

The *Journey* beyond *Passage* into the University: The Relevance of E. M. Forster for (Indian) Academia²

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Abstract: This paper reads *The Longest Journey* to glean the instructive and to discuss the relevance of E. M. Forster for contemporary India, especially his impact on the university. As it explicates the implications of Forster's writing for the Indian university, many of these instructive foresights from Forster are applicable to the state of the university globally, too, as funding cuts and hiked fees affect universities in the USA, Britain, Japan, and elsewhere. Forster is prescient with his views on the university, and we can learn from his writings to assess the damage being done to academia by conservative policies.

Keywords: E. M. Forster, India, *The Longest Journey*, university, JNU, Jawaharlal Nehru University, academia

While for most Forster scholars *A Passage to India* (1924) is the go-to text for Forster and India, *The Longest Journey* (1905) works perhaps best today to elucidate the relevance of Forster in contemporary India. Whereas postcolonial readings such as Sarah Suleri's *The Rhetoric of English India* or M. Shaheen's *E. M. Forster and the Politics of Imperialism* have focused on race relations and orientalism as points of interrogation in *Passage* to engage with his relationship with the country, for me as an Indian reader of E. M. Forster in the twenty-first century, 93 years after the publication of *Passage*

² The present paper derives some of its key ideas from the op-ed-like article I published on an Indian news website, *Catch News*, on 5 April 2016, called "Forsterian Prescience: I Say this Because I am JNU or HCU" to explain not the world of E. M. Forster, but the world of Indian academia today and to seek to fully understand and explain some of the complex motivations behind its present predicaments through a dialogue Forster wrote on the university in his novel.

and in the 70th year of Indian independence, it is *The Longest Journey* that has come to find an entirely new resonance in recent times.

These echoes emerge from the discussions in *The Longest Journey* about the university and relate to the causes and means for the changes implemented by the present and the last governments at the public university in India that appear to be attempts to control and limit the ideas coming out of the university so as to quash opposition and suppress dissent. Thus, this paper reads *The Longest Journey* to glean the instructive and to discuss the relevance of Forster for contemporary India, especially in his impact on the university. As it explicates the implications of Forster's writing for the Indian university, many of these instructive foresights from Forster are applicable to the state of the university globally, too, as funding cuts and hiked fees affect universities in the USA, Britain, Japan, and elsewhere. Forster is prescient with his views on the university, and we can learn from his writings to assess the damage being done to academia by conservative policies.

The present government in India is formed by a single party majority, that of the BJP, or the Bhartiya Janta Party, which is a rightist party guided by its Hindu-fascistic ideological parent organisation, the RSS or the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, that espouses a militant and nationalistically proud form of party-sponsored Hinduism called Hindutva. The government is led by Mr Narendra Modi, accused but now cleared by the court of having condoned the 2002 violence in Gujarat, where he was chief minister at the time. The riots led to the official figure of over a thousand dead. The rightward turn in India seems contiguous with such shifts across the world.

Since coming to power in March 2014, the BJP government has sought to change the vice-chancellors or directors of leading educational institutes and come down hard on dissent from the students and academics within. This reaction has been particularly vitriolic against any left-leaning or anti-caste student politics, especially at the top public universities that in the past had a vibrant culture of dissent. There have been numerous instances where the police have been called up against peacefully protesting students. Mr Venkaiah Naidu, ex-president of BJP and, notably, union cabinet minister for information and broadcasting, has spoken against student involvement in politics: "They (students) must study and stay away from politics. If they are interested in politics, they can leave studies and join politics" (India TV).

