

Academia and the free will

India's dismal score on the Academic Freedom Index reflects the issues plaguing the country's education system



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India announced its National Education Policy (NEP) on July 29 this year. The policy aims at overhauling the educational system in the country and making "India a global knowledge superpower", with a new system that is aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal-4 (SDG 4). It also emphasises universal access to schools for all children, raising the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER), and ending the spiralling dropout rate in India.

The academic community is still debating and weighing the pros and cons of the NEP. However, one of the key disappointments is that the real problem plaguing the educational system in the country and the higher education system, the erosion of academic freedom, is being discussed by nobody.

India has scored considerably low in the international Academic Freedom Index (AFI) with a score of 0.352, which is closely followed by Saudi Arabia (0.278) and Libya (0.238). In the last five years, the AFI of India has dipped by 0.1 points. Surprisingly, countries like Malaysia (0.582), Pakistan (0.554), Brazil (0.466), Somalia (0.436) and Ukraine (0.422) have scored better than India. Uruguay and Portugal top the AFI, with scores of 0.971 each, followed closely by Latvia (0.964) and Germany (0.960).

The many claims in NEP 2020

The AFI and the accompanying report quantify the freedom of scholars to discuss politically and culturally controversial topics, without fearing for their life, studies or profession – an aspect where India is failing terribly. In such a scenario, it is important to look into what the NEP 2020 has to offer. The NEP 2020 claims that it is based on principles of creativity and critical thinking and envisions an education system that is free from political or external interference. For instance, the policy states that faculty will be given the "freedom to design their own curricular and pedagogical approaches within the approved framework, including textbook and reading material selections, assignments and assessments". It also suggests constituting a National Research Foundation (NRF), a merit-based and peer-reviewed research funding, which "will be governed, independently of the government, by a rotat-

ing Board of Governors consisting of the very best researchers and innovators across fields". However, the question is whether these promises and offers will be put into practice or remain just a rhetoric.

The AFI has cited the 'Free to Think: Report of the Scholars at Risk Academic Freedom Monitoring Project', to suggest that the political tensions in India may have something to do with declining 'academic freedom'. The police brutality against students at Jamia Millia Islamia University and Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi, and their being labelled as anti-nationals, has raised concerns about the state of academic freedom.

Rent-seeking culture

The AFI used eight components to evaluate the scores: freedom to research and teach, freedom of academic exchange and dissemination, institutional autonomy, campus integrity, freedom of academic and cultural expression, constitutional protection of academic freedom, international legal commitment to academic freedom under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and existence of universities. India has not fared well in components like institutional autonomy, campus integrity, freedom of academic and cultural expression and constitutional protection of academic freedom. Most universities in the country are subjected to unsolicited interference from governments in both academic and non-academic issues. It is common knowledge by now that a majority of appointments, especially to top-ranking posts like that of vice-chancellors, pro vice-chancellors and registrars, have been highly politicised. Such political appointments not only choke academic and creative freedom, but also lead to corrupt practices, including those in licensing and accreditation, thus promoting unhealthy favouritism and nepotism in staff appointments and student admissions. This reflects a 'rent-seeking culture' within the academic community.

At present, many educational institutions and regulatory bodies, both at the Central and State levels, are headed by bureaucrats. However, the NEP 2020 aims to de-bureaucratise the education system by giving governance powers to academicians. It also talks about giving autonomy to higher education institutions by handing over their administration to a board comprising academicians. This may help de-bureaucratise the education system and reduce political interference to an extent.

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