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Cargo cultism and the whiteness syndrome: fake internationalization of private universities of India

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Abstract

One of the many visions of the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP, 2020), is to make efforts to internationalize the higher education system of the country. The purpose of internationalization is to make sure that like the universities from Europe, the US, Australia and other white-centric geopolitical locations of the world, the universities in India can attain global distinctions in terms of rankings, publications, curriculums and pedagogies. However, the execution process is plagued with flawed, superficial and grossly researched policies. To explain further, the initiatives for internationalizing the higher education systems are being undertaken at a rapid pace and in uncritical ways. For example, the focus of internationalization is centered on private universities, with not much focus on government-run institutions. In the name of student and faculty exchange programs, the universities in India are being flooded with white academicians whose physical visibility matters more than scholarliness. Their visibility on the university campuses is regarded as a potential marketing tool to initiate various forms of degree programs and motivate students to pay enormous amounts of registration fees. This opinion piece discusses how the project of internationalization of universities in India is engulfed with the phenomena of cargo cultism and whiteness syndrome. The arguments have been supported with personal conversations with two research participants from two private universities that are based in Noida and Hyderabad. Besides personal conversations, the arguments have also been supported by informal conversations with friends and colleagues and by analyzing photos, videos, and writings that are posted on social media by the university as markers of appreciation and success.

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Introduction

In 2019, after submitting my PhD thesis, I (Sayan Dey) joined a private university in Noida to teach in the Department of Language and Literature. One of the many factors that motivated me to apply for the job was a set of international programs for teaching and research that looked very promising and were glamorously outlined in the university's website. I felt that such a university with multiple international collaborations will be a suitable fit for my career growth. However, after a few weeks of joining, I realized that teaching and research were regarded as the least important there. Rather, what was given more importance was, that we dressed in suits and ties; we spoke accented English (even if it sounded comical); we published our research papers in so-called international journals even if they were deemed predatory; and we had the capacity to invite white, golden-haired and blue-eyed academicians from Europe and the US. Such academicians may not have been of much relevance to the then-existing academic and research programs of the university, but they should be physically visible in the campus. Besides these, the architectural style of the university, the campus structure, the cafeterias, the classrooms and the curriculums blindly mimicked the European universities with a belief that gradually such mimicry would uplift them to the 'standards' and the 'status quo' of the prestigious Euro-North American academic institutions. With the formulation of National Educational Policy 2020 (NEP, 2020) that envisions a rigorous internationalization of the higher education system in India, these practices of cargo cultism (Feynman, 1974) have aggravated further.

During a lecture at the California Institute of Technology in 1974, Richard Feynman argued that many human communities across the planet have a fetishism towards mimicking the existential practices of certain racially privileged cultures and societies (like white-centric Euro-North American sociocultural practices) that are widely sought after across the globe. But, in reality, such fetishisms have no value except generating imaginative experiences of physical and emotional spectacularity that are underpinned with falsified promises of growth and development (Feynman, 1974). Though Richard Feynman conceptualized the notion of cargo cultism in the contexts of physics and cultural practices, the concept has been found relevant across diverse sociocultural scenarios. The phenomenon of cargo cultism is underlined by the perspective that the possession of certain objects or cargoes that were once used by the colonial officials will enhance the social, cultural, racial, and economic status of the communities, who were once colonized and enslaved by the Europeans. According to Feynman (1974), the practices of cargo cultism are usually prominent amongst the countries who have been or continue to be ridden by warfare, border disputes and refugee crises. Such situations have eventually opened up gateways for Europe and the US to physically and ideologically interfere and further enhance the already existing sociopolitical fractures. In this article, the concept of cargo cultism has been fleshed out in the context of how private universities in India mimic the Euro-North American universities physically, culturally, socially, and ideologically. The cargoes appear in the forms of Graeco-Roman architectural styles of the buildings; large theatre-styled

classrooms equipped with latest technologies; syllabuses and pedagogies that have been hijacked from various Ivy League and Russell League universities; and the functional procedures that are dictated according to the whims and fancies of certain foreign universities. The growth of cargo cultism was further intensified by the phenomenon of whiteness syndrome. Whiteness syndrome is a neocolonial social, cultural, and ideological phenomenon that seduces, motivates and convinces individuals and institutions to blindly imitate the colonially-structured, white-centric, and Euro-North American patterns of thinking and doing.

