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The Perilous State of Academic Freedom in India

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Abstract

Academic freedom is an integral part of higher education. Academic freedom enjoys a significant place in institutions of higher learning as it fosters a spirit of intellectual inquiry and critical thinking among students and academic intelligentsia as a whole. However, academic freedom has been under attack in various higher education institutions in the world and India, considered to be the world's largest democracy is no exception. In the past few years, a vast majority of controversies over the declining academic freedom in India has been centered around the intra-mural and extra - mural expressions made by the academic community. The abysmal performance of certain countries especially that of India in the academic freedom index (AFi) ascertains this fact. The AFi index suggests that political tensions in India have something to do with the declining academic freedom. Various factors including political and bureaucratic interference in the functioning of universities to campus politics with a violent disruptive tenor are to be blamed for the precarious situation. India's ailing democracy is also to be blamed for the sad state of academic freedom in the country.

Keywords

Academic Freedom, India, Democracy, Higher Education, Political Regimes

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1.Introduction

Academic freedom is considered as a “sine qua non”¹ in academic institutions, especially in the institutions of higher learning. The term ‘academic freedom’, despite its significance in nurturing a healthy atmosphere in universities, have been largely ignored. There have been widespread criticism that even the highly influential “university rankings” ignore the relevance of academic freedom while selecting the best universities. Since academic freedom is a broad term, there is no single definition for the term as such. However, the general consensus is that it denotes the freedom of students, scholars and teachers to study, research and teach topics they chose without being subjected to external or internal pressures, especially interference from the part of governments (Nelson, 2010). In other words, academic freedom is the freedom to engage in intellectual inquiry². It also denotes the freedom of academic community to engage in healthy intellectual debates without the fear of retaliation from the mighty and powerful. Academic freedom is not something restricted to the four walls of a university classroom. It is directly related to “freedom of speech and expression”. Thus, academic freedom gives the students and teachers the right to fearlessly express their views that can be in the form of writing, in speech and through various mass mediums, within and outside of the campus. However, it also doesn’t give license to anyone to speak anything they want, especially matters that infringe upon the rights and freedom of others. The interpretation and definition of academic freedom are countless as anyone can define academic freedom based on their experience and perspective and that is an advantage for some but a disadvantage for the other.

¹See, Shannon (2019) and Vrielink, Lemmens and Paramentier (2013).

²See, Blessinger and Hans (2018).

The academic freedom index (AFi)³ released in March 2020 proposes a score for each country to determine the level of academic freedom in universities worldwide to determine the level of academic freedom in universities and academic institutions. The Index has a maximum value of one and a minimum value of zero. These scores are based on expert assessments made by 1,810 scholars integrated in Bayesian measurement model. The AFi has used eight components to measure academic freedom. They are the 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 and international legal commitment to academic freedom under international covenant on economic, social, and cultural rights and existence of universities.

The interpretation and definition of academic freedom are countless as anyone can define academic freedom based on their experience and perspective. It is widely considered that academic freedom is high in democratic countries and it barely exists in authoritarian regimes and it is to an extent true also. The existence, sustainability, and longevity of academic freedom in a country also have a direct correlation with political regime in power. It is an accepted fact that politics and education share a symbiotic relationship. It is like education affects politics and politics affects education. Good democratic countries enjoy a good level of academic freedom, while authoritarian regimes tend to have poor academic freedom. Meanwhile, in the case of India, the level of academic freedom is poor. The reason is that India is a flawed democracy, as per the 2019 Democracy Index⁴.

³ See, Kinzelbach, Saliba , Spannagel, and Quinn, (2020). Meanwhile, a total of 35 countries including USA, Switzerland and Australia does not figure in AFi due to insufficient Coder Numbers.

⁴See, Democracy Index 2019.

The term academic freedom was always viewed through the lens of politics and freedom of speech and expression and not as an entity itself in India even by those in academic community. This has also brought the attention to how education system interacts with political contexts that they operate in. With politics becoming an integral part in realm of higher education, the attempts to suppress academic freedom through political will often in a violent disruptive tenor is increasing at an alarming rate in India.

According to World Bank⁵, India has the third highest education system in the world⁶ and it is a surprise to many that India did not fare well in the academic freedom index (AFi). India's poor academic freedom will be somewhat surprising to many. On one hand, institutions of higher learning in the country does enjoy some amount of freedom but on the other hand, attempts to clip the wings of academic freedom has been on the rise over the years.

In the recent times, especially in countries like India, a worrying trend has emerged in which academics and scholars are subjected to physical intimidation, mental harassment, smear campaigns, court cases, imprisonment and other humiliations and all because they are too critical to the political regimes in power. To make this possible, those in power are willing to interfere in the school and university curricula and to dictate what students should be taught in classrooms, what topics should be chosen for research, and imposing restrictions on intra-mural and inter-mural expressions of academicians and students, particularly those against the government.

⁵ See, World Bank (2018)

⁶ Number of colleges and universities in India reached 39,931 and 993 respectively in 2019. India had 37.4 million students enrolled in higher education in the said financial year. Gross Enrolment Ratio in higher education reached 26.3 per cent in 2019.

Apart from the excessive government intervention including in the appointment of vice - chancellors, pro vice-chancellors, the bureaucratic interference in the functioning and administration of universities and campus politics with a disruptive tenor are also equally responsible for the bleak state of academic freedom in India (Chathukulam, 2020).

The erosion of the academic freedom in India began with the excessive political and bureaucratic interference in the administration of universities which in a way gave birth to corruption and rent seeking culture. However, the onslaught on academic freedom became a matter of concern among the academic community in the past five or six years. The general consensus today is to put blame on the current political regimes interest in saffronising education (Tharamangalam 2016 and Roover 2010) that is to make education as an instrument to propagate Hindutva ideology and culture. But it is not fair to put all the blame on the current political regime in India and their ideologies for the sad state of academic freedom in the country. The previous political regimes in India and the politics and corrupt practices since then have an equal role in the sad state of academic freedom in India.

This paper looks into the present condition of academic freedom and the unhealthy trend of onslaught on academic freedom in India and examines the factors responsible for the erosion of academic freedom in the country. It also examines whether political regimes have any direct correlation with the academic freedom and whether more academic freedom leads to a higher knowledge production.