To give a very short history of the prominent flashpoints in the recent history of Indian academia under the present government, one may begin with the appointment of Gajendra Chauhan (BJP member) on 19 June 2015 as the Chairman of the prestigious Film and Television Institute of India, FTII, in Pune, which has produced numerous popular and acclaimed film personalities. Chauhan's only claim to fame is the portrayal of a mythological character, Yudhisthira, in *Mahabharata* televised in 1988, although it has since come to light that he had also produced and acted in a number of soft-porn films. His appointment was met by a full-scale boycott by the students citing his incompetence and absence of any stature to lead the country's top institute, and demands were made for his resignation. The students went on an indefinite strike, during which they courted arrest and were beaten up by the police during protests and night raids at hostels. They had to concede after 139 days in the face of government apathy, but only after having lodged their protest.

In Chennai in Tamil Nadu, South India, in May 2015, the Human Resource Ministry stepped in directly based on an "anonymous complaint" at the prestigious IIT or Indian Institute of Technology to ask the institute for its comments regarding Ambedkar Periyar Study Circle, an anti-caste student reading group, which led to the IIT banning the study group, saying that it was trying to create an atmosphere of "hatred against the Prime Minister and Hindus" among students by distributing pamphlets (Yamunan).

Further north, but in South India again, in Hyderabad Central University or HCU in Hyderabad, which has incidentally had one of the best English departments in India, a clampdown on students and the vindictive revocation of student fellowships eventually resulted in the suicide of a dissenting student, Rohith Vemula. The row at Hyderabad began in July 2015, when some students, including Vemula, of an anti-caste organization, Ambedkar Students' Association, were suspended and barred from their hostels for "raising issues under the banner of Ambedkar Students' Association (ASA)" (Nagaraja). They had questioned the death penalty given to Yakub Menon, a Muslim and an erstwhile gangster, who had confessed and given testimony against his brother, an underworld don, and they had condemned the attack by the student wing of the ruling party, the ABVP, on the documentary screenings of *Muzaffarnagar Baaqi Hai*, a documentary film on recent riots in the north of India, where a large number of Muslims (minority in India) had died.

Vemula was denied his fellowship of 25,000 INR per month or about 340 USD or Euros and thrown out of his hostel. A poor scholarship student, Rohith Vemula died in debt. He wrote a tour de force of a suicide letter, which has since resonated with thousands and millions. I quote briefly from it here: "The value of a man was reduced to his immediate identity and nearest possibility. To a vote. To a number. To a thing. Never was a man treated as a mind. As a glorious thing made up of star dust" (Pavan). He ended by saying that he has no grievances and no expectations, except that if someone can obtain the arrears of his scholarship money, would they please clear his debts and give the remainder of it to his family. All student protests in Hyderabad since his death have been met with aggressive police action involving usual riot control measures and arrests.

In JNU or Jawaharlal Nehru University, a top humanities and social and physical sciences post-graduate university in New Delhi, in February 2016, some students held a peaceful protest against the death penalty of Afzal Guru, the accused in the 2001 attacks on the Indian parliament, whose conviction remains hotly contested on various grounds. Following the protest events, the Indian state filed charges of sedition against a number of students. The JNU student president, Kanhaiya Kumar, was arrested on 12 February, four days after the incident, although he had not been physically present at the event at all nor had his student party been involved with the event. He was kept in prison until 2 March, when he was granted bail by the high court. In between, he was beaten up by a posse of men dressed up as lawyers when he was presented at the court in police custody (JNU Row). Kanhaiya and other students were also debarred from the university. Arrest warrants were drawn against other students, too, of which Umar Khalid and Anirban Chatterjee surrendered to the police, as well, although they managed to have bails approved by the court quicker. The court has also put a stay order on the debarment of these students, which allows them to submit their PhDs which were due for Anirban and others.

During this entire period of student unrest, the mainstream Indian media has often sided with the state, branding these students as "anti-national." This word is now being bandied about in the Indian public sphere as a dirty word which can have severe political consequences for any dissenting or critical citizen or a conscientious objector. One can get roughed up or beaten up by right-wing goons, arrested by the police, have scholarships stopped, and be debarred from university and hostel by the university administration

or the HR ministry itself. The state may use charges of sedition against you. You may receive death threats against yourself and your family, as happened especially in the case of the JNU students and particularly one Umar Khalid, who is a communist and atheist from a Muslim family and who was also framed as an Islamist terrorist with connections to terror organisations by many of the media channels (Daniyal).