My (Sayan) experience at the university in Noida was no different. Academics from Europe, the US and Australia visited the campus for a few days; pretended to have cracked all the codes of potentialities and crises that the university had and fed the university administrators with Euro-North American-centric ideas of growth and progress, which did not fit within the local socioeconomic contexts. While walking around the campus, I (Sayan) often saw that the faculties and staff from different European universities would visit the institution; sign Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs); click elegant photos with the inhouse leadership teams for social media bytes; and hold several meetings, whose photographs were widely visible, but the content of the discussions were unknown. Prior to their departure, they also provided feedback to the leadership team, which was implemented by frantically replacing the existing syllabuses and replacing them with Eurocentric curricular and pedagogical transformations. As a part of the change, many local Indian texts on theories and philosophies, especially in the fields of Humanities (literature, cultural studies, sociology, history, philosophy, and other subject areas), were replaced by selective western texts, which were found unrelatable to the local sociocultural contexts. The process of replacement was fancifully titled as 'research and academic upgradation,' and was dumped on students and faculties, who were clueless about how to execute them. Every concern and complaint fell on deaf ears and the students and faculties were silenced by the university management with the narrative that these changes will globally enhance the international reputation of the university, without any basis. During my one year of stay in that university, I (Sayan) had closely observed how whiteness in the forms of shifts and movements of white bodies (international guest faculties and students) through the university corridors, classrooms, cafeterias, and meeting halls enhanced the marketability of the university. The physical movements of the white bodies also saw the simultaneous movement of white-centric ideologies that make the collaborations and exchange programs available only to a fixed set of faculties and research disciplines that are usually considered to be financially competent and can generate satisfactory revenues. So, even though the MOUs were advertised as a pan-University vision, in reality, with the hidden consent of the foreign partner universities, they were made available exclusively to the faculties of engineering, technology, and business studies.

The faculties from the humanities and social sciences were completely left out, as they were found not intellectually rich enough for academic and research growth. Along with these aspects, the epidermalization of knowledge-making spaces (Fanon, 1967; Browne, 2009; Dey, 2022) in India, where the

presence and the narratives of the white and white-centric ideologies and intellectualities are considered by default relevant and superior to the knowledge systems of one's own, need critical attention. This article, through various evidences and analyses of the perspective of the private universities in India, underlines "how whiteness underwrites systems of racial oppression and how it is reproduced" within the contemporary systems of knowledge production (Owen, 2007, p. 203). The whiteness syndrome of various private universities unfolds the ways in which whiteness functions as a "structuring property of racialized social systems" (Owen, 2007, p. 203). During my stay in that institute, I (Sayan) also observed that only white academics were invited and when I (Sayan) raised this aspect with one of my colleagues, he winked at me and shared "whiteness sells" (Participant A, Personal Conversation, 2019, Noida). These experiences were not only personal but collective as well, which I realized through personal conversations with colleagues based there and in other private universities across India.

Prior to progressing with the arguments, we would like to clarify here why this article is specifically focused on private universities. We chose private universities because of our physical accessibility and work experiences. Since our first jobs, we have been working in various private institutions in India. As a result, we are highly aware of the various intentions and ideologies through which the institutions function. Also, with respect to the vision of National Education Policy 2020 (NEP, 2020), the process of internationalization of the academic system has been strategically centered on the private universities and government-run educational institutions are deliberately and systemically ignored. It is so because, in this way the higher education system of the country can be centrally corporatized and the students can be helplessly exploited in terms of admission fees, registration fees for study abroad programs, international summer schools, canteen fees, and various other ways, without any restrictions and regulations. The process of exposing the learners to various international academic and research programs is highly appreciable. However, the focus of introducing such programs in a lot of corporatized universities in India is less on scholarship building and more on profitmaking, through blindly implanting the functional procedures of the universities based in Europe and the US. This systemic ignorance of certain educational institutions at the cost of others is one of the many underlying agendas of internationalization.