2. Attacks on Academic Freedom in India

Attacks on academic freedom have been on the rise in the last few years, especially in India. According to *Free to Think - Report of the Scholars at Risk Academic Freedom Monitoring Project, 2019*, after China and Turkey, India has reported the third highest number of attacks on academic community. It suggested that political tensions have led to numerous violent incidents in the institutions of higher learning. Authorities have arrested scholars and students and some of them have even suffered professional and personal retaliation for critical expression especially against the government.⁷ The *Free to Think - Report of the Scholars at Risk Academic Freedom Monitoring Project, 2020* has stated that even in the midst of Covid 19-crisis, there was a “persistent threat to scholars, students and universities in countries including India.”

The report states that in the last two years, there has been an apparent surge in attacks on academic freedom. It points out that the nationalistic rhetoric by the ruling political regime in the country have created an environment where ideas and discussions are constricted, and “dissent” has become a taboo. Such practices have choked the space and freedom for academic inquiry in the institutions of higher learning. While Covid 19 was making inroads into India, the country was witnessing a crackdown on students protests in institutions of higher learning. The *Free to Think 2020 Report* states that the arrest of activists, including students and scholars even in the midst of pandemic- induced lockdown have raised concerns and doubts that the government was “taking advantage of the crisis in order to crack down on dissent.”

Following the Covid 19 outbreak, universities and colleges remain closed and institutions of higher learning have embraced online education. In a country like India, where only half of the

⁷See, Human Rights Watch May 24, 2016

populations have access to internet, access to education became narrowed. Students living in remote villages and communities without access to internet, especially in the case of Jammu and Kashmir, where government has declared internet blackout⁸ even prior to the Covid 19 lockdown has deeply affected the academic freedom of teachers, students, and scholars to teach , to study and to do research (Ishfaq and Shazia 2020 and Sundar and Fazili 2020).

In January 2021, Ministry of Education, Government of India, issued an office memorandum⁹ which stated the revised the guidelines for holding online/virtual conferences/seminars/training. As per the latest guidelines, if central educational institutions, public-funded universities including affiliated colleges and organizations and institutions controlled by the Government of India and State Governments want to conduct online international seminars (webinars) and conferences on subjects related to “security of State, Border, Northeast States, Union Territories of Jammu and Kashmir, Ladakh or any other issues that are directly related to India’s internal matters”, they have to seek permission from the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. They also have to seek prior permission from the Ministry, to conduct online conferences on anything sensitive be it political, technical, scientific, commercial, and even personal with provisions for sharing of data in any form including presentations etc. In addition to that, names of all participants attending online webinars relating to sensitive issues and internal matters of India needs to be approved by the Ministry. Academic intelligentsia and activists have dubbed it as an encroachment on the autonomy of institutions and a brazen move to muzzle the academic freedom and freedom of speech and expression in general. (Kulkarni, 2021).

⁸ After 17 months, 4G internet was restored in Jammu and Kashmir on February 6, 2021.

⁹ Office Memorandum issued by Ministry of Education, Government of India on January 15, 2021.

In March 2021, a noted academician Pratap Bhanu Mehta resigned from his position as a professor of political science at Ashoka university in Delhi, India ((Perrigo, 2021). In his resignation letter, Mehta, who has been critical of the policies of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) stated that he is stepping down as his public writings which “support of a politics that tries to honor constitutional values of freedom and equal respect for all citizens is perceived to carry risks for the university.” Arvind Subramanian, the former chief economic advisor to Prime Minister Narendra Modi and an economics professor at Ashoka University also resigned from his position in solidarity with Mehta. Subramanian in his letter stated that circumstances related to Mehta’s resignation as the reason and hinted that it is an insult to academic freedom and expression. Those in academic community feel that this is an attempt to put a noose on academic freedom and suppression of dissent, a policy said to be endorsed by the ruling political regime. In 2020, Freedom House , a US Think Tank has lowered India’s academic freedom score from three to two out of a possible four citing “rising intimidation in recent years that is aimed at controlling academic discussion of politically sensitive topics” (Freedom House, 2020). The Freedom in the World 2021, states that there has been a rise in activities in “campuses intent to disturb academic freedom” and the report puts the blame on forces close to the government for such a scenario. (Freedom House 2021).

The abysmal performance of India in the academic freedom index (AFi)¹⁰ 2020, also ascertains the bleak state of academic freedom in the country. India has scored considerably low in the international academic freedom index (AFi) with a score of 0.352. In the last five years, the AFi of India has dipped by 0.1 points. In the case of AFi scores, on the one hand India is sandwiched between Algeria (0.357), Cameroon (0.361) Vietnam (0.379) and on the other hand it is

¹⁰ The AFi was released on March 26, 2020.

between Kazakhstan (0.302), Djibouti (0.308) and Libya (0.238). Then countries like Malaysia (0.582), Pakistan (0.554), Brazil (0.466) Somalia (0.436) and Ukraine (0.422) have poor academic freedom but surprisingly have scored better than India. Uruguay and Portugal have the best AFI scores of 0.971 each, followed by Latvia (0.964) and Germany (0.960).¹¹

Attacks on institutions of higher learning in the country have generated a sense of fear and uncertainty among the students and academicians. So, did such attacks on academic freedom happened in the past or is it a new phenomenon? The answer is that the erosion of academic freedom began much earlier but only in the recent times even academic community started to take a note of it. While critiquing the academic freedom in India, it is also important to understand the condition of academic freedom in the country since its Independence. It is widely considered that Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru¹² upheld the importance of academic freedom (Narayanan, 1987). There was a time when universities were conceived as autonomous institutions and functioned with least government interference. There was mutual respect among the government and heads of academic institutions. For instance, when John Mathai¹³ was the vice – chancellor of Kerala University, he sought an appointment to meet the then Chief Minister E M S Namboodiripad¹⁴. Upon receiving the request, the CM sought an appointment to meet John Mathai (Panikkar, 2002). This incident shows how a politician and statesman like Namboodiripad

¹¹ The scores for each country are taken from the AFI.

¹² Jawaharlal Nehru was the first Prime Minister of India and a prominent figure in the Indian Independence Movement. As prime minister of independent India, Nehru had initiated socio-economic policies of the idealistic socialist kind.

