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Re-collections of acts and enactors of resistance: Challenging discourses of intellectual marginality and academic freedom within Indian universities

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Abstract

Social marginality and injustice often intersect in hegemonic perceptions of intellectual authority. To learn about alternative worldmaking within conditions of socio-political change, 46 academics from within 30 institutions participated in a study to archive their life histories. Each contributed to addressing social injustice, at various points from 1963-2024, and were some of the 'first' to enter the academic profession in India of their social groupings. Data generation included recorded oral discussions with Dr Dhawan (Women's Studies) and photo-talk discussions with Prof Belluigi (Critical University Studies). These engendered self-criticality about their positionality, ethico-political frames, and relationships within and beyond the institutional murus. Creative storytellers and visual artists then offered intergenerational interpretations. The paper explores (in)sights into the constructions of these transformative intellectual authorities as im/perfect enactors, and individual and collective acts of resistance against injustice as de/idealisations of academic freedom, which de-centre dominant tropes of leadership.

Full paper

Hegemonic constructions of intellectual authority reproduce dominant discourses about whom belongs within the academy; and projections of deficit onto social groups marginalised from higher education and minoritised in academic positions. Counter-narratives of authority in transition emerge from those practicing refusal (Bargu, 2024) of continued social injustices within universities (Mikulan and Zembylas, 2023).

As the world's largest democracy and one of the oldest Majority World context to have resisted British colonisation and gained independence, India has seen shifts, concerted projects and regulation re-shape its universities. Reservation policies have impacted student access to the human right of higher education (Wadwa, 2018); 'study areas' such as Women's Studies and Dalit studies have intervened to mainstream social justice. However,

the composition of those who undertake (permanent and precarious) academic labour continues to reflect casteist and ethno-religious inequalities, with significant under-representation of so-called Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Muslims within the professoriate. This top-down view from afar is depicted quantitatively in administrative data and recent studies (Chattopadhyay, Marginson and Varghese, 2021), including by this study's project leads (Belluigi et al., 2022; Dhawan et al., 2023).

Those with insights from having lived and learnt from the struggles they have endured within universities, offer far richer counter-narratives of what is it to *be* and to *become* an intellectual authority on social justice when operating at the porous internal-external borderlands of the institutional *murus*. Many have gone 'from first to first' as students and then faculty within the academy [1]. Such intersectional marginality, and the possibilities of communal praxis it engenders, are understudied internationally (Turner et al, 2022; Vue, 2021). To learn about alternative worldmaking within conditions of socio-political change, 46 academics were invited to participate in our study. From positions within 30 universities in 10 states in India, each had contributed to addressing social injustice's intersections with gender inequalities in their teaching, research or 'extension activities' (Third Mission), through various periods from 1963-2024.

Their life history narratives include reflections on their self-criticality about their positionality; their ethico-political frames; and their relationships with groups and collectives within and beyond the borders of the institutional *murus*. These were produced in an interview-like discussion with the Indian Primary Investigator, an academic in Indian Women's Studies (Dhawan) trusted within participants' networks; with 7 participants electing to contribute further (in)sights via photo-talk with the UK-based Primary Investigator (Belluigi), a South African academic in Critical University Studies. Selected interview transcripts were engaged with by 5 creative storytellers working/ studying within universities, offering intergenerational interpretations produced in the form of short stories, zines and graphic novellas. In addition, 18 interviews were shared with 4 contemporary visual artists, who produced 6 artworks through their creative arts research practice (Belluigi, Dhawan, Achuthan and Vieten, 2025). These purposely disrupted conventional (auto)biographical models of life history which have fed reproductions of 'linear masculine lines as authentic selves' (Rassool, 2004), including elite-making of 'first generation' professors through intellectual historiography (Telkes, 1998). Rather, extending feminist historiographic writing (Stefaniw, 2020), conditions of possibility for feminist intellectual ancestry-making in the present, crossed generational, identitarian and nationalist boundary lines (Clark, 2016; Marquina et al, 2015).

Recognising discourse as an artefact of culture, the layers of narration (Sclater, 2003; Sclater, Squire and Treacher, 2000) of the participants' transcripts and the creative works, were brought into dialogue with the dominantly-positioned discourses evoked as foil or shadow in the oral, textual and audio-visual forms (Metcalf, 2019). In this paper, the affective terrain of participants' remembrances and the creative works are re-read through the lens and language of ugliness, which emerges as discomfort and friction along the

eroding fissures of dominant cultural myths and norms (Henderson, 2018). Unlike western beauty/ ugly binaries (Nuttal, 2006), this language enables opening to alternative conceptions of worldmaking that recognise the value of inglorious, imperfect and even mundane constructions of academic practices (acts) and figures (enactors) of individual and collective ugly freedoms (Anker, 2022). Not only can academic freedom be ugly when built as an entitlement through harms to others; but alternate, communal notions are held and practiced, that are mis-recognised when read through normative, individualist, liberal, masculinist frames (Belluigi, 2023).

De-centring dominant tropes of leadership, the paper presents (in)sights into the self-constructions of these transformative intellectual authorities as im/perfect enactors, the de/idealisation of academic freedom of individual and collective acts of resistance against injustice, in their accounts and the creative interpretations. In such ways it is hoped that these unconventional re-tellings of living intellectual histories will trouble the erasures of metanarratives of universities.