With respect to these arguments, the article is divided into five sections. The introduction sets the pace of the arguments by discussing the backdrop from which the thematic and theoretical arguments have emerged in this article. The introduction is followed by the literature review that reflects on the different works that have been generated so far with regard to the overarching theme of this article. This section also highlights the scantiness of available documents. The third section reflects on the research methods of walking interviews and a close analysis of the social media pages of the universities in which the research participants are based, and how the responses have shaped the arguments. With respect to the conversations, the fourth section analyses and discusses how the conversations unfold the normalization of cargo cultism and whiteness syndrome as shortcut ways

of catching up with the West. The final section summarizes the article and recommends possible ways in which effective policies can be framed and implemented in order to internationalize the higher education system of India with the most diverse and inclusive patterns.

Literature review

Apart from newspaper articles and various op-eds, no documents exist that particularly focus on the problematic ways in which the higher education system is being internationalized and privatized. In fact, a lot of these op-eds like "Evolving Concept of Internationalization in Indian Education" (2021) by Anirban Chakraborty, "Internationalization of Higher Education in India" (2023) by Iqbaljeet Singh Bains, and many others not only appreciate the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP, 2020) of internationalization, but also focus their arguments on how internationalization should be led by STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) education. These articles also deliberately do not focus on the ways in which the disciplines of humanities and social sciences are being systemically left out of the projects of internationalization. These articles also appreciate the rapid transformations that are being brought by the universities through recruiting foreign full-time and visiting faculties. However, deliberately or ignorantly, what these articles fail to highlight is how often the quality of the foreign faculties is way below the expected standards of teaching and learning that have been discussed in the consequent sections. To elaborate further, as discussed in the fourth section of the article, the international faculties often fail to fulfil the basic requirements of an institution like framing innovative curriculums, publishing in prestigious journals with high impact factors, carrying out basic administration responsibilities as outlined in the job contracts, and others. Despite their failures, their job remains secured and often when the foreign faculties decide to leave, they are influenced to stay back by increasing their pay scale for nothing (Participant B, Personal Conversation, 2021, Hyderabad).

Amidst censorship and surveillance by the present right-wing government of India, there are very few articles like "Interrogating the Internationalization of Indian Higher Education" (2023), which openly critiques the higher education system of India. This commentary by Ranjan & Hameed focuses on "flawed assumptions" and "inherent contradictions" (2023, p. 28) of the National Education Policy (NEP, 2020) with regard to the state of the internationalization of the higher education system in India. The article does not specifically focus on the aspects of cargo cultism and whiteness syndrome, but the arguments about questionable teaching, learning and ranking policies (argued in the following sections) as shaped by the political and commercial stakeholders' critiques of the fake projects of internationalizing the Indian academia. Apart from these documents, it is also crucial to talk about National Education Policy 2020 (NEP, 2020). With regard to the aspect of internationalization, the educational policy promises to make the "Indian education system self-reliant and compliant to global standards & norms which would enable

India to attract a greater number of students from abroad" (National Education Policy, 2020). The policy also outlines the methodologies that would be used to implement the proposal like research and teaching collaborations with and "faculty/student exchanges with high-quality foreign institutions, and mutually beneficial MOUs with foreign countries" (National Education Policy, 2020). The UGC Chairman also publishes short writeups and videos on social media channels for the students, parents and faculties to clarify how the policies of internationalization would be implemented. However, in reality, the verbal assurances and blueprints hardly match with the systems in which they are implemented. As mentioned in the introductory and the following sections, these policies are nothing more than eye-washing tactics of blanketing the real intention of privatizing the education system, making it blindly and seductively white-centric, and limiting academic accessibility only to the socioeconomically privileged communities.

Research methods

The arguments in this article have been shaped through personal conversations and close analysis of photos, videos, and descriptive texts as found in the social media pages of the universities in which the participants are based. The conversations, photos, videos, and descriptive texts have been analyzed through Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA argues that words are never neutrally produced. They convey "how we see ourselves, our identity, knowledge, values and beliefs. They are politicized even if we are not aware of it because they reflect the interests of those who speak" (Cervera et al., 2006, p. 10). CDA has been used by investigating how social dynamics and power structures are constructed within the higher educational institutions of India through implementing glamorous and enticing marketing policies across their respective campuses and social media channels. The conversations for this project took place through the research method of walking interviews, which acknowledges walking as an "experience, source of knowledge, personal sharing, and memory" (O'Neill & Roberts, 2020, p. 1).