¹³ John Mathai was an economist and served as India's first Railway Minister and subsequently as India's Finance Minister. Mathai served as the vice – chancellor of University of Bombay from 1955 to 1957 and he was the vice – chancellor of University of Kerala from 1957 to 1959. See, Aravindan & Haridas 1990.

¹⁴ Elamkulam Manakkal Sankaran Namboodiripad, popularly known as EMS was the first Chief Minister of Kerala. Under the leadership of EMS, in 1957, the first ever democratically elected communist government in India came into power.

revered an academic position the latter held. However, such examples remain only as a mere narrative or rhetoric and even politicians and academicians who recall the respect EMS had for academic community and Mathai have no time to emulate it. As Panikkar¹⁵ points out the present day politicians are neither of the stature of EMS nor are all the vice chancellors of Mathai's stature.

Universities in India have been envisioned as “spaces of critical knowledge and academic freedom were subservient to the concept that institutions of higher learning must be sites of nation building in India”(Sundar 2018). Various committees and commissions on education have been constituted in India which includes the University Education Commission also known as S Radhakrishnan Commission (1948 – 49) Kothari Education Commission Report (1964 – 66) also known as the Education Commission and the National Knowledge Commission also known as Yash Pal Committee Report of 2009 are a few among them and they have stressed the significance of academic freedom. India also have various education policies including the National Policy on Education (1968), National Policy on Education (1986) and Revised Programme of Action (1992). But nobody took these recommendations and suggestions with seriousness.

3. The State of Academic Freedom in India Since 1950s

In the mid-50s and 60s, state governments in various parts of India began to interfere in the administration of institutions of higher learning. It was also a time when political parties were foraying into educational institutions to exert the influence of the ruling political regimes and it also paved way for the formation of unions for teachers and students and campus politics. India has a rich history and legacy of how students especially student movements have shaped India's

¹⁵ Panikkar is a renowned historian and educationist.

political development and academic freedom. Political mobilization of students especially against the misrule of state and central governments in the 50s and 60s was a common trend. So academic freedom first came to be associated with these student movements and these movements largely fought against political issues rather than academic freedom in itself. But as citizens of India, students and academic community in general have the right to raise voice against the unpopular and discriminatory policies of the government. It also falls under the general right to freedom of speech and expression.

In India, student movements and protests against political and social issues became synonymous with academic freedom in India. In 1958, there were 58 student agitations and it rose to 395 in 1964 and again climbed to 3,861 and by 1974, a total of 11,540 student agitations took place in the country (Rudolph and Susanne, 1987). The student uprising in 1973, also known as *Nav Nirman Movement* against the then Chief Minister Chimanbhai Patel¹⁶ of Congress¹⁷ in Gujarat is a remarkable one¹⁸. The students and the academic community in general were frustrated with numerous issues including widespread corruption practices and influence of Chimanbhai Patel in the management of various colleges and institutions of higher learning in Gujarat. It began on December 20, 1973, when the students of L D Engineering College Hostel, Ahmedabad launched a protest against hike in tuition fees and mess bill. Soon, students from other colleges and University of Gujarat, joined the protest. The general public was also upset with the inflation and corrupt practices of the ruling government and they also expressed their support to the students.

¹⁶Chimanbhai Patel was the Chief Minister of Gujarat from July 17, 1973 to February 9, 1974.

¹⁷Indian National Congress, popularly known as Congress party is a political party in India. Founded in 1885, the Indian National Congress dominated the Indian Independence movement.

¹⁸See, Shah 1974.

Police and government tried to suppress the student movement. Student leaders were arrested, and authorities slapped draconian laws on them to suppress the movement. But after 77 days, the student agitation brought down the Patel government.

During the same time Bihar too had an inefficient Chief Minister. Taking inspiration from the student movement in Gujarat, students in Patna University launched a similar protest in March 1974¹⁹. As usual government tried to suppress the movement. Police action against the students created a sympathy wave and Gandhian Jayaprakash Narayan²⁰, popularly known as JP offered leadership to the student movement in Bihar. In June 1974, JP, launched a mass anti – corruption movement titled *SampoornKranthi* (Total Revolution) against the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. This eventually paved the way for the emergency in India.

When Indira Gandhi declared an internal emergency²¹ in 1975, all types of freedom including freedom of speech and expression, freedom of movement and even fundamental rights were suspended. During the emergency, the student movements were largely suppressed, and the situation was such that anyone who speaks against the government was put behind the bars and there have been reports that some were allegedly tortured²². However, in several universities and academic institutions across India, students and faculty members organized underground protests²³, and even distributed pamphlets and leaflets against the imposition of Emergency. The 1980s saw 10600 student agitation movements. However, governments in power, be it at the

¹⁹ See, Venkateshwaran(2019)

²⁰ Jayaprakash Narayan (1902-1979) was an Indian nationalist and social reform leader.

²¹ The Emergency in India refers to a 21month period from 1975 to 1977 when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi had a state of emergency declared across the country

²²See, Venugopal 2015.

²³See, Jayaram 1979.

Centre or State have used covert and overt pressures on academic institutions. Even before AFI, India never fared well in academic freedom and the student movements which also falls under the broad definition of academic freedom continues to be suppressed through violent means.

At present, these unhealthy trends have started to become more and more visible in the public sphere in which thinking, reasoning, questioning, and criticizing the ruling political regime by the academia is not only welcomed but also treated with utter disdain by those in power. The violent and brutal repression of student protest in the country over Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA)²⁴ and National Registry of Citizens (NRC)²⁵ is a perfect example for this. These days the academic community and intellectuals who are critical of the ruling regime are framed as anti-nationals and there have also been instances where Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) and sedition laws were slapped on students who participated in these protest²⁶.

4. Factors Hurting Academic Freedom in India

A. Political Tensions

The AFI has cited the *Free to Think: Report of the Scholars at Risk Academic Freedom Monitoring Project*, (2019 & 2020)²⁷ to indicate that “the political tensions in India that have led to violent

²⁴ CAA seeks to amend the definition of illegal immigrant for Hindu, Sikh, Parsi, Buddhist and Christian immigrants from Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh, who have lived in India without documentation. They will be granted fast track Indian citizenship in six years. Opposition parties and human right activists have criticized the government ringfences Muslim identity by declaring India a welcome refuge to all other religious communities.

