

IMP #3. What Are We Defending When We Defend Public Education?

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This is the third in a four-part series on the contradictions of practicing critical scholarship in Indian academia today. In [Part I](#), I explored the emotional labour of critique, an invisible but daily struggle. In [Part II](#), I posed an institutional critique of the private university. This essay turns to public universities, fragmented, defunded, and yet still the last places where political imagination finds public expression. **Who is the Public University For?**

If elite universities have perfected the aesthetic of critique, public universities still embody its mess. But that mess matters.



Source: Bilal Kuchay/Al Jazeera (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/11/23/hundreds-march-in-india-to-demand-affordable-education-for-all>)

Public universities were once imagined as engines of national integration, mobility, and reasoned dissent. Today, they have become battlegrounds. In many cases, they are starved of funds, over-policed, and vilified in public discourse. Yet, despite their crisis, and sometimes because of it, they remain among the last spaces where political struggle is not just theorised, but lived.

In stark contrast, institutions like the IITs and IIMs operate under a different logic, prestige without politics. Their excellence is presumed, and their insulation is mistaken for neutrality.

I Didn't Always Know What I Was Defending

I have studied in an autonomous college under Kerala University. The classes were uninspiring. The syllabus felt like an obligation. Student politics looked like turf wars between factions. I remember SFI activists once barging into class and demanding we join a protest. I didn't know what it was about, but I didn't feel like I had the right to say no. Some classmates saw the teacher trying to finish the syllabus as "bourgeois". I didn't have the vocabulary to make sense of this, but I remember feeling confused and disappointed.

That disillusionment wasn't simple. One day, ABVP cadres from a nearby "rival" college threw a crude explosive onto our campus. They arrived on bikes, waving flags and carrying weapons. It was SFI activists who protected us that day, helping students escape to the nearest bus stop. I had classmates who lost years of study to violence. Some left the country to finish their degrees. I stayed. I struggled for years, wondering if I was cut out for academia.

That doubt stayed with me into my PhD and my first teaching job. It still shapes how I think about what critique costs, and what it requires to survive it.

When Critique Isn't Branded, It's Risky

In the public university, critique is not a funded research project or a seminar on publishing in SCOPUS-indexed journals. It's often a matter of survival. At JNU, Jamia, HCU, and AMU, students have mobilised against caste violence, fee hikes, state repression, and everyday authoritarianism. They have fought over hostel rules, medium of instruction, and capital punishment. Politics here is alive, though messy, exhausting, and full of contradictions.

Compare this to IITs, IIMs, and many elite private universities. Protest is nearly absent, not because students and faculty are apolitical, but because dissent has been structurally removed. Student unions are banned. Faculty are bound by performance metrics and HR protocols. The architecture itself discourages collectivism with gated campuses, biometric surveillance, and corporate partnerships.

In these institutions, political science often takes the form of public choice theory, policy design, or management studies. Critical traditions, of Marxism, Ambedkarite thought, or feminist critique, exist, if at all, in marginal seminars or elective offerings. These institutions proudly train technocrats for global markets, but they are often allergic to political thought. In this sense, they resemble private universities more than the public ones they technically belong to.

What about the State Universities?

We must be careful not to flatten public universities into one category. The crisis of the state university, especially its affiliated colleges, is specific, structural, and often invisible to those outside it.

Adjunctification has destroyed job security for faculty. University appointments are political patronage tools. Infrastructure is decaying. Exams are delayed for years. PhDs are supervised without resources. Campuses operate without functioning libraries, labs, or even bathrooms.

And yet, for many working class and rural students, these institutions are the only available ladder. They travel long distances, work jobs on the side, and endure indifferent bureaucracies in the hope of something better. Some eventually make it to elite institutions, public or private, only to encounter a new kind of alienation. Their politics, if it survives, is hard won.

This structural abandonment is not an accident. It is the result of decades of policy that have favoured privatisation, casualisation, and competition. Rankings, “learning outcomes”, and EdTech dashboards are just new names for older exclusions.

Prestige is a System that can be Gamified

Today, elite institutions do not simply compete on educational quality. They compete on performance. This includes publication in SCOPUS-indexed journals, high NAAC scores, citations and global rankings. Institutions that succeed in this system are not necessarily more intellectually rigorous, they are more efficient at managing the spectacle of excellence.

Some institutions have figured out how to game the system. Incentivising quantity over quality, building citation cabals, or outsourcing writing to third-party vendors. Others are simply bad at being elite. They mimic the institutional form of private or central universities but without the resources, staff, or ideological clarity to sustain it. These fragmented institutions suffer materially and also from a profound confusion about their purpose.

And Yet, We Must Defend the Public

Despite everything, the public university remains one of the few arenas where critique can still exist beyond the classroom. It may be broken, but it's not empty. Even in its dysfunction, it holds space for political possibility.

In a time when the idea of the university is being reduced to a market signal like a degree, or a job, we are losing something else. We are losing the space for doubt, idleness, inefficiency, and confrontation. We are losing the right to ask the questions.

Universities interested in social justice cannot be built on corporate templates. They cannot merely train workers for the digital economy. They must remain spaces where other kinds of futures can be imagined, even badly, even provisionally.

In the [fourth and final part](#) of this series, I reflect on the home as a site of political struggle. How are we losing our political imagination, especially among the educated, liberal, and the radical? What happens when we internalise defeat, discipline our hope, and call it responsibility? How do we navigate love, family and critique?

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