Participants and ethics

The conversations took place with two participants – one each from Noida and Hyderabad. The two participants were chosen on the basis of personal connections, consent and availability. Due to ethical concerns, the original names of the participants have not been revealed. The participant from Noida has been named Participant A, and the participant from Hyderabad has been named Participant B. Noida is a city, which is located in the Gautam Buddha Nagar district in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, and Hyderabad is the capital city in the southern Indian state of Telangana. It is also for ethical reasons that the photos, videos and descriptive texts have not been referenced or very specifically discussed in this article.

Processes in which the methods have been implemented

All the conversations took place in person and inside the respective university campuses of the participants. While conversing, we walked through the open spaces, cafeterias, and corridors of different subject departments and talked about the social dynamics and power structures of different academic disciplines. We also talked about how certain academic disciplines gain validity for international accreditation and recognition (Fleming et al., 2021; Andrew, 2023). During the conversations, the physical movements across the different locations of the campus interwove with the narratives of intellectual violence, fetishism towards white-skinned academics, hierarchies in pay structures and the exclusionary functionalities of different academic disciplines. These interventions unveil diverse patterns of social practices and social relationships (Fairclough et al., 1997), and the ways in which the colonial dynamics of racial, cultural, social, and geopolitical superiorities are rekindled through localized forms of socially, culturally, and economically exclusionary systems of knowledge dissemination in contemporary India. The time period of the research was January 2019 to August 2023. The conversations that are centered on the two research participants took place between 2019 and 2021. The rest of the time period has been utilized through informal conversations with friends and colleagues and closely analyzing the social media pages of different private universities.

Besides conversations, the arguments in this article have also been framed through analyzing the social media pages of the respective universities of the research participants on LinkedIn and the patterns in which they promote their so-called innovative internationalization strategies. During the analysis, we took into consideration several photos, videos and descriptive texts that have been posted for promotions and how they exclusively focus on the appreciation by foreign academicians. We also noted that in their reflections, the foreign faculties, rather than talking about scholarship developments and capacity building of students and staff, mostly talk about the architectural aesthetics of the university campuses and the way in which they resemble the universities across Europe and the US. Such reflections further enabled us to identify the normative and systemic ways in which the performances of cargo cultism and whiteness syndrome are systemically maintained.

Analysis and discussions

The first conversation took place in 2019 with Participant A in a private university located in Noida that boasts several hundred MOUs, faculty and student exchange programs, and varied national and international awards. Participant A was a 37-year-old male, who was then based in the Department of Communication. While conversing about the national and international prospects of his university, he shared: "Our university is being internationalized in a very hierarchical and abusive manner. On the one side, the pay scale and other facilities of the local Indian faculties are stagnated, and on the other hand, huge money is spent to bring underqualified international faculties as full-timers and guests" (Participant A, Personal Conversation, 2019, Noida). He also added: "It

is only a selective group of faculties from a set of selective disciplines, who owns the privilege of interacting with the foreign faculties. The rest of us only watch them from a distance" (Participant A, 2019). This conversation took place immediately after I joined the university. After a few months, my personal experiences were quite relatable. Participant A also mentioned that "if you see white academicians inside the campus, they may not necessarily be faculties or staff from foreign institutions. They can also be random tourists, who are allowed to freely roam around, so that the people from the university media team can film their photographs, curate false stories of international visiting staff, and proudly flaunt them across social media. Such superficial approaches towards internationalization are institutionally recognized through ranking systems and affiliations by the University Grants Commission (UGC). UGC is the highest body, which is responsible for coordinating, determining and maintaining standards of higher education. The celebration of colonial hangovers (Lele, 2012; Dey & Alamman, 2021) are motivated by the cargo- cult perspective that the random mimicry of white bodies and ideologies would enhance the intellectual impression of the university globally, which did not happen to date.

