

Indian institutions have a ‘brilliant moron’ problem.

Only Rajeev Bhargava can save them

Rajeev Bhargava’s latest book brings together short articles he wrote for The Hindu and addresses pressing ethical questions we face in our country today.

-Yogendra Yadav

Brilliant morons. That’s what I think of many of the highly educated Indians that I come across. The financial consultant who analyses the share market with amazing equanimity and perspective but spouts the worst stereotypes about women. The brilliant software engineer who is sensitive to the invisible Western and White dominance but asserts that caste has ceased to exist. The doctor who doesn’t trust reports from any ordinary path lab but is willing to believe that Muslims will soon overtake the Hindu population. This combination of technical intelligence and social idiocy is a hallmark of contemporary India.

To be fair, this is not just India. You could say that this is a sign of our times. While this sounds better, it is not entirely true. I see a difference between higher education institutions in India and outside. In the US, for example, there is widespread ignorance, bigotry and racism in society. But when you enter their elite university campuses, you don’t encounter that, at least not in public discussion. Any association with misogyny, White supremacy or Islamophobia is a matter of deep embarrassment.

Brilliant morons and ideological coverts

Our country presents a contrast. There is widespread caste and communal prejudice in the society, but no more than you would find on a street in the Midwest of the US. Our elite university campuses—IITs, medical colleges and thousands of management and engineering institutions—are, however, not free from these prejudices. If anything, these are centres where a deadly mix of social ignorance and intellectual arrogance produces hardcore bigotry, congealed prejudices and a culture of entitled selfishness. This is where you find brilliant morons.

Higher education institutions that teach social sciences and humanities suffer from a different problem. Their students are not socially illiterate and would not flaunt their biases. They have learnt the politically correct language. But most of them do not understand the positions they espouse. I felt that as a student at the Jawaharlal Nehru University four decades ago, and I see that in many progressive

institutions now. Mass ideological conversion to the Left-wing is no different from religious conversions, at least in what it does to the intellectual abilities of the convert: The same herd mentality, the same desire for salvation, and the same suspension of cognitive faculties.

They all need public reason

A culture of public reason is missing from our education system and, indeed, from our public life. Whether it is a classroom or a political organisation, we have a culture of obedience, not questioning. We like to stay in our comfort zones with people of similar views and social backgrounds, where no one challenges us. When we meet people who challenge our opinion, we resort to abuses or quiet withdrawal of the lets-not-judge variety. That's why our TV debates are full of fire and fury but very little reasoning. This is what feeds authoritarianism in our times.

Cultivating public reason is a crying need of our collective life. We need a culture where right and wrong are discussed in an open, transparent manner, where basic and difficult questions are asked, straightforward answers demanded, where facts are checked, and where every argument has to stand on its own feet.

Here is an exemplar

If you ask me where to start, now I have an answer. Rajeev Bhargava's latest work, *Between Hope and Despair: 100 Ethical Reflections on Contemporary India*, is the kind of book you would want to gift to a young Indian you are hopeful about. This is the book I have wanted from him for decades. Rajeev Bhargava is a well-known political philosopher who has taught generations of students at JNU and the University of Delhi. I was one of them. He taught us how to make a judgement, how to be fair to the position we disagree with, how to keep an open mind, and how to present our argument in a cogent manner. This was not the craft of scoring a clever point over your opponent. He led us to a genuine pursuit of truth. Whenever someone compliments me about a TV debate, I think of my father, who taught me fairness. And I think of Rajeev Bhargava.

I have waited for this book more than his internationally acclaimed academic tomes, as it allows those who never sat in his classrooms to learn this critical art of public reasoning. He is the teacher India needs at this critical juncture.

The book brings together short articles that Professor Bhargava wrote for The Hindu. These articles address a wide range of pressing ethical questions that we face in our country: Why do we need a Constitution? Why should we value democracy? How do we relate to national pride? Are minority rights a good idea? What do we mean by secularism? What does it mean to forgive and forget? Do facts matter in the post-truth age?

I would not spoil your reading experience by anticipating or summarising his answers. It will suffice to say that these do not fit into any ideological straight jacket, into any ism. If there is an ideology that runs through the book, it is the ideology of the Indian Constitution, the idea of India. I daresay that Rajeev Bhargava offers a deeper and more nuanced defence of the philosophy of the Indian Constitution than offered by the makers of our Constitution in the heat and the dust of the moment.

An advertisement for philosophy

Students of political philosophy would recognise the academic debates underlying these questions, some of which Professor Bhargava has himself contributed to in his academic avatar. They would recognise a mind trained in the analytical philosophy tradition. An occasional reference to Charles Taylor or Alasdair MacIntyre would betray his philosophic leanings. Yet he manages to address the big questions of our time without throwing any academic jargon at you, without expecting you to have read heavy books, and without pushing you into political correctness.

The author invites you to raise basic questions that you have always wanted to ask. He helps you to think through by drawing simple yet powerful distinctions that stay in your mind and help you see the world in a different light. This is plain yet deep moral reasoning at its best, an advertisement for the relevance of philosophic reasoning. I often ask young people to read Amartya Sen and John Rawls as examples of clear, logical reasoning, even if they are not interested in the subject or do not agree with their position. Rajeev Bhargava's book belongs to that category.

Your brilliant, young, techie nephew may be persuaded by the answers given in this book. If so, the book has recruited one more soldier to defend our republic at this dark moment. If he disagrees with its answers, the book has succeeded even more in cultivating a critical, thinking citizen, no longer a moron.