Creating an Organisational Culture of Equality: An Ethnography of an Indian University

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Abstract: **Since the 1980s, the benefits of a strong organisational culture are well documented: greater loyalty, greater motivation, more cooperation, and more innovation. However, most case studies come from the corporate sector. Few focus on how organisational culture is formed in the higher education sector, and even fewer in the Indian higher education sector. This ethnography explores five steps of forming organisational culture, based on six months of participant observation.**

Keywords: **Socialisation, Ethics, Leadership, Constitutional Values, Policy, Critical thinking.**

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the 1980s, the benefits of a strong organisational culture are well documented: greater loyalty, greater motivation, more cooperation, and more innovation [1], [2], [3], [4]. Among companies, organisational culture can account for a 20-30% differential between competitors [5]. However, most case studies come from the international corporate sector [5]. The following is a case study from the education sector — how one Indian university built a strong organisational culture of equality from the ground up.

While there is no universally shared definition of organisational culture, for this case study, it is defined as the "consistent, observable patterns of behavior in organizations" [6]. Organisational culture exists at three levels: artifacts, espoused beliefs and values, and basic underlying assumptions [7]. The ethnography observes and reflects on the interaction of these three levels of organisational culture, through the first-person lens of a sympathetic outsider and reflective social scientist. The case study aims to broaden the understanding of how organisational culture forms, particularly in the higher education sector.

2. ETHNOGRAPHIC EXPERIENCE

In April 2015, I went to Ambedkar University Delhi (AUD) for the first time. AUD was established in 2007 with a vision to "combine equity and social justice" and "to pioneer an institutional culture of non-hierarchical functioning". It's easy to be skeptical when one reads this in the context of India. Sociologist Geert Hofstede ranks India among the most hierarchal cultures in the world. Universities do not tend to be any less hierarchal.

After walking through the campus and writing notes within my field journal about my initial impressions, I met a group of six students sitting together on the grass. I introduced myself, "Hi, I'm Kevin. I'm a Sociology PhD scholar from Jamia Millia Islamia. I came here because I read on your website that Ambedkar University aims to 'pioneer a culture of non-hierarchal functioning'. Now, you know if I ask a faculty member, they might give me the politically correct answer, but you can give me the real answer."

"Yes, AUD has been life-changing," said one student.

"My first semester here, I learned how to think!" proclaimed another student.

"I discovered who I am here. Before coming, I didn't express myself much. But now we can challenge things and are confident to speak anything," added another student.

Over the next six months, I interviewed more than twenty students. About half were as passionate as these first couple of students. About 25% were neutral about AUD, and the other 25% liked AUD but had a less "life-changing" experience up until that point. One student described her change as a result of AUD, "All of my friends think I'm crazy. They are in commerce programmes and applying for MBA programmes. But I don't need a BMW. I just want to make a difference in the world. Their path has lost its appeal to me."

Over the coming six months, I asked a half dozen faculty and a dozen students, "What do you think makes AUD unique? Is it the policy or professors or classes?" The most common answer besides "all of it" was "it is the mindset". It is the organizational culture that makes Ambedkar University different – an alternative mindset, embodied in policy, the Vice Chancellor, the professors, and the students that created a new socialising system. The case study is not the voice of any single faculty or student, but the composite voice of two dozen students, six faculty, the Vice Chancellor, and a few working within of the administration.

Despite the students' enthusiasm for AUD, the faculty tended to be more tempered in their assessment of AUD's accomplishments: "Don't believe there is no hierarchy. There is, but it is just more permeable" (D.L.). (Initials and pseudonyms are used in place of names throughout the case study).

The challenge with any ethnographic case study is how to organise it. Should it follow a more detached, third person approach? Or should it follow a more ethnographic, first person approach? I have chosen the latter, as the entire study was not a case of participant observation. I was actively involved in the relationships with students and faculty. It is their trust and stories which made the case study. The best way to honour their honesty was to recount their stories as they happened, with as little tampering by me, the researcher, as possible. The primary exception to this is in the form of its overall structure.