The media debate polarising popular opinion at the time also focused on how the public university students in such cases were using tax money to undermine the state. In this again they were taking the cue from Union Minister Naidu: "They are all studying at a central university where public money is involved. So they must do justice to the cause and they must study, that's all. If they are interested in politics, they can leave studies and join politics" (Chopra). One particular news anchor, Arnab Goswami, who carries out a very Fox TV-like presentation, shouting down all opposition, was particularly virulent. His constant refrain and question to his interviewees, although he seldom waits for a response, is "The nation wants to know." In his show with Umar Khalid, Arnab pilloried Khalid for daring to criticize the nation while studying on the Indian taxpayer's money (Onial).

The nation is being deified ever more strongly. Bharatmata, or mother India, has also been revived by far-right organisations largely affiliated to the afore-mentioned RSS as a goddess who is considered untouchable by these majoritarian right wing supporters. She was first painted by Abanindranath Tagore, Nobel laureate Rabindranath's brother, in the nineteenth century, and gave a concrete image to the anti-colonial freedom struggle. However, she is now used as a sacrosanct deity by hyper-nationalists in India that may be questioned only at the questioner's peril within or without the university.

Now, it is here that it becomes imperative for Forster to understand and criticize these energies of the state and the media and the manner in which they shape popular opinion. Forster's prescient dialogue between Rickie and Ansell on Cambridge from *The Longest Journey* reflects most lucidly on the behemoth of the nation or on ideas such as of making a nation great again that are being stuffed down people's throats in India, and elsewhere, to silence them. He lucidly explains the very different and opposing strategies that "the great world" or the so-called "nation" and the institutions of knowledge criticizing it adopt. It exposes the societal problem where many people have bought into the rhetoric that claims to speak for a generalized mass,

and while ignoring specifics, arguing against the university's aspirations for intellect and culture that ultimately lead to civilizational development and growth. The following is an extract from this dialogue that is subsequently analyzed to explain this point further:

"We are bound to get narrow," sighed Rickie. He and his friend were lying in a meadow during their last summer term. In his incurable love for flowers he had plaited two garlands of buttercups and cow-parsley, and Ansell's lean Jewish face was framed in one of them. "Cambridge is wonderful, but – but it's so tiny. You have no idea – at least, I think you have no idea – how the great world looks down on it."

"I read the letters in the papers."

"It's a bad look-out."

"How?"

"Cambridge has lost touch with the times."

"Was she ever intended to touch them?"

"She satisfies," said Rickie mysteriously, "neither the professions, nor the public schools, nor the great thinking mass of men and women. There is a general feeling that her day is over, and naturally one feels pretty sick."

"Do you still write short stories?"

"Why?"

"Because your English has gone to the devil. You think and talk in Journalese. Define a great thinking mass" (Forster 1978, 62).

As we can see here, Forster has quite succinctly identified the complaint of the nation or the great mass against the university, which is that the university is out of sync with its time and needs. This is the debate that has raged in India, and in many ways across the world, as we witness funding cuts in the humanities, and the shutting down of departments. Rickie is uncannily similar here to the afore-cited Indian TV day journalist Arnab Goswami, who appropriates what "the nation wants to know," although not as virulently as the latter. In reality, "the great mass of men and women," whom Arnab claims to represent and Rickie sought to speak for, are in all likelihood too unconcerned or diverse to care in the ways these speakers for them seem to think. Nonetheless, Arnab on his show demands blood, and his pound of the flesh

from the university—when he asks Umar Khalid to comply by the nation’s (really his own and perhaps the government’s) norms, just because his education is paid for by the taxpayer. Rickie too is perpetuating propaganda that he has thoughtlessly bought into, which a journalist such as Arnab seems to reproduce with a more invested agenda. However, Forster then deconstructs this propaganda for us through Ansell.

