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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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 globalization’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 Globalisation & 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 working people 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 Doo-war — 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 moves 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 Kathmandu’s casino workers. Brazilian Maíra 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 Tinti Matthew (34), a software engineer from Bangalore who 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.