The structure answers the question, "How does one create an organisational culture?" A five-step process emerged from the fifty-plus pages of field notes. The five-step structure is not claiming to be the intentional process that AUD followed, but rather a composite picture of what happened based on interviews.

3.   RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Strategy 1: Choose the Core Institutional Values:

Strategy one is the easiest to achieve on paper, but it is the most foundational to the remaining four strategies of socialisation. There are many organisations that achieve strategy one but fail to socialise their members. Ambedkar University's success in socialising its members is not because of its clarity in strategy one, but its consistency in working out the values of strategy one into strategy two through five.

Every institution socialises, but not all socialisations are noticeable. In the case of Ambedkar University, the aim is noticeable. The aim may be summarised using the three values of the Constitution's Preamble: equality, liberty, and fraternity. More specifically, the university spells out its secondary socialising agenda in its mission statement. The first aim is "to pioneer an institutional culture of non-hierarchal functioning" (i.e. equality). The second aim is that "each programme, designed by faculty, is cutting edge, interdisciplinary and interactive" (i.e. liberty of thought). The third aim is that "the University strongly believes that no knowledge becomes socially productive unless it spreads across society, transcending barriers of caste, creed and class" (i.e. fraternity built upon social activism).

These three values are the glue that holds together the policy of the university. In addition, the values are the magnet which attract like-minded faculty to its unique socialising mission. Finally, the three values are the grid to select an institutional champion – in this case, the Vice Chancellor.

3.2 Strategy 2: Choose a Leader that Reflects the Institutional Values:

On my first visit to campus, I met a group of students sitting on the grass. After I introduced myself and sat down, they proceeded to tell me this story. "Kevin, you should have been here a couple weeks ago. We had a spring festival out here on the grounds. The V.C. [Vice Chancellor] came, and he sat on the footpath, and nobody made a big deal about it."

Another student joined in enthusiastically, "Yes, sometimes, the V.C. will come to the canteen and he will stand in line with all the other students."

Both stories were striking examples of non-hierarchal functioning, but what would the faculty say? Weeks later, I was interviewing a Sociology professor about their experience at AUD. After complaining about being "treated like a robot" teaching back-to-back courses, they offered this about their relationship with the V.C. "You will never find another V.C. like Professor Manoj. He will help you in your personal and professional life. I can criticise my V.C. before his face, and it is not problem. He has made AUD a dissent against the privatisation of higher education" (B.D.).

Professor B.D.'s comment capture all three of AUD's core values. First, there is a personal relationship of equality with the V.C. Despite the V.C.'s position, he does not shield himself from his faculty's critique. Second, there is a culture of liberty of thought. If a professor has a critique of the system, they are free to voice it. Third, there is a recognition of the university's larger social agenda within the context of India.

After weeks of hearing stories about the V.C. from both faculty and students, I interviewed Professor Manoj. In our forty-minute meeting, Professor Manoj embodied the core value of non-hierarchal functioning. At our first meeting, he was ten minutes late. Immediately, his first words to me were, "Sorry to keep you waiting." In a meeting such as this, generally I would give deference to the person of higher status to set the agenda. However, I noticed that in our first ten seconds, he was waiting for me to set the agenda.

After realising that he was letting me steer the meeting, I told him why I had come. "I am doing a PhD on how organisations are instilling the Constitutional values of equality, liberty, and fraternity. So when I read on your website that AUD is pioneering a culture of non-hierarchal functioning."

"It's aspirational," he interrupted me.

Finally, we discussed my PhD, and how it might be able to help them document how AUD has been able to build a counter culture. Despite his interest, his answer was deferential. "I could say let's document this, and my [leadership] team might agree with it as well, but I think in the longer term they would resent it. So let me talk to them first." Despite his power, his approach to leadership was democratic – even on a matter as small as this.

3.3 Strategy 3: Choose Policies that Reflect the Institutional Values:

Values alone do not socialise. But values embodied in policy and a person became the socialising core of AUD. The policies of AUD reflect the three core institutional values. First, specific policy decisions were made to make non-hierarchal functioning an increasing reality.