Our informal conversations with various faculties and staff from the same university revealed how these problems keep on persisting due to a lack of collective resistance, due to fear of penalization and expulsion on the one side and the seduction for being the 'wannabe European intellectual' on the other. During the conversations, many faculties shared that even though they were frustrated for not being considered intellectually capable of interacting and participating in research exchanges with foreign faculties, they did not resist because they did not want to let go of the colonially influenced desire of becoming like a white intellectual. When one looks at the videos, audios and descriptive texts on social media that promote the international programs of the university, one is bound to have a completely contradictory and misleadingly positive impression about the university.

Almost a similar experience was shared by Participant B, a 34-year-old man, who was working as an Assistant Professor in the School of Liberal Arts. With respect to the strategies of internationalization, he shared: "Almost every month we are informed about the recruitment of adjunct faculties and distinguished professors (who are by default white-skinned) from different universities of Europe and the US, and some of those universities and departments are not even prominently recognized in their own countries" (Participant B, 2021, Personal Conversation, Hyderabad). He also shared that "many professors who have been recruited did not turn up to date and many have requested to withdraw their names. And many professors who turned up did not appear to add a lot of value to the existing academic and research structure of the institution" (Participant B, 2021). Moreover, as the participant shared, the university continues to claim a lot of white foreign faculties as their own, even after they have officially resigned. He also added: "When international faculties arrive on the campus, their itineraries are set up in such a manner so that they do not have much scope for public interactions and remain only limited to a group of faculties and staff. They always receive 'special

treatment' from the management because of their superior class status and foreign academic degrees" (Participant B, 2021). Besides him, the informal conversations with other faculties revealed that the practices of cargo cultism and the whiteness syndrome in terms of Euro-North American-centric architectures, body languages, behavioral patterns, and dressing styles are widely encouraged. These white Euro-North American-centric aspirations are strategically and institutionally preserved as smartness, professionalism, and marketing gimmicks. These fetishisms toward whiteness and foreignness are other instances of how the colonial hangover in the forms of celebrating white physical and ideological presence in the university campuses serve as one of the many foundational dimensions of internationalizing the higher educational institutions in India. At the time of sharing their experiences, both the participants also revealed how their respective institutions blindly mimic the architectural styles of European and American universities to make the students and staff feel as if they are studying or working in a Euro-North American University.

These initiatives convert universities from sites of intellectual and critical thinking towards an imaginative promised land of happiness (Mignolo, 2007), where the knowledge-making processes are entirely focused on advertising, marketing, and the salability of knowledge, power and being (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015; Mbembe, 2016) that are manufactured and globally deployed as authentic and impactful by Europe and the US. Having read the arguments and the analyses in this article, the readers might feel skeptical about how we derived our conclusions just based on two personal conversations. Therefore, we would like to clarify here that along with the two conversations, the arguments have also been shaped through personal experiences and the informal interactions that we had with various friends and colleagues, who are based in different private universities across the country. Also, as mentioned in the research methods section, the analysis of photos, videos, and descriptive texts has also enabled us to unfold the phenomena of cargo cultism and whiteness syndrome through diverse contexts and situations.

Conclusion and possibilities

Altogether, this article makes an effort to unpack the ways in which genuine scholarly, critical, and intellectual developments are being habitually compromised through rapidly reducing the knowledge-making processes of teaching, learning and researching into a mere state of gimmickry. Within a state of gimmickry, serious thinking and discussions are erased and replaced by performances of spectacularity that are spearheaded by white, heteronormative and Euro-North American-centric bodies, ideologies and knowledge structures (Dey, 2020). The uniqueness of this article lies in the aspect that it exposes the underlying fakeness and capitalistic propaganda of internationalization of many private universities in India. No research article has been written so far that critically and elaborately reflects on how many higher educational institutions conceptualize the project of internationalization as a fraudulent money-vending scheme that lures students with promises of 100 per cent campus placements, attractive pay packages and

professional infrastructural support. Such promises often turn out to be false and exaggerated in nature and by the time the students finish the courses, they feel lost, deceived and exhausted. As discussed in this article, the pan-Indian project of internationalizing the higher education system, rather than engaging with genuine research works, critical discussions, and innovative curriculums and pedagogies, are more focused on creating fake templates of global education and knowledge values in the forms of spectacular photos, videos, architectures and resource systems that are visually appealing, but ideologically hollow.