²⁵ NRC is an official record of those who are legal Indian citizens. It includes demographic information about all those individuals who qualify as citizens of India as per the Citizenship Act, 1955. The register was first prepared after the 1951 Census of India and since then it was not updated until recently. On November 20, 2019, Home Minister Amit Shah declared during a parliamentary session that the register would be extended to the entire country.

²⁶ Times of India , June 4, 2020.

²⁷ Scholars at Risk 2019 and 2020

protests between students, security forces, and off-campus groups, and have driven legal actions and disciplinary measures against scholars as well as students critical of those in power”, may have something to do with declining “academic freedom” in India.

In India, the freedom of academic and cultural expression and constitutional protection of academic freedom have been eroding in the past few years and this has led to political tensions between the academic community, government, and law enforcement agencies.

1. The police brutality against students²⁸ at Jamia Millia Islamia University²⁹, Aligarh Muslim University³⁰, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU)³¹ in Delhi who were protesting against the CAA and NRC and labelling them as anti-nationals violates the freedom of academic and cultural expression.
2. In December 2019, police resorted to violence to stop a peaceful protest march at JNU over hike in hostel fees.³² The right for peaceful protests is protected by International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which India is a party. Such incidents undermine academic freedom and democracy in general. Such incidents have triggered political tensions and violence in India.

²⁸ Slater 2020.

²⁹ Jamia Millia Islamia, an institution originally established at Aligarh in United Provinces, India in 1920 became a Central University by an act of the Indian Parliament in 1988.

³⁰ It is one of the oldest surviving universities in India.

³¹ The Jawaharlal Nehru University constituted under the Jawaharlal Nehru University Act 1966, came into existence in 1969.

³² Bhanj 2019.

India has not fared well in components listed in AFi including 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.

Take the first component in AFi freedom to research and teach. Academic freedom implies the freedom of scholars or academic community to conduct critical enquiry. It also implies the freedom of students as well as teachers to deliberate on ideas or concepts without fear of sanction and intimidation. These days, freedom of scholars, students and faculty are threatened by internal as well as external factors.³³ Internal factors constitute when academic institutions are weakened from within due to corrupt, unethical, and undemocratic practices within the institutions of higher learning. External factors include coercive efforts from the ruling political regimes and their efforts in making academic community subservient to the government to act according to the whims and fancies of those in power.

1. In 2018, Central government decided to impose Central Civil Service (CCS) Conduct Rules of 1963 (amended in 2014) on the academic community³⁴. Under CSS, the professors can neither analyze nor criticize the policies of the government. If they want to write an opinion piece on any matter, especially when it comes to criticizing the government, they should get prior approval from the higher authority. Though, owing to criticism, government clarified that it was not mandatory to impose CSS rules on academic community, the reality is far from different. Questioning and critical thinking are not entertained and those who resort to such practices are subjected to intimidation, physical and verbal attacks, silenced and even jailed. While academia believes university as an institution needs to be

³³ Bhargava. 2019.

³⁴ Financial Express, October 26, 2018 and Apporvanand, 2018.

placed outside the purview of government to maintain academic freedom, the government, irrespective of which party is in power, believes that it needs to interfere in the functioning of educational institutions.

2. In 2019, a circular was issued by the vice-chancellor of Central University of Kerala directed various departments in the university to “discourage research in irrelevant areas” and to make a shelf of PhD topics “in accordance with the national priorities” from which the students might choose their topics³⁵.

The academic community was surprised as there is already a doctoral research committee comprising subject experts to decide the relevance and priority of topics and some even wondered as to why such a circular to undermine academic freedom was issued in the first place.

3. In 2016, Gujarat government also issued a similar directive, listing eighty two topics of relevance for PhD research in state universities³⁶. Unsolicited interference from the part of government chokes the freedom to think critically as well as knowledge enhancement process.

B. Political Interference in Institutions of Higher Learning and Rent-Seeking Culture

Institutions of higher learning including universities in the country are subjected to unsolicited interference from the part of governments in power on academic and non-academic issues. Majority of the appointments, especially top post appointments like that of vice-chancellors are highly politicized. In other words, top post appointments of universities usually tend to be political appointee, who makes sure that the political interest of government or ruling party is taken care

³⁵ The Wire. March 16, 2019.

³⁶ Yagnik and Chauhan 2016.

of. There have been a number of instances to indicate the interference of government in the matters of universities and other institutions of higher learning.

1. In 2015, protests happened at the Film and Television Institute of India, (FTII) Pune³⁷, India, when students objected to the attempts made by the government to interfere in the management, curricula, and even cultural events on campus. One of the main reasons for the protest was the appointment of an actor as the director of the FTII, alleging that the said actor lacked the credentials needed for the post and the appointment was based on his proximity towards the ruling political regime.³⁸

Such political appointments not only curtail academic and creative freedom but also the overall academic excellence of universities and their institutional autonomy. It also leads to corruption practices including those in licensing and accreditation of academic institutions and also promotes unhealthy favoritism and nepotism in staff appointments and student admissions. It gave birth to “rent – seeking culture” within the academic community. Universities have now become cradles of corruption. Here are few of the instances that took place in universities in this regard.

1. In 2018, the vice - chancellor of Bharathiyar University, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India was arrested by Directorate of Vigilance and Anti- Corruption for accepting a bribe of Rs.30 lakhs (US\$ 41,215) from an assistant professor of Chemistry department in the university³⁹.
2. In September 2020, the Anti – Corruption Bureau in Rajasthan, India, arrested vice-chancellor of the Maharshi Dayanand University in Ajmer, Rajasthan in a bribery case. It

³⁷ The FTII is an autonomous institute under the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting of the Government of India and aided by the Central Government of India. It was established in 1960.

³⁸ Rashid 2015.

³⁹See, Subburaj (2018)

was reported that the vice-chancellor demanded a hefty bribe for allotment of additional seats and an examination centre from a private college affiliated to the university with the help of middle men⁴⁰.