On one of my early visits to AUD, I was standing in line at the canteen when I noticed a "hijra" (transgender) standing in front of me paying the cashier. Weeks later, I saw the same hijra walking across campus in a sari. It was only weeks later that I learned that this hijra was not a visitor to campus but a faculty member.

As one student was telling me the "best part of AUD", she said, "AUD accepts us the way we are. Even Mr. Vijay [the hijra I had been seeing], we are not sure if he is transgender or cross-gender. But he is accepted. He'll wear jeans with a sari." Within the policy of AUD is the willingness to treat the transgender community with equality, to the extent of hiring them on the faculty.

Also, within the hiring policy, there seemed to be a preference for a certain type of candidate: young candidates, candidates with some international exposure, and candidates that are willing to be hired on a temporary basis initially. One of the senior faculty who had hired all the faculty in one of the Schools explained to me, "When we hired, I was looking for someone who knew international standard, versus only home-grown. Often, I would go to their performance [for arts professors]. Then, usually before we hired on a permanent basis, we give them practice by teaching for a semester or guest lecture. This way vested interested is discouraged in hiring."

In addition to its hiring policy, equity values were embodied in several other ways. One of the most common complaints among students and faculty was the high fees charged by AUD – Rs. 25,000 per year. However, to mitigate AUD becoming an institution for the privileged they have instituted a fee waiver scheme for needy students. Who decides who is needy? A committee made up of both faculty and current students decides. Also to help mitigate the high costs, AUD sponsors a student work programme to reduce tuition costs. The programme gives students the option to earn up to Rs. 500 per day.

In higher education, there is often a great divide between students from English-medium and Hindi-medium background. Several students brought this issue up in the context of Ambedkar's mission to lift up the marginalised. Many of them referenced an English learning centre sponsored by the university, which was trying to bridge this gap. Within AUD's policy is an aim to give "equality of opportunity" regardless of one's first language.

The last policy embodying a culture of non-hierarchal functioning at AUD may not be intentional. There is only one central canteen, and faculty and students use it equally. It may be the unintentional product of living in a borrowed and small campus, but there was no separate canteen for faculty. Faculty had to stand in line with everyone else. Faculty had to fight for the few open chairs with everyone else.

The second set of policy decisions reflect AUD's liberty of thought. Within its core curricular design, AUD made two choices which sets it apart from any university in the city. First, AUD chose to cater exclusively to the humanities and social sciences. Second, AUD chose an interdisciplinary approach. One senior faculty explained to me, "Even before faculty was taken in, the course structure has been four mandatory credits, plus eight specialisation credits, and four electives credits which can come from any discipline" (S.J.). Another faculty said, "The only reason I am [at AUD] is because of its interdisciplinary approach and the flexibility it gives when it comes to tweaking the course" (D.V.).

While its curricular decisions are not obvious when walking around campus, its graffiti is. There are drawings are cartoons, superheroes, and lesbian lovers, but short political sayings are the most common: "Lesbian and proud", "Justice should be discovered through the struggle of humankind in present and history", "I am proud to be a sansi" (A Sansi is a nomadic tribe from Rajasthan stigmatised as "habitually criminal" under the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871), "Wine, poetry or virtue, as you wish. Be drunk", "Liberate ur [sic] inner awesome", "Get rich or die tryin'. This too shall pass", "Do one thing everyday that scares you!", "It's better to burn out than to fade away," and "F^ck patriarchy." Based on the handwriting, it doesn't appear that it is any one person creating the graffiti, but that it is a type of decentralised art exhibit.

While this appeared quite liberal to me, one student complained, "When NAAC came last year, there was a drawing of a woman [having sex] and the administration said it should be washed. But then the administration asked, 'Who owns the university?' This is a space that students have created. Eventually the authorities won, and it was washed out." So, it is appears there are limits to the freedom of expression, even at AUD.