Ansell asks of “the great world,” which in today’s India is analogous to the great nation being thrown in our faces: “Where is it? How do you set about finding it? How long does it take to get there? What does it think? What does it do? What does it want?” (Forster 1978, 62). This is blatantly calling out the grand claims made in the name of “the great world,” or, in our times, the state. Forster does not beat about the bush here, but hits the nail on its head. He reveals social hypocrisy and the pushing of self-serving political agendas. Ansell’s rhetorical yet hard-hitting questions about the great world (state for us) have no easy answer.

Contrary to Arnab’s and Rickie’s easy claims to knowing what the nation wants, in a country such as India, with its 22 official languages and innumerable dialects, numerous religions, ethnicities, and castes, there can be no single answer to this. In a postmodern world of multiple voices and identities, even a nation is unlikely to want the same things unless ideologically conditioned to do so. However, is this ideological condition ever good? History tells us otherwise. Should there then not be questioning of such propaganda? Should the university, as traditionally the space for promoting free intellectual thought and questioning, not be the site to challenge this? Can and should the space of the university as the site to question all be questioned? Forster’s Ansell is already questioning the right of the nationalists, the propagandists, “the great world” to question the university.

As if carrying on from Forster’s Ansell, JNU held a number of teach-in protests where its faculty gave public lectures on nationalism when the student president was in jail. The administration denied them microphones and the teachers spoke on campus mostly without any sound-magnifying support to rapt audiences. These lectures are available on YouTube. While referring to Ernest Renan, historian Nivedita Menon emphasized that the nation is in fact a daily plebiscite, a constantly changing formation of opinion. Surely, a daily plebiscite cannot eternally question or condemn the right of its people and particularly the university to question its opinions. The university, in this instance, refused to be told what the nation is by those

who claim to tell it what it is often through majoritarian, narrow views. Instead, it gave an intellectual, sophisticated, insightful, scholarly, ethical and humanitarian response to what it can and should be.

However, Walter Benjamin in his 1915 essay, "The Life of Students", also foresaw the possibility of the demand for the university colluding with the state, clarified the purpose the university had served for the state, and warned of the dangers of believing in it as a space for so-called complete academic freedom. He argues: "[T]he true sign of corruption is not the collusion of the university and the state (something that is by no means incompatible with honest barbarity), but the theory and guarantee of academic freedom, when in reality people assume with brutal complacency that the aim of study is to steer its disciples to a socially adapted individuality and service to the state" (2011, 199).

Then, listening to Benjamin, it would be false to make a claim for a fully independent university. However, this is also not what Forster seems to suggest. While he is registering the problem in the nation's statist and shortsighted condemnation of the university's right to criticism, he is not saying that the university exists outside the nation state or in opposition to it. His only suggestion, through Ansell, is that a distinction be made between the micro and the macro, the small and the big, the "good and the great," as he calls it, and that no one may easily coopt or claim to be the great, but the university should continue to strive for the good. This is its role which the state and its nationalists must allow it to retain. Ansell tells us: "There is no great world at all, only a little earth, for ever isolated from the rest of the little solar system," and "All the societies are narrow, but some are good and some are bad [...] The good societies say, 'I tell you to do this because I am Cambridge.' The bad ones say, 'I tell you to do that because I am the great world, not because I am 'Peckham,' or 'Billingsgate,' or 'Park Lane,' but 'because I am the great world'" (Forster 1978, 62-63).

This is remarkable in hitting the nail hard and perfectly on its head. In contemporary times, different leaders are claiming to make their nations great without advancing any concrete plans to do so, and often working to the contrary. Worse, by constantly invoking their nations and managing the media, they are getting away with policies that in fact only help the interests of the few. They do not address smaller goals or projects, smaller communities, but keep reiterating grand goals for the great. Ultimately they ignore even the many, as they put up great symbols.