Certain unconventional practices have also been adopted when it comes to selecting candidates for the post of vice-chancellor. In November 2020, senior professors shortlisted by search panels for the posts of vice-chancellors of six state universities in Odisha were made to take a written test at the Raj Bhavan, a move many of the candidates and other academics described as humiliating. Academician and a few of the candidates who appeared for the exam criticized the selection process and some even frowned upon the questions asked in the exam. For instance, there was a question like *If God appears before you and asks for a boon, what will you like to ask for?*⁴¹. How could questions like these going to help find the candidate eligible for the post of vice – chancellor? Incidents like these are not only a humiliation to learned scholars and academicians but a brutal insult to academic freedom itself. In rare cases, there have been instances where chancellors⁴² give a briefing to the candidates on why he wants to conduct a test for candidates aspiring for the post of vice - chancellor and the chancellor has to make a request to the candidates to appear before the exam⁴³. For instance, two years ago, a written test was conducted to select a VC for Berhampur University, Odisha, India, and the decision was made after an interaction between eligible candidates with the governor, who is also the chancellor.

In Odisha, another incident took place in which the process of appointing state university vice-chancellors was embroiled in another controversy when the government amended the Odisha

⁴⁰See, Parihar (2020)

⁴¹See, Suffian (2020)

⁴² In India, governors of the states serve as the ex – officio chancellor of universities.

⁴³ Mohanty 2020.

Universities Act in September 2020 through an ordinance, changing the composition of the search panels. Search panels were earlier made up of nominees of the chancellor, the University Grants Commission and the syndicate of the university concerned. The ordinance replaced the syndicate representative with an Odisha government representative. Practices like these pave the way for the increasing and uncontrolled government interference which could subsequently choke the academic freedom.

In 2019, Department of Higher Education, Government of Kerala, came up with a proposal in which all prospective candidates aspiring for the post of vice-chancellor in Kerala universities have to face an interview from the search committee as part of the selection process. The search committee consisted of Chief Secretary, a nominee from University Grants Commission and a nominee from university. Academicians in the state had mixed reviews regarding this decision⁴⁴. At a time, when academics are already concerned about the increasing presence of bureaucracy in the higher education sector, the decision of the government to include the top most IAS officer/senior bureaucrat in the search committee to interview candidates for the post of vice – chancellor feels like an insult to any self – respecting academician. They see it as a ploy by the vested interests to exert their influence once again over higher education institutions. On the other hand, some academicians are of the opinion that it would bring more transparency and will foster merit based appointment.

⁴⁴ Eminent academicians have termed the procedure of inviting applications and conducting interviews as a ‘bureaucratic approach’ and ‘unreasonable. They are of the opinion that search committee should form a panel and invite noted academicians to take up the post of vice – chancellor. See Krishnakumar 2019. Prof. KK George, former director of School of Management Studies, Cochin University of Science and Technology (CUSAT) is of the opinion that the senate and syndicate are highly politicized entities. During an interview with Prof. George on November 13, 2020, he said that during his stint at the CUSAT he didn’t find his academic life as very productive and felt some sort of constraints on academic freedom in general. Prof. George added that, he had a more productive academic life in Centre for Development Studies, Thiruvanthapuram, Kerala.

There have been allegations that politicians nominate vice – chancellors on the basis of caste, community considerations⁴⁵. It has been alleged that the important decision-making bodies like syndicate and senate are promoting such sectarian interests. In Kerala, academicians have criticized the system of dividing the top posts in the universities among four prominent communities-Ezhavas⁴⁶, Muslims, Christians and Nairs⁴⁷

Delay in the appointment of vice - chancellors of universities is a common issue these days. It is rare to witness a vice - chancellor appointed before the expiry of the term of the outgoing vice - chancellor and takes charge on the same day. In the absence of vice - chancellor, Higher Education Secretaries on behalf of government, especially under the direction of Education department wields their power over institutions of higher learning. Politics and falling standards in academics are some of the reasons. Candidates themselves have to lobby with decision makers. The laid down procedures are either misused or violated to appoint candidates who are not qualified for the post of vice – chancellor. The general trend is to appoint those with sufficient political and society standing. Search committee recommendations are often overlooked. All these indicates that top posts in higher education institutions are highly politicized. Then in the case of syndicates functioning in the universities has also been a matter of great disappointment. Syndicates ceased to act as “think tanks”. The vice - chancellors are crammed between the Syndicate and the bureaucrats. It is unfortunate that a good number of Syndicate members are nominees of the government⁴⁸.

⁴⁵See, Times of India, (June, 20, 2020)

⁴⁶dominant backward class caste among the Hindus in Kerala, India

⁴⁷See, Thomas 2018.

⁴⁸ Hegde 2016.

Along with political intervention, there is the problem of bureaucratic intervention. Education is a favorite topic not just for politicians but also for the bureaucrats, and there have been instances where many bureaucrats⁴⁹, were given plum posts in academic institutions and even in regulatory bodies like National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE). There have also been instances where bureaucrats were appointed as registrars in institutions of higher learning.

C. Government Interference in Curriculum Violating Academic Freedom

Freedom regarding what to teach in the four walls of a classroom has been a bone of contention between the members within the academic community as well as the political regime and society at large. India has a relatively prescribed curriculum. Committees create course syllabus with readings, and professors are instructed to teach from the materials that have been assigned. That is regulatory bodies like University Grants Commission, All India Council for Technical Education have formulated a standardized curriculum and they dictate what subjects should be taught in universities. In India there have been numerous instances where a lot of books and readings suggested as part of course curriculum were banned from classrooms, as a certain section or group felt they were offensive, derogatory and could mislead and corrupt the mind of students.

Recently, the Manomaniam Sundaranar University in Tirunelveli district in Tamil Nadu, India banned writer Arundhati Roy's book titled *Walking with Comrades*, from its post graduate English syllabus⁵⁰. The book was based on Roy's visit to Maoist⁵¹ hideouts. The decision came following

⁴⁹ Pandey 2019. In 2012, a former chief secretary to the Kerala government was appointed as the vice -chancellor of Thunchath Ezhuthachan Malayalam University in Kerala.

⁵⁰ The Wire, November 12, 2020.

⁵¹ The Maoist, popularly known as Naxals in India are inspired by the political philosophy of China's Mao Zedong. Naxals argue that they are here to fight against the oppression of the downtrodden and marginalised sections of the society. In 2004, several Maoist groups merged to form the Communist Party of India (Maoist), which is now the largest left-wing extremist organization in the country. The Maoists are banned in India and government has declared Maoists' rebellion as the biggest "internal security threat". Meanwhile, they are not to be confused with the mainstream communist parties in India who regularly get elected to legislatures and parliament.

objections raised by the Right – Wing Student Party - the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP). Due to the agitation, vice-chancellor decided to remove the book and it was replaced with a few essays from naturalist M. Krishnan's *My Native Land: Essays on Nature*. According to University sources, the book was included in the syllabus since 2017. It was only recently that it was brought to University's notice that the author had glorified Maoists. There have been reports that vice -chancellor formed a committee to discuss the issue and it recommended the withdrawal of the book.