The last act of liberty of thought displayed at AUD came in the Fall of 2015 when a *Muzaffarnagar Baaqi Hai* was brought to campus. The documentary had been banned at every other state and national university in Delhi – but not AUD. Within its mission statement, AUD states that "we strongly believe…in improving understanding amongst cultures" and "the university aspires to mold its students into informed and sensitive professionals who will engage with their social responsibilities." The Muzaffarnagar riots in September 2013 resulted in the death of 42 Muslims and 20 Hindus and was highly controversial. Nevertheless, liberty of thought trumped the risk. It played in a packed auditorium (200+ students) and discussion of the film carried on until 8 P.M., after beginning shortly after 1 P.M. One professor told me later, "That is the real process [of learning]" (V.S.).

In addition to equality and liberty of thought policies, there are three major policies that promote its value of fraternal activism. First, there are no classes on Wednesday and Friday afternoon. Why? To give students more time to engage in their own clubs. Second, field-work and project work makes up at least 25% of curricular time. One student described their experience, "After the second semester during the summary holidays we were required to do fieldwork with an NGO. In our course, the professor kept trying to link theory and practice. They were teaching about marginalisation, and so we were sent to rural areas and slums for our fieldwork. It was very frustrating. It was so hot, especially in the month of June. I remember coming to the professor and saying, 'I cannot do this. There is not even power in the village for two days at a time. I can't do this.' She responded by saying, 'What about them?' In the end it was a very enriching experience, but [apart from the curriculum] we would never do this."

It is easy to write a mission statement saying "no knowledge becomes socially productive unless it spreads across society, transcending barriers of caste, creed and class." However, unless it is worked out in specific policies, it becomes meaningless jargon. The socialising power of the values is lost. In the case of AUD, at least in part, the values are made concrete through policy.

3.4 Strategy 4: Professors Socialise Students:

Professors – not policy nor the Vice Chancellor -- are the primary mediators of cultural values at Ambedkar University. But how did they come? There were at least five different answers to this question. Some came for a job. Some came because of the interdisciplinary approach. Some came because of their relationship to Professor Manoj. Some came because "we are the rebels of the DU system." They were attracted to the symbolic space that Ambedkar University was creating. One professor described his perspective to me saying, "What drives me is participating in the meaningful and meaningless. The university system is very constraining, but we are doing something. We are not reaching great places, but we are doing something meaningful" (V.S.). For this professor, the meaning was in the values that AUD was trying to live out. The values attracted him to AUD and led him to "give up being an H.O.D. or a secure, high status job in the DU system."

But it was not just the professors who chose to come to AUD; it was the administration. Over lunch at the canteen, I sat with two I.T. professionals on the campus. I asked them, "Why did you come to AUD?"

"I am here because of the vision. We are trying to do something," one responded.

"What?" I asked.

"Things like that don't happen at DU. You see, I grew up on north campus. My parents are in the administration, but I am not an educated person. But I had friends that I played with who were educated. That [association] was my advantage. So when I heard about this job, I joined [AUD] from the beginning." The values embodied in the V.C. and specific policies became the magnet which attracted a certain type of person. They resonated with the subaltern values of Ambedkar and wanted to join with it, even if in a small way. Though this professor and I.T. professional is not representative of everyone, they became a part of the socialising core of the university.

Primarily, it is the professors that mediate the value of non-hierarchal functioning through a philosophy of "friendship" within the learning context. It is the professors that mediate the value of liberty of thought by approaching learning as an interactive process, not product. It is the professors that mediate the value of activism through their own drive.

"Kevin, it seems to me that learning happens best in the context of friendship. That is my paradigm," confided one professor. Later, I observed this same professor. It was a small class of six students and one was absent. The professor began class by asking, "Where is [A.B.]?"

The students fumbled an answer, "He won't be coming today."

"What's the matter? He has seemed more disengaged recently. Is that correct?"

All the students nodded in agreement.

"So, what are we going to do?"

This led to a five-minute conversation. They concluded that they would go directly to his home to visit him.

This friendship ethos expressed itself in other ways outside the classroom. Professors would smoke together with students. Professors would buy coffee for their students. Professors would encourage their students to call them, and in some cases, would have students over to their home after class. In an exit interview of some final year Sociology students, they told the Dean, "The professors are not Sociologists. They're people." The Dean told me later, "It did not feel like a compliment to me, at least at first. But for them, that was the most important thing."

Often, I would ask students, "How has your experience at AUD been?"