Similarly, journalists speak in the name of “the great world” or the nation, too, when in fact they are reproducing their own biases at best and agendas at worst. This is equivocated and garbed in the name of the greater good of the nation. Ansell’s dialogue explicated this for us more than a century ago. Like him, and his Cambridge, certain universities in India (and across the world) are taking up a stance against this posturing, and the shutting down of criticism.

In today’s India, news anchor Arnab Goswami does not ask questions of his interviewees putting himself forward as the questioner, but saying that the “nation” wants to know. Right-wing goons ask people on the street and at the university to respect and raise slogans for the goddess Bharatmata or Mother India, demanding from them a proof of their Indian-ness, when there is no provision for such in the secular constitution of India. The rightist state government is using the colonial law of sedition to target liberal and left-leaning voices. JNU and HCU and other universities have stood up as a strong bastion for free speech while claiming to speak in their own names or for the sake of human rights in India. They do not invoke abstract notions of patriotism and the nation when the idea itself is questionable in the federation that is India.

Ansell concludes by calling out the propagandists: “They lie. And fools like you listen to them, and believe that they are a thing which does not exist and never has existed, and confuse ‘great,’ which has no meaning whatever, with ‘good,’ which means salvation” (Forster 1978, 63). This distinction between the great and the good is crucial for Forster’s Ansell as it must be for us all today. Good is what is beneficial, great is what is powerful. Good is real for all, great is what serves the real interests of a few while creating an illusion for all. Goodness comes from education, greatness comes from propaganda.

The students of the Indian university are battling against the “great” and abstract ideas of a new India. They demand their concrete human rights: the right to education, to freedom of thought and expression, and to the end of caste. They protest against the easy targeting of minorities of all kinds—sexual, economic, religious—and seek to abolish the inequality for women and the oppressed. It is they who, from their universities and coming from different political leanings, sometimes from the right, too, demand the Forsterian good for their society. The present establishment on the other hand is aspiring for a great nationalism where they seem to have forgotten the good

of the people but would rather dabble in posturing and pride for a place at the world's round table.

However, to throw in a Forsterian caveat, before the conclusion: Forster also gets Rickie to alert the reader to the fear, the limitations, and the aura of the intellectual or the university for those outside it. Rickie notes of his exclusion on having to leave the university, as unlike Ansell he is not brilliant enough to continue: "‘I never shall come indoors again,’ said Rickie. [...] ‘It’s well enough for those who’ll get a Fellowship, but in a few weeks I shall go down. In a few years it’ll be as if I’ve never been up. It matters very much to me what the world is like’" (Forster 1978, 63). In India too, many who are running down JNU or HCU, or Rohith Vemula or Umar Khalid over social media tend to hail from the very large numbers that still do not have access to good education themselves. Over 300 million people, which is about the same as the population of all of Europe, continue to be illiterate in India. Many more have no access to quality university education. In such a scenario, the illiterate multitudes do sometimes find the liberties claimed and aspired for by the university student remote and difficult to understand. The answer cannot be the shallow, vehement, and useless evocation of the great nationalism. It must be the sounder creation of the good of more educational opportunities for all, and the better establishment of liberty and the space for dissent.

Forster has, thus, shown us not only the false propaganda possible against the university that is becoming more evident in our times, but also the way and the need to respond to it, which is the job of all those affiliated with the university. This is valuable not just for India in the present day but also for the UK and the US and many other countries that are trying to make themselves great again while making education more expensive and unaffordable for many. Apart from these direct comments on the university, the good and the great, Forster's general multicultural ethos to be found across his work is also greatly relevant today for India and the globalized world where hate crimes against minorities and refugees are on the rise. There is much to be learnt from it for the (Indian) university, too.

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