Generally, a decision to include or drop a book is made by three committees – syllabus committee, standing committee and senate. Incidents like denying to teach certain books raise concerns as to whether the diversity of the society will be distorted as per the whims and fancies of those in power and whether they are entrusted with the task of deciding what is the right form of art, what is the right form of literature and what should students read. Incidents like these are never a new phenomenon in India, where freedom of speech and expression is a bigger problem than academic freedom. If a professor wants to teach a banned book or writing, the person has to seek permission from the higher up as it is a banned literature and even if permission is granted, they have to face the wrath and humiliation too. Even before the emergence of the current political regime, there were attempts to scuttle academic freedom in the country.

1. In 2011 , an essay titled “*Three Hundred Ramayana's: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation*” was scrapped by the Academic Council of Delhi University from an undergraduate course in history after a right - wing student group vandalized the university's history department to protest the teaching of this essay. The banning of this

essay was viewed as succumbing to political pressure and a violation of academic freedom⁵².

2. In 2010, Mumbai University removed Rohinton Mistry's novel *Such a Long Journey* from the reading list of the second-year BA syllabus after objections were raised to the passages in the book that negatively portrayed Indian politics⁵³.
3. James Laine's *Shivaji: Hindu King in Islamic India*⁵⁴, Megha Kumar's *Communalism and Sexual Violence: Ahmedabad since 1969*, and Sekhar Bandopadhyay's *From Plassey to Partition: A History of Modern India* are banned from classrooms in India.
4. In 2018, right-wing activists and trolls have targeted Ashoka university and a professor named Aparna Vaidik for teaching a novel titled 'Gardner in the Wasteland' by Srividya Natrajan (Singh, 2018).

Academic freedom outside the university classrooms is also a big concern and is subjected to heated discussions in the Indian campuses. The concept of academic freedom in institutions of higher education also extends to seminars, conferences and activities that occur outside the classroom. In theory, extramural speech activities are particularly dangerous in Indian universities. All these incidents makes one think that while we give students the right to vote when they turn eighteen years of age years old, why the academic community as well as political parties and the government fear when students are given the right to think⁵⁵? There have also been instances where governments have interfered into the domain of autonomy of the university and thus encroaching upon the academic freedom of the higher institutions of

⁵²Mahaprashasta 2011.

⁵³Bruke 2010.

⁵⁴Novetzke and Lee 2004.

⁵⁵Vijetha 2011.

learning. For instance, the latest Kerala budget⁵⁶ proposes a list of 30 fully autonomous Inter University Centers and Schools to be established within universities. Such proposals usually figures in the University budget and not in the government budget.

D. Social Identities and Academic Freedom

Issues like caste, religion and gender frequently create a tense atmosphere within and outside educational institutions. Such fear and environment of terror more or less constrain the studies and research and the overall freedom of expression within academia. What one writes, teaches and studies can not only result in suspension of services and can even cost one's life.

In 2015, MalleshappaMadivalappa Kalburgi, a scholar, writer, academic, and the former vice-chancellor of Kannada University in Hampi was shot dead outside his home in Karnataka, India. Kulbargi, asked sensitive questions related to the saint of his own community and the worship of religious idols. Kalburgi's criticism against idolatry in Hinduism was enough for some sections to hate him⁵⁷.

At the moment, neither the political regime nor institutions of higher learning encourage debate. Everyone wants to stop debates and discussions that upsets those in power and vested interests. Academic researchers are bound to be controversial and are subjected to open debates and discussion. .But the problem here is that, instead of healthy discussions, the debates are turned into verbal assaults that eventually end up in physical violence.

Making enquiries to further their knowledge and research, especially unconventional views and practices are part and parcel of academic community. At the same time, they also have to keep in

⁵⁶ Budget Speech(2021 – 2022), Government of Kerala.

⁵⁷Sayeed 2015.

mind that their unconventional thinking does not turn harmful to the society. However, till now nobody has been able to distinguish between what amounts to harm, insult, or misuse of freedom of speech and expression and what constitutes academic freedom and what doesn't. According to prominent historian Romila Thapar, a society whose ambience is suffused with fear ceases to nurture creativity and its life is reduced to a routine banality⁵⁸.

Meanwhile, the National Education Policy 2020, (NEP) recently introduced by the Central government gives adequate stress on academic freedom and has some interesting suggestions to weed out political and bureaucratic interference in academic institutions. If it is implemented in the true spirit, the evils plaguing our education system will be wiped out to an extent (Chathukulam, 2020).

E. Disruptive Campus Politics and Eroding Academic Freedom.

Student Politics, popularly known as campus politics has been an integral part of college and university campuses in India. The practice of students actively participating in politics began in the early twentieth century, when the country was fighting for its freedom. Political parties, at that time, started mobilizing the support of students in colleges and universities. Many of the past as well as present-day politicians including ministers, Members of Parliaments (MPs) and Members of Legislative Assemblies (MLAs) are the products of the vibrant yet volatile campus politics.

While the overall idea envisaged by campus politics was to make educational institutions a better place for pursuing studies and research and to act as the watchdog of academic freedom, it has turned out to be disruptive and dangerous. Campus politics has taken a violent disruptive tenor as political parties with vested interests making students scapegoats for reviving their political

⁵⁸Salam Us Ziya 2016.

fortunes and to further their careers⁵⁹. Student unions were formed with the idea of establishing a democratic and scientific education system, to protect the rights of the student community, to battle all sort of discrimination. But in reality, political parties merely use student unions for their own selfish agendas. Even in the campuses in states like Kerala, student outfits act as offshoots of political parties wielding considerable control over academic institutions. Instead of protecting academic freedom these student bodies resort to agitations and violence within the academic community⁶⁰. Student outfits in the name of campus politics are conducting strikes and protests, a move a section of those within academic community views as something that overrides a student's right to study, a core aspect of academic freedom. Though there were bans on campus politics including political activities, there were strong oppositions citing it violates the democratic right of students, another aspect of academic freedom. But as long as campus politics remain unhealthy, it will continue to be the biggest enemy of academic freedom and academic community. Students and teachers can have discussions on any issue, they can also show their disagreement and express their opinions but in a peaceful and healthy manner. The most disappointing part is that those who ardently support and participates in campus politics have not raised their voice demanding the protection of academic freedom in institutions of higher learning.

