

Time to out the 'yellow-notes' dons is today

The core function of a university is research, which must be realised through publications and innovation. Publications and innovation further demonstrate lecturers' engagements with intellectual controversies. It is in these dialogues amongst peers that new ideas emerge that shape the world.

But even before publications or innovation begin shaping knowledge in particular disciplines, the rigorous publication process in reputable journals and books would have been significantly illuminating to both the authors and reviewers. It is for this reason that graduate students are encouraged to publish before graduation as the process inducts them in an important academic ritual. This is a ritual that tests the academic initiates' resilience, determination and, above all, intelligence.

It is sad that some academics have innovated ways to circumvent the rigorous publication process by publishing in paid predatory journals, mostly based in India. But the worst scenario is where some academics have been teaching at university for decades without a proper publication or innovation that can establish their contribution to knowledge. These are the 'yellow-notes' dons.

It is not sensible to teach at university for decades without a serious publication or innovation in one's area of specialisation unless the person has chosen the path of yellow-notes dons! This is a smooth path that calls for neither painstaking interrogation nor investigation of ideas. It is a swift path that makes use of teaching modules that have faithfully served several generations. It is not the path taken by major theorists in academia who transformed the world through their lectures.

Invent survival means

The yellow-notes dons seem to be spectators to scholars who are forever locked in academic discourses they care about. But the history of this cadre of academics is rarely examined.

A decade or so after Independence, academics found themselves among the underpaid labourers. This appears to have been the state's strategy to tone down academics' intrusion in matters governance. Wallowing in poverty, many chose to invent survival means apart from the gratifying conflict of wits that often antagonised dictatorial regimes. This spelt damnation of academics' sharp-edged engagements with many societal issues.

While academics' economic deprivation was a terrible low that brought about despair upon the corridors of academia, it gave rise to the yellow-notes dons, who chose being apolitical, aloof and average but rich. With time, the yellow-notes dons became highly relevant, as some were appointed in powerful positions in government. This cadre gained notoriety as the streetwise academics; they cast away the production and dissemination of knowledge along the way and busied themselves with creating wealth through various (underhand) dealings.