

RIDING THE GLOBALISATION DEBATE

A unique programme spanning four campuses across the world, including Mumbai, deals with new-age labour issues

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Mumbai, July 9

FIVE YEARS ago, when Frank Hoffer, Senior Researcher at the International Labour Organisation, began conceiving "a unique program of study to create an international group of thinkers who can help spread globalisation's benefits", a campus in India seemed obvious on the shortlist.

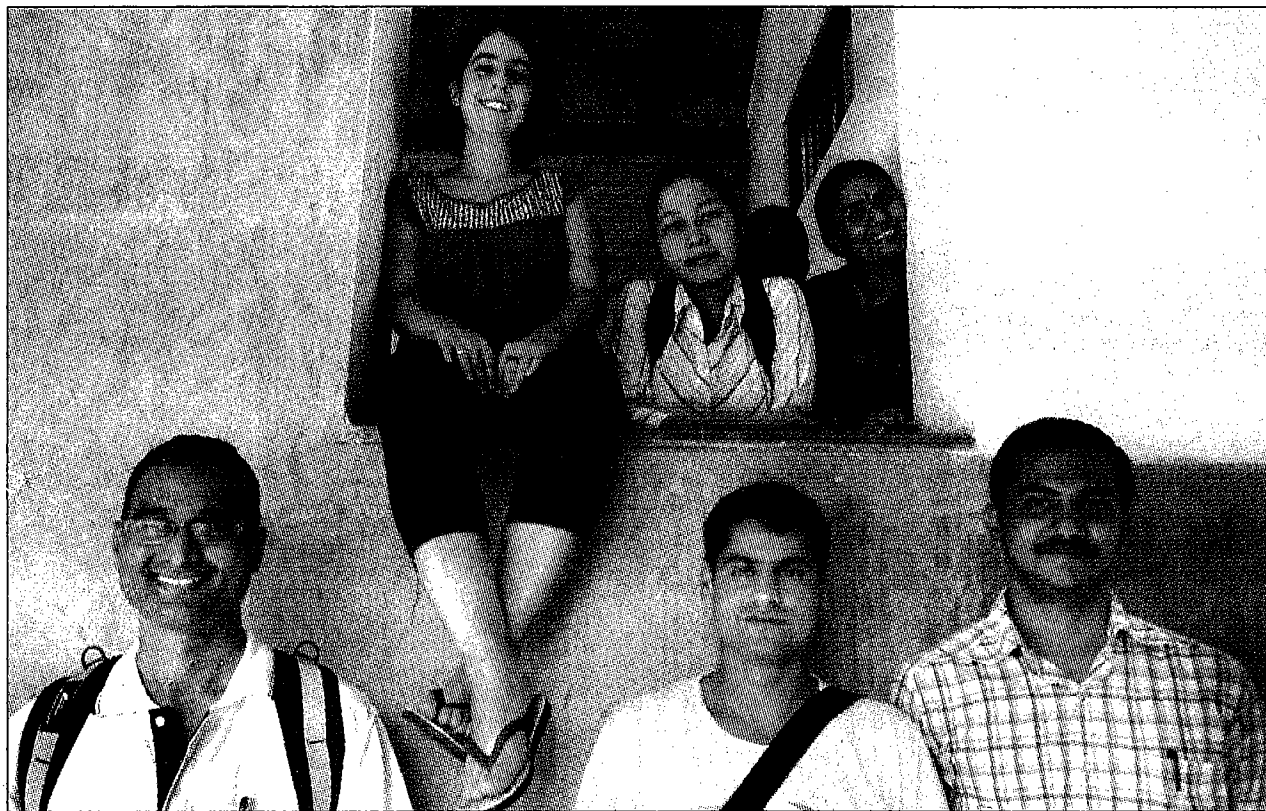
Over the phone from his Geneva office, Hoffer explained why the officially Communist China did not fit the bill for the nascent Globalization & Labour degree that now runs in four campuses across four continents, including Mumbai's Tata Institute of Social Sciences.

"India has a vibrant intellectual community, a free civil society and inventive experiments with organising workers like SEWA (a 7-lakh strong organisation of self-employed women workers)," Hoffer said. "Not China."

On a recent afternoon, in a room on the verdant TISS campus, course director Sharit Bhowmick — in an indigo blue shirt reminiscent of Amitabh Bachchan playing a dock worker in *Deewar* — introduced the class of over 20 to the two-year degree, and its wide-ranging content from economics to ethics.

Courses include analyses of the opportunity and disadvantage of globalising economies to what determines labour markets.

Bhowmick told *Hindustan Times* that as more work moved under contracts and poor social insurance, "the traditional table-thumping does not work anymore. People representing labour problems need to be rigorous, analytical and savvy, and that is what we aim to encourage here".



In today's post-industrial Mumbai, Bhowmick said, over 70 per cent of people are informally employed, an exact reversal of proportions five decades ago. His youngest student is 22, the oldest, 52. The group itself is an eclectic mix bringing together students straight out of an undergraduate degree to journalists and engineers who have left their jobs.

There are also the experienced trade unionists like G.B. Thamel from Nepal, who lobbies for the rights of Kathman-

du's casino workers. Brazilian Maira Vannuchi, a young researcher from renowned Sao Paulo and banker Anjali Bedekar is taking two years off from her three-decade career with State Bank of India, where she is on the core committee of the employees' body.

"The last decade has seen major shifts in our economy, with many of my colleagues losing jobs. But a bank like ours is socially important since we will operate a branch in the world's second

coldest place in Drass, while multinational banks are focused on the high-end urban customer," she said.

Bedekar's classmates include less likely students like Tinu Matthew (24), a software engineer from Bangalore who till last month worked for tech major Satyam. "The pay was great, but I had no freedom. Such work is relentless and does not encourage you to think and question things around you. That is what I want to learn to do here," he said.

THE COURSE

■ The Globalisation and Labour program is a 2-year-long degree conceived by the International Labour Organization and running in 4 campuses, linked by exchange programs, today — Mumbai's TISS, Kassel University in Berlin, Campinas University in Sao Paulo and South Africa's University of Witwatersrand.

■ The ILO's Frank Hoffer said: "The process of globalisation has made it difficult for unions and people's groups to respond in a national context. We want to create a community of thinkers who are exposed to different cultures and can respond to this challenge."

ANAND SHINDE/HT

Students who have taken the Globalisation & Labour course at Tata Institute of Social Sciences.

“I was an operations manager in a leather factory in Kolkata. Workers were exposed to terrible conditions, including having to dip bare hands in chemicals like chrome and sulphur. The owner would not follow any basic standards.”



JOY, a former engineer, who wants to work with an NGO or trade union

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ANJALI BEDEKAR, an employee with State Bank of India