It is important to note that the criticisms of fake internationalization, intellectual cargo cultism, and whiteness syndrome in this article are not intended to dismiss the values of internationalization as a whole. The real intention is to urgently expose the hidden intentions of education ministries and organizations in India to restrict access to education, learning and intellectual growth within the socioeconomically privileged communities. It is so, because, such communities are always ready to celebrate the privatization and commercialization of the education system without questioning and critiquing the process. The phenomena of cargo cultism and whiteness syndrome also remind us how, despite several years of India's judicial independence from the British, the specters of colonization continue to haunt the country by stealthily invading the individual psyches, societies, and the knowledge-producing systems, and successfully convincing the people to celebrate the flawed, white-centric, and invasive ideological and epistemological approaches of many Euro-North American educational institutions. However, we cannot conclude our arguments through criticisms and lamentations. Along with criticisms, it is crucial to find possible pathways for rectifying the flawed internationalizing approach of the private higher educational institutions in India. One of the possible initiating points could be to thoroughly revise the national educational policies and clearly state that internationalization should not be limited to the architectural innovations of university campuses, flooding the campuses with white academicians, and signing MOUs. Educational institutions need to engage in genuine scholarship growth through curricular, pedagogical, and research collaborations by inviting young and experienced researchers and professors (irrespective of their caste, class and race) from reputed international universities with cutting-edge research and teaching-learning experiences, and encouraging in-house students and staff to collaborate with them in unbiased ways.

Another possible way of countering fake internationalization could be to allot a significant part of the education budget towards equal capacity building in all the academic and research disciplines. Usually, the educational ministry centrally encourages students and staff to engage in research projects that are centered on the fields of business, science, technology, engineering and management. A small portion of the budget is allotted to humanities and social sciences, and only for certain specific subjects like political sciences, international relations, and economics. The educational ministry of India mostly signs MOUs with educational ministries from Europe, Australia and the US. Also, many times, the MOUs are signed to enhance the capacity building of students and staff who are only associated with

STEM education (Tilak, 2021). This problematic bias needs to be dismantled and research and teaching in the fields of humanities and social sciences need to be encouraged by allotting sufficient grants for teaching, research, and publication developments through constructing research centers and incubation hubs; building open-access research publication models; incentivizing students and staff for producing pathbreaking researches, designing residential fellowship programs to encourage international researchers and thinkers, and in various other ways. Along with these initiatives, it is essential to build educational and research bodies with experienced academicians and researchers, who can keep track of the predatory internationalizing practices of the educational institutions in the forms of recruiting foreign faculties, publishing in international journals and signing exchange programs, and alert the public by exposing them. Already organizations like India Research Watchdog (access link: <https://www.linkedin.com/company/india-research-watchdog/>) and Retraction Watch (access link: <https://www.linkedin.com/company/retractionwatch/>) have been taking initiatives to investigate and expose the fake international agendas of different private universities in India by revealing the names of the individuals and organizations and justifying their predatory acts of recruitments, publications, and teaching-learning models through thoroughly researched data and statistics. Though 'Retraction Watch' is a US-based organization, they have designated research and investigation teams in India, who keep a thorough track of predatory practices of internationalization across public and private universities in India. These initiatives are effective, but they may not be sufficient because with just two to three organizations, it is difficult to take into account the academic and research activities of 455 private universities in India. Therefore, more such organizations are required.

In addition to these institutional initiatives, it is crucial for teachers, learners and researchers to build self-consciousness. The presence of a few photos and videos of white foreign academicians on social media pages and institutional websites should not be regarded as parameters of high intellectual scholarliness. As discussed in the previous sections of this article, such representations can be extremely deceptive and misleading. So, prior to taking admissions or seeking jobs, individuals should thoroughly research their chosen institution by getting in touch with faculties and students, looking for performance statistics of the students, and knowing about the research and teaching portfolios of the faculties. However, these possibilities and recommendations are not the ultimate ones and this article serves as a warm invitation to scholars across India to continue with these discussions and share other potential recommendations. As authors, we firmly believe that this article will function as an efficient resource to encourage researchers to produce more such works that would expose the fake strategies of growth and development of the higher educational institutions in India and generate awareness amongst the learners and the teachers.

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