

March 21, 2021

Dear Superheroes,

This is the most difficult letter I have ever written. I wanted to write earlier. But we are still processing the train of events that led to my resignation, along with Prof. Subramanian. I was personally overwhelmed by the outpouring of affection and support you have displayed over the last week. Your solidarity means to me more than I can ever express in words. It is affection that will overwhelm me whenever I will remember this week.

But the deeper reason why this is difficult to write is this. Ashoka as an institution stands indicted before your bracing moral clarity and deep political wisdom. Your protests instantly grasped what we, your elders, failed to adequately understand. Your protest was not about two individuals. It was about Ashoka's institutional integrity. But it was also about the dark and ominous shadows that loom over India democracy. As we worry about Ashoka, you also reminded us that the challenges we face pale in comparison with what our academic colleagues in universities elsewhere in India face. You connected the dots. Your protest was focussed on Ashoka. But it was about values larger than Ashoka. As many of you know, one of my favourite quotes is from George Eliot, "the right to rebellion is the right to seek a higher rule, and not to wander in mere lawlessness." Your "rebellion" was grounded in a concern for freedom and democracy. You carried it out with dignity, grace and I might add, based on memes some of you shared, some serious artistic creativity.

So what can we, those who let you down, say to you? The first thing I will say is this. In all candour, this episode will be seen to have hurt Ashoka's reputation. But in a larger sense Ashoka's reputation will be enhanced, not by what the University did but what you did. You may lose a couple of Professors. But anyone looking at you will wonder in admiration. The poise and articulacy with which you defended important values and demanded accountability should make anyone want to associate with this university. You are its beating heart and soul and nothing can damage that. Second, it is not for me to intercede in this matter. But I imagine your voice will, in the long run make Ashoka a better university and get it to recommit to its ideals and values. So your outpouring is already a victory of sorts. You have taught us by example, what we were badly trying to teach you by lectures. You should be proud of yourselves. You should be confident that you will create a better world. You have already accomplished Ashoka's mission.

In institutional contexts, principles and values cannot be replaced; individuals always can. So my plea to you is this. It is time for me to move on. Teaching at Ashoka, particularly the last couple of years, has been an absolute joy. It reinforced the one conviction I have carried my life without fail: students never ever let you down. So giving up the company of Ashoka students and colleagues, disrupting our lives, and leaving a fine university, is not an easy decision. But it is, for me, the only honourable thing to do, consistent with my values; values I think you share. I also believe it is in the best interests of the university. It is often said that you cannot swim in the same river twice. In the contrarian spirit of Ashoka, I tried by resigning twice!! I hope even

you might forgive me for not wanting to tempt fate again. The underlying circumstances that led to the resignation will not change for the foreseeable future, in my case, at any rate. So I must close this chapter. I urge you not to press on this matter. I know you will be disappointed. But if I may exercise one last bit of professorial discretion: your mission is larger than the fate of two Professors.

I hope the Trustees and Faculty will work with you to secure your renewed trust and confidence. With your guidance they will be able to secure the institutional autonomy and freedom Ashoka needs. You embody the courage, reasonableness and understanding of democratic values that will take the university forward. I request you to work with them to make Ashoka a success.

We live in complicated times. India is bursting with creativity. But the dark shadows of authoritarianism are also hovering over us, putting us all in often uncomfortable and sometimes dishonourable positions. We will have to find principled and intelligent ways of overcoming this condition. Most of us are reduced to lamenting this looming darkness. I leave Ashoka with the conviction that a young generation is emerging that will provide what Vivekananda said we needed. We don't simply need people who cry darkness. We need someone who can shine the light. I am confident, all of you can and will.

I am from a small town Jodhpur, and there is a saying in Marwari that begins "*Dharam reh si, reh si dhara*" (where there is dharma the earth is preserved). My conversation with you on these matters has been a source of immense pleasure. But the good thing about his conversation is that it continues wherever we are, through the texts I so enjoyed with you this year: Plato, Mahabharata, Montaigne, Hobbes, Marx, Beauvoir, Kant and many others. But what you taught us is something more valuable: that liberal values are more about having a character than they are about professing a creed. It is a character you have in ample measure. I am eternally grateful to you.

Thank you so much.

With the highest admiration,

Pratap Bhanu Mehta