In the recent times, politicians have started to come up with events to woo the student community, especially first-time voters ahead of the election season. Such attempts are also crippling academic

⁵⁹One of the authors of this paper talked to students studying in various parts of the country on October 25, 26 and 27 in 2020. While some students supported the campus politics, a section of students admitted it is doing more harm than good

⁶⁰The authors of this paper interviewed students and professors in colleges and universities and majority of them agreed that the student outfits are resorting to unhealthy trends and they are mainly used for settling personal and political scores, harass students and teachers. In Kerala, there have been gruesome incidents where students were killed in the name of violent student politics. The interviews were conducted from November 4 to November 10. In 2018, a student of Maharaja's College in Kochi was murdered by a rival outfit. Violence has become a regular affair on campuses across Kerala, and perpetrators don't only enjoy political protection, but are also actively encouraged and funded by parties. Also see Arun 2018.

freedom. The main problem with these events is that it is done in an authoritarian fashion and instead of impromptu interaction with students, such events are in reality a scripted question and answer session to boost the image of the political leaders. Under such circumstances, students are not given any freedom to ask the questions they want and are instead forced to ask scripted and diplomatic questions to the politicians. While discussions are done in the guise to elicit views on the strength and challenges in the realm of higher education, in reality such calculated public relations exercise have led to curtailment of academic freedom. For instance, in 2021, as part of a series of interactive programmes designed ahead of the upcoming Assembly Elections in the state of Kerala, Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan interacted with students on a host of issues concerning the higher education sector under the CM@Campusprogramme⁶¹. In a discussion held at Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, Kerala on February 8, 2021, the CM was enraged over the query of a student. The reason was that the question was asked to him after the event was concluded. Instead of politely refusing to answer the question, those in power are resorting to aggressive replies.

5. Does decline in academic freedom denotes decline in democracy?

Academic freedom is considered as a salient feature of good democracies. Education, especially a strong higher education sector is viewed as a necessary prerequisite for developing a culture of democracy. The cooperation between public authorities, civil society including the academic community is vital to nurture and safeguard democracy. The deterioration of academic freedom threatens not only the quality of higher education but democracy itself⁶².

⁶¹ The Hindu, January 30, 2021. One of the authors of this paper attended the CM@ campus programme held at Cochin University of Science and Technology, Kalamassery, Kerala on February 1, 2021. The authors also viewed the interaction held at Kerala University on February 6, 2021 and Mahatma Gandhi University on February 8, 2021.

⁶² Bergan and Harkavy 2019.

Academic freedom is generally high in democratic countries and it barely exists in authoritarian regimes. It is an established fact that the existence, sustainability, and longevity of academic freedom in a country has a direct correlation with political regime in power.

The 2019 Democracy Index has classified countries into four categories. They are full democracies⁶³, flawed democracies⁶⁴, hybrid regimes⁶⁵ and authoritarian regimes⁶⁶. Good democratic countries enjoy a good level of academic freedom. For instance, countries like Norway, Iceland, Sweden, New Zealand, Finland, Ireland, Denmark, Canada, Spain, Mauritius, Chile, France, Portugal, and Uruguay are ‘full democracies⁶⁷’, as per the 2019 Democracy Index. These countries also enjoy better academic freedom as per the AFi index. Authoritarian regimes⁶⁸ like China, North Korea and Cuba, fare poorly in academic freedom.

Does decline in academic freedom denotes decline in democracy? If one compares the AFi with the Democracy Index, there are myriad of possibilities. For instance, India may be the world’s largest democracy but as per the Democracy Index, it is a flawed democracy. Erosion of civil liberties is cited as the reason for categorizing India as a flawed democracy. India also has poor academic freedom. So, in the case of India and Brazil, one can say that in countries with deteriorating democracy, academic freedom is low. But that doesn’t mean all flawed democracies

⁶³As per the Democracy Index 2019 , full democracies are nations where civil liberties and fundamental political freedoms are not only respected but also reinforced by a political culture conducive to the thriving of democratic principles.

⁶⁴ Flawed democracies are nations where elections are fair and free and basic civil liberties are honoured but may have issues (e.g. media freedom infringement and minor suppression of political opposition and critics).

⁶⁵ Hybrid regimes are nations with regular electoral frauds, preventing them from being fair and free democracies.

⁶⁶ Authoritarian regimes are nations where political pluralism is nonexistent or severely limited. These nations are often absolute monarchies or dictatorships, may have some conventional institutions of democracy but with meagre significance.

have poor academic freedom. Countries like Israel, Italy, South Korea, Argentina, Malta, Estonia, Slovakia, and Slovenia which has good academic freedom index (AFi) are “flawed democracies”.

In the case of Haiti, Albania, Guatemala, and Georgia which are classified as a “hybrid regime” has better academic freedom index. However, hybrid regimes like Pakistan and Bangladesh has poor academic freedom, (Table No:1).

