see care as a burden. Most faculty quietly absorb this, because to protest would mark you as “difficult” or worse, “replaceable”.

And as in elite universities, teaching is increasingly transactional. Exams are repeated until students pass. Grades become negotiable. Question papers are drafted during so-called general vacations. Academic care is gamified, critical feedback, punished.

Elite Precarity and Strategic Utility

In contrast, my institution is far better resourced. But even here, one survives by performing utility.

I am not central to the university’s brand. But I am useful. I help design curricula. I contribute to undergraduate admissions. I co-ordinate a PhD programme. I mentor. I show up to meetings and spend hours wondering how to balance intellectual integrity with institutional survival.

A doctoral programme, especially in fields like international affairs or public policy, can occupy an ambivalent space in an elite private university. They do not generate revenues the way undergraduate or master’s or even online programmes do. Nor do they fit easily into branding strategies aimed at foreign tie-ups and student mobility. The result is a quiet but consistent under-investment, not overt hostility, but a lack of institutional imagination.

Admissions are heavily resourced because they bring in tuition. Doctoral research, by contrast, demands long-term commitment with little immediate return. So even when faculty attempt to build meaningful, diverse, and context-sensitive PhD programmes, tailored, say, to diplomats, civil servants, or young researchers, they do so within tightly controlled budgetary and administrative constraints. Innovation is welcome, but it has to be frugal.

Interestingly, this mirrors what happens in a public university. You try to build something that matters, but the system’s priorities lie elsewhere.

When Aspiration Becomes Anxiety

Across elite private universities, the student-institution relationship is increasingly commodified. Students quickly learn to mimic the behaviour of those they believe are successful. They write what they think professors want to hear. They volunteer for research assistantships or committee roles in exchange for credentials. Those branded as “cool”, “socialist”, or “chill” professors sometimes find themselves gamed, expecting to exchange leniency for flattery.

The line between mentorship and networking blurs. And when this performative meritocracy fails to yield expected results, disappointment is framed as a mental health issue. But what if it is something else? A deeper cognitive dissonance, created by repeated deviance from solidarities based on kindness, honesty, and mutual respect?

The market does not deliver here.

Source: Screenshot from Dead Poets Society (1989)

What Is to Be Done?

There are structures here which are too powerful to name directly. The elite private university is an optimised system. It absorbs the language of dissent, curates the appearance of diversity, and packages critique as cultural capital. It offers upward mobility to students, soft coercion to faculty, and reputational returns to donors.

But we need to stop pretending that this is benign.

The institution cannot be transformed by curriculum changes or committee meetings alone. The very logic that governs it: cost efficiency, reputation management, student satisfaction as customer feedback, is antithetical to the open-ended, risky, and slow work of critical scholarship.

We need clarity. We must be able to **name the contradictions** without masking them in corporate-speak.

We need to be able to **operate as a collective**. Isolation is the institution's greatest weapon. Informal solidarities are our best defence.

Refuse the fiction that merit alone protects you. **Refuse the idea that critique is only valid when polite**. Refuse to make yourself small just to be seen as a team player.

This is not a manifesto. These are field notes. The university won't change unless its contradictions become impossible to ignore. Until then, we teach, write, dissent and survive whether the institution cares or not.

This is the second in a four-part series on the contradictions of practicing critical scholarship in Indian academia today. In Part I, I explored the performance of critique and the exhausting emotional labour demanded of critical scholars. In Part III, I turn to central universities, state universities and IITs and IIMs, celebrated as bastions of Indian academic excellence. Behind their meritocratic sheen lies a deeper story of exclusion, bureaucratic rot, and ideological capture. Let's talk about the promise of public education as well as the betrayals it has endured.