The public university dissected

MAKING SENSE OF THE UNIVERSITY: A MANIFESTO OF OUR TIMES
By Debaditya Bhattacharya,
Cambridge, ₹1,595

In February 2016, after several student leaders of Jawaharlal Nehru University were arrested on charges of sedition, something curious happened at the campus's borders. The cleaners, mess workers, gardeners and barbers who kept the university running declared their faith in the students' integrity and innocence. Some, as Debaditya Bhattacharya notes, went out of their way to open escape routes for students fleeing right-wing mobs. Across the road however, Munirka, the village that had subsidised JNU's intellectual life for almost half a century with cheap rooms and cheaper tea, turned against its own livelihood: landlords threatened students with evictions, autorickshaw drivers refused to board passengers to the university, Kashmiri and north-eastern students were asked to prove their patriotism, and residents demanded that the neighbourhood be sanitised of 'anti-national' elements. What was extinguished, in Bhattacharya's memorable phrase, was "the endless buzz of lazy conversations over the buying of a pack of cigarettes or a cold drink — *the gesture that converted commerce into the embrace of community.*"

This anecdote about intimate articulations of civic coexistence inside and outside the university campus captures the book's argument. The fate of the public university, Bhattacharya contends, is decided at its gates, among those who make its thinking possible but are rarely thought about in return: the migrant branded illegal, the Dalit student, the *hijab*-wearing believer, and the informal worker. He calls these publics the university's "unthought", and his book is a conceptual history of how they have been included, counted, instructed, and expelled.

In the Prologue, Bhattacharya dismantles the nationalist fable of Nalanda and Takshashila as ancient universities: one barred Chandala students, and the other was a monastery. He traces how colonial public money after 1813 emptied vernacular schools of their lower-caste pupils. What such a past reveals is that the public university never simply possessed its publicness; it has conferred it selectively, and in the conferring, withheld it. Bhattacharya provocatively argues in his Introduction that the unsettling nature of our time necessitates that "Concepts like community, secularity, solidarity and academic freedom — as the noms de guerre that sutured the public university to pretensions of 'publicness' — must be reviewed and, if necessary, completely rewritten."

Each unthought figure receives a chapter that reads a recent crisis against a longer history. The women of Shaheen Bagh, telling reporters that they would rather die in the cold than live like the students beaten inside Jamia, occasion a meditation on how the fear of death, in a pandemic or in a pogrom, binds the university to people it otherwise shares nothing with. Rohith Vemula's suicide note, read beside the 1992 death of the Lodha scholar, Chuni Kotal, reveals how a Dalit mind becomes audible only when it "dies in English". The Karnataka *hijab* judgment is dissected with forensic patience, down to the discovery that the sole 'woman' the judges cited on Islamic practice was an undergraduate term paper in an American university. The final chapter's history of academic freedom, from the papal bulls that let medieval masters strike work to Stanford's Ross affair, ends in a manifesto whose boldest principle awards freedom first to the unranked and the unprotected.



Unthought spaces

Bhattacharya has been writing about the Indian university for over a decade. *The Indian University: A Critical History* is about the illusory Indian experience of an imported idea, while the 2019 volumes he edited, *The Idea of the University* and *The University Unthought*, gathered diverse reflections around the institution's present crisis. This book supplies a mature formation of Bhattacharya's thought: a theory of what the public in the public university might mean. That theory is not confined to India. Bhattacharya reads the encampments for Palestine on American campuses and the student revolt that toppled Sheikh Hasina in Bangladesh in 2024 as versions of the same recognition. He returns home for a witty conclusion, reading the National Education Policy as Orwellian Newspeak, an alphabet of acronyms in which the Academic Bank of Credit lets students trade course credit like shares and be free from the university altogether.

The book is well-timed. On August 15, the Indian prime minister declared from the Red Fort that "*dimagi* Naxals" must be identified and isolated; within a week ABVP-led mobs had ransacked Jadavpur University overnight while a bill ending Indian Statistical Institute's ninety-five-year autonomy awaits in Parliament. The prime minister's charge needs no gang and no protest, only a mind, and that makes the university the obvious place to start looking. Bhattacharya's wager is that a campus that thinks alongside its gardeners, mess workers, tea-sellers, and its neighbours is no longer a single address that can be surrounded. Because what will a State that has declared war on thinking do when it discovers how widely the thinking is already distributed?

Somak Mukherjee

झारखण्ड सरकार
राजस्व, निबंधन एवं भूमि सुधार

प्रेस विज्ञप्ति

संoसंo–13 / निoविo(विविध)–06 / 2025–441 / निo.

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अस्वीकार्य है।

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PR 392164 Registration(26-27).D