Table No: 1 : Details of selected 40 countries and their academic freedom

Sl. No	Name of the Country	Regime Type as per Democracy Index (2019)	Score for Regimes as per Democracy Index (0 to 10)	Academic Freedom index (AFi) score (0 to 1)
1.	Norway	Full Democracy	9.87	0.919
2	Iceland	Full Democracy	9.58	0.922
3	Sweden	Full Democracy	9.39	0.947
4	New Zealand	Full Democracy	9.26	0.908
5	Finland	Full Democracy	9.25	0.936
6	Ireland	Full Democracy	9.24	0.935
7	Denmark	Full Democracy	9.22	0.921
8	Canada	Full Democracy	9.22	0.940
9	France	Full Democracy	8.12	0.846
10	Chile	Full Democracy	8.08	0.933
11	Spain	Full Democracy	8.29	0.942
12	Uruguay	Full Democracy	8.38	0.971
13	Portugal	Full Democracy	8.03	0.971
14	United Kingdom	Full Democracy	8.52	0.934
15	Mauritius	Full Democracy	8.22	0.727
16	Netherlands	Full Democracy	9.01	0.931
17	Argentina	Flawed Democracy	7.02	0.909
18	Israel	Flawed Democracy	7.86	0.939
19	Brazil	Flawed Democracy	6.86	0.466
20	Italy	Flawed Democracy	7.52	0.944
21	India	Flawed Democracy	6.90	0.352
22	South Korea	Flawed Democracy	8.00	0.802
23	Slovakia	Flawed Democracy	7.17	0.939
24	Slovenia	Flawed Democracy	7.50	0.921
25	Malta	Flawed Democracy	7.95	0.869
26	Estonia	Flawed Democracy	7.90	0.957
27	Haiti	Hybrid Regime	4.57	0.652
28	Pakistan	Hybrid Regime	4.25	0.554
29	Albania	Hybrid Regime	5.89	0.848

30	Bangladesh	Hybrid Regime	5.88	0.195
31	China	Authoritarian	2.26	0.101
32	Cuba	Authoritarian	2.84	0.137
33	North Korea	Authoritarian	1.08	0.011
34	Syria	Authoritarian	1.43	0.089
35	Thailand	Flawed Democracy	6.32	0.191
36	Zimbabwe	Authoritarian	3.16	0.107
37	United Arab Emirates	Authoritarian	2.76	0.103
38	Yemen	Authoritarian	1.95	0.139
39	Georgia	Hybrid Regime	5.42	0.831
40	Guatemala	Hybrid Regime	5.26	0.829

Source : Compiled the Data from Democracy Index 2019 and Academic Freedom Index 2020.

6.Does more academic freedom lead to more knowledge production?

So, can India become a knowledge superpower as envisioned in the absence of academic freedom?

Unfortunately, there is no definite answer. Look in the case of China. It falls in the worst category of AFi (0.101). However, even with the worse academic freedom, along with being an authoritarian regime China's dominance in the field of knowledge production is a surprising one. China, accounts for 20.67 per cent of all global publications in scientific articles,⁶⁹ followed by US at 16.54 per cent. In China, the number of global scientific publications increased from 2,49,049 in 2008 to 5,28,263 in 2018, at a growth rate of 7.81 per cent per annum. It is also the world's leading patent generator. In the case of China, despite being an authoritarian regime, how does it manage to generate more knowledge production? One of the major reasons behind this is the Cash per Publication Policy in China in which Chinese scientists are financially rewarded whenever their scientific papers are published in reputable journals⁷⁰.

⁶⁹ See, McCarthy (2019)

⁷⁰ Quan, Chen, and Shu 2017

An investigative study⁷¹ by Wei Quan (Wuhan University) Bikun Chen (Nanjing University of Science and Technology) and Fei Shu (McGill University) have found that cash-per-publication incentives are common and scientists who publish in the top Western Journals can earn around \$1000,000 per paper.

The second reason is the huge investment China makes in the field of Research and Development (R&D). China invests nearly 2.1 per cent of its GDP in R & D, It has 1,089 number of researchers per million inhabitants.

In the case of India, despite being categorized as a flawed democracy along with limited investment (0.7 per cent of GDP) in R & D, it has emerged as the third largest publisher of scientific articles in the world. In 2008, India published 48,998 science and engineering articles and it rose to 1,35,788 articles in 2018. India nearly accounts for 5.31 per cent of the total world publications in science and engineering⁷². The country has 156 researchers per million. During 2018, India was ranked at 3rd, 5th and 9th in scientific publication output as per the National Science Foundation(NSF)⁷³, SCOPUS⁷⁴ and Science Citation Index (SCI) database respectively⁷⁵. Uruguay which has topped the AFI invests just 0.3 per cent of its GDP in R&D and has 642 researchers per

⁷¹ The name of the study is *Publish or impoverish: An investigation of the monetary reward system of science in China (1999-2016)*. This study is based on the analysis of 168 university documents regarding the cash-per-publication reward policy at 100 Chinese universities. Chinese universities offer cash rewards from USD30 to USD165,000 for papers published in journals indexed by Web of Science, and the average reward amount has been increasing for the past ten years.

⁷² As per R&D Statistics and Indicators 2019-20 based on the national S&T survey 2018 brought out by the National Science and Technology Management Information (NSTMIS), Department of Science and Technology (DST).

⁷⁴ SCOPUS is the world's largest multidisciplinary abstract and citation database containing both peer-reviewed research literatures, quality web resources with smart tools that track, analyze and visualize research.

⁷⁵ Ministry of Science and Technology, Government of India.

million inhabitants. Portugal, which also tops the AFI invests 1.3 per cent of its GDP in R & D and has 3,662 researchers per million inhabitants. Meanwhile, a total of 1,594 Indian scientists have also made it to the list of Stanford University's top 2% scientists in the world.⁷⁶

From all these, it is evident that some countries with less academic freedom tend to make more contribution academically and scientifically, while countries with more academic freedom need not be on the same page. So, does that mean, academic freedom is not that important when it comes to knowledge production? Definitely not. For instance, in a country with limited academic freedom, researchers may not enjoy full freedom when it comes to what they can research. There have been instances where academic papers were subjected to censoring and researchers were asked to keep in mind the national priorities rather than other interests. In April 2019, China imposed restrictions on the publication of academic research on the origins of Covid 19. Notices were published by several universities that all academic papers on Covid 19 would be subject to extra vetting by the Ministry of Science and Technology before publication. This shows how the political leadership was trying to control the narrative on Covid 19 and suppress the academic freedom to research as a whole⁷⁷. In the case of India, a flat budget, rising intolerance and suppression of dissent and at times pseudo-science has been hurting the research and knowledge production.

Academics should have the freedom to carry out the research of their choice without government interference, but the opposite is happening in India. In 2019, the minutes of Union Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD), had a suggestion asking vice-chancellors of central

⁷⁶ Scientists at Stanford University, led by John Ioannidis created a database of 1,59,683 scientists in the world, based on standard indicators such as citations, h-index, co-authorship and a composite indicator. Also see, Gireeshan and Chathukulam, 2020

⁷⁷ Stephanie, Graham-Harrison and Kuo, 2020.

universities to “discourage research in irrelevