

The unlikely city welcoming Delhi's intellectual refugees

The political climate in India's capital is stifling free thought

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FOR CENTURIES Delhi attracted scholars, saints and statesmen hoping to influence the ruler of the day. Once India achieved independence, it was the natural place for the fledgling state to locate national institutions such as archives and universities. Publishers and think-tanks soon followed. The sheer density of serious thinkers makes Delhi the intellectual capital of India.

Or made, at any rate. Since taking power in 2014 Narendra Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have narrowed the space for free

thinking in media, entertainment and cultural institutions. Why should pointy-headed types be immune? Chiefs of public universities were replaced with more pliant figures. Private universities and non-profit groups came next. Authors of inconvenient papers lost their jobs. Think-tanks lost their sources of funding. The Centre for Policy Research, which worked with various governments over five decades, is the canonical example. In 2023 its licence to receive foreign money was suspended, then revoked a year later, in effect destroying it. Most of its researchers were laid off.

There is no one to talk to in Delhi any more, grumbles one recent transplant. Institutions that have not been broken have learnt to bend. Intellectuals who kept their jobs know not to broadcast their views. Researchers who want their policy ideas taken seriously choose their affiliations carefully. Some superannuated scholars set up new non-partisan bodies—with funding strictly domestic—in the hope of a clean slate. Established researchers with impressive CVs accepted positions at Western universities. Younger ones moved to different disciplines or sectors. And then there are those who went to Ahmedabad.

Ahmedabad? The sole metropolis of Gujarat, a state ruled by the BJP for nearly three decades, a dozen of those by Mr Modi himself? The municipality where the party won 83% of seats in recent local elections? The city that routinely tops lists of India's most segregated by religion? Where Muslims live in one of India's largest ghettos? Where the right of public assembly was repeatedly curtailed for ten years until a recent court ruling? Where vegetarianism rules and alcohol is prohibited? That Ahmedabad?

The very same. Ashoka recently dropped by the city to chat with refugees from Delhi. The intellectual environment they found upon landing, they say, was a pleasant surprise. There is "high freedom" within their institutions, though with the understanding that they will keep suitably low public profiles. The idea, as an administrator explained to a recent arrival, is to "facilitate" smart people to do

their work. In other words, management has what passes for courage in today's India, doing the basic job of shielding thinkers from political pressure.

As for Gujarat's reputedly zipped-up atmosphere? There are parties every weekend. The city has a wealth of public and private universities—including some of India's top schools for management, design and urban planning—and a correspondingly high concentration of youngish staff keen to let their hair down. As in many prohibition states, alcohol is not just available but home-delivered by service-oriented bootleggers operating in a cut-throat market.

Ahmedabad's image has never recovered from its position at the epicentre of Hindu-Muslim riots that marred Gujarat's—and Mr Modi's—reputation in 2002. Yet it has a far older tradition of progressive thought among its mercantile elites. Industrialists from the city bankrolled Mahatma Gandhi's social reforms. Supposedly cultureless capitalists established public museums to house their collections. In the 1950s a group of textile barons invited Le Corbusier, a Swiss-French modernist architect, to build them homes, offices and a cultural centre. Many of the city's private schools and universities were founded and are still run by members of the business class. There is more to the place than vegetarianism and Islamophobia.

It is easy to get carried away. Ahmedabad is no bastion of free speech. The media, as in the rest of the country, have a tough time of it. Independent news outlets unduly attached to reporting facts do not last long. Yet in less public fields, there is a freedom to operate unusual for a place dominated by the BJP. That Gujarat is caricatured in the liberal imagination as a quasi-fascist state filled with anti-intellectuals may even help it. It is, as one tactfully anonymous recent arrival from Delhi puts it, very calm in the eye of the storm.■