"Life changing" was a common reply.

"How?" I would follow-up.

That is when a group of four students told me about their Viva experience a year earlier. "Last year, we had a Viva session that went from nine in the morning until nine in the evening. It was so precious that no one wanted to leave. Students would leave and bring back food for everyone else. There were eighteen of us but professor V.S. patiently listened for twelve hours. We were just telling him about our life and struggles. He wanted us to connect our psychology to real-life situations. That was the exam. We chose it, and he accepted it. He respected students' emotions. We laughed with him. We cried with him. We danced with him. We are all very attached to him. That class was a life-changing experience for everyone."

If friendship is the context for learning, learning is best seen as a process many of the faculty. In fact, when I tried to interview one of the faculty on "innovative teaching practices" at AUD, he soundly rebuked me for suggesting such a thing. "The moment we 'capture' innovation, we kill it. The only real innovation is being, not doing. You cannot sit in on one class and know what is happening. You aren't seeing the long-term process" (V.S.).

So what does process-oriented teaching look like? In almost every class that I observed, the professor gave the students their PowerPoint. The point was not the product but how students were able to integrate it with their lives. One professor of psychology explained their goal: "In my classroom, I want people to reflect on failure. If I am teaching on childhood, I ask them with they have ever seen their father cry. Then, I give them the assignment to ask their father what is his biggest fear in life. Students hate me! Parents hate me! But the ability to mourn in the classroom is a success, and the real battles are at home." The classroom time is a catalyst, not the end product.

On the flipside, students were very consistent about what they most appreciated about AUD: "it's interactive." Of the twenty students interviewed, this answer was the most consistent. "Professors would rather have us up there talking than themselves. And you can say whatever you want in class, as long as you have a reason to justify your answer."

In addition to a process-orientation on learning, many of the professors brought an activism within their class which influenced the students. Over a lunch with four art students, they confessed, "Before coming to AUD, we were all doing art but we were in a cocoon. We were in our room replicating still lives with no connection to our audience and no connection to ourselves. In fact, we never even thought about our audience before!" This mindset shift was not an accident on the part of the professor. In one ninety-minute class, the same professor said at least three different times, "You need to find your audience. Art gets caught up in its own cocoon and too easily looses the interest of its audience" (S.V.). The curriculum not only included making art, but displaying it publicly.

For non-fine arts programmes, activism took a different form: exposing hegemony. I asked one sociology professor, "What's the best part of teaching for you?"

"Shaking them up!" he replied.

"What do you mean by that?" I asked.

"BAs have been taught how to conform. So I want to shake them up. My goal is to develop their critical thinking. Without this, things will not improve [in society]. I want them to learn to be critical without being cynical." The courses, often hand designed by the faculty, reflect this hegemony-exposing agenda.

3.5 Strategy 5: Students Socialise Other Students:

I asked dozens of students, "Why did you choose AUD?" The most common answer? "My friend told me that it was good." Another student recommended it to them. It was not its national reputation. It was not because it was a state university. It was not an academic programme. It was not its location. It was not its cost. It was not the faculty or the Vice Chancellor. It was the students themselves. The students were no longer the socialised, but the socialisers. This because theme five in answer to the research question.

On my first visit to campus, I observed two things that I never remember seeing before on an Indian campus. It was nothing extraordinary. It was ordinary, and that is what made it extraordinary. I had been following B.D., an undergrad student, around campus for most of the day. As we turned down one of AUD's many corridors, I saw him tip his head towards one of the security guards. The security guard lifted his hand, waved, and smiled back. It wasn't a formal smile. It looked like the kind of smile you give a friend.

Later I asked B.D., "Do you know the security guards here?"

"They're great! They are so helpful," he responded.

"No, what I mean is do you know some of them personally? Because I noticed a bit earlier that you seemed to nod at one of them and he seemed to really know you," I clarified.

"Oh yeah, that's true. But they help us so much, opening a classroom for our theater group even really late at night," B.D. justified.

Within an hour, B.D. invited me to lunch at the canteen, and again, an ordinary extraordinary thing happened. As we approached the cashier, B.D. asked him, "How's Rohit doing?" It was too loud in the canteen to hear his response, but I could judge from his lips that this had been an ongoing conversation. Moreover, he didn't answer with a formal two-word answer. It was a real conversation, built on some real relationship.

Later, I asked B.D., "Is that normal? Do most people talk to their canteen cashier?"

"Not necessary. But everybody is happy to be here. So, I guess, it is like a virtuous circle," he reasoned.

This was strategy five at work: students socialising other students – and administrative staff – in a culture of non-hierarchal functioning between security guards, students, and canteen staff.

On my first visit to AUD, I met A.K., the founder of the theater group on campus. Over the next six months, I joined them in several of their practice sessions. On my final visit, I met a soft-spoken, first-year student, R.J.

I asked him, "How has your experience been at AUD?"

"I love it," he responded without hesitation.

"What do you love?" I pressed.

"In the theater society, we are all a bunch of misfits and that is why we get along. It is like family," R.J. said happily.

What struck me about the theater group meetings was nothing that was done but what was assumed. Student leadership was assumed. Personal growth was assumed. Personal investment was assumed. Every session was planned from start to finish with a half-dozen improvisation or theater exercises. It was led by A.K. but even R.J. could see the value he was gaining from it. "I come from Hindi-medium so this is very helpful to me in making me confident in English and speaking," he reasoned. Again, students are training and socialising other students.

After meeting another new group of students, I asked, "Why did you choose AUD?"

"I met B.J. and T.J. here on my first visit to campus," F.J. said.

"Really, how did that happen?" I pressed.

"B.J. and T.J. were giving a tour of the campus, and I really liked them and could see myself here. They said it was good," F.J. said matter-of-factly.

"Really, so you two give tours to new students? That's great."

"Yeah, we started doing that after our first year," B.J. and T.J. said.

"What do you mean 'you started it'? Is it some kind of programme?" I asked confused.

"It didn't exist, but we thought it would be helpful so we told admissions and now when people come, they call our numbers, and if we are free, we give them tours."

"Where I come from, they actually have formal programmes that are managed by the admissions department to do exactly what you guys did. But I've never heard of students initiating something like this and then their admissions department adopting it. That's great," I shared.

Later, I discovered other examples of student-sponsored volunteerism: the MBA department sponsored a blood drive, a collection of students volunteered as part of a gender justice campaign, and a few students told me about "their hobby" to bring cleaning supplies onto the Delhi metro and "clean things up." Perhaps, noting my surprise about this spirit of volunteerism on campus, on student told me this fictional story.

"Kevin, do you see this trash bin here? If it were to turn over and all the trash fall out and spread across the green, within one hour it would be all cleaned up."

"Sure. We have someone on our campus that goes around and stabs all the trash around the canteen too," I replied.

"No, you don't understand. I mean students themselves would do it. This is our campus."

This last comment became a theme running through the field journal. It is an assumption that is socialised into students through a dozen policy decisions. It is an assumption that makes sense of their fellow students behaviour. One student described it to me like this, "Kevin, when students come to AUD, they realise that they are the masters of their own life, not living under a school master" (B.D.). For those who have been socialised by the values of AUD, it becomes difficult to leave. Many students said they wanted to come back to AUD for their next degree. For another student, she had always wanted to go to the Tata Institute of Social Sciences in Mumbai. Despite being accepted, she said she didn't like it. "It felt like school" to them – not being "the master of their own life."

4. CONCLUSION

Organisational culture is powerful. It shapes the behaviour of large numbers of people – mmost of the time, outside of their conscious awareness [7]. When I asked students, "What makes AUD unique?", most stumbled for an answer. The best one could say was "it's all of it" or "it's the mindset". Technically speaking, it is organisational culture — starting with the leader and the foundational policies.

In hindsight, the case study aligns closely with Schein's first principle of organisational culture: "Leaders as entrepreneurs are the main architects of cultures" [7]. Their architecture sets the boundaries and incentives for future behaviour. This, in turn, socialises outward to the whole organisation. In the case of AUD, socialisation began at the centre, moved out through the professors, and finished with students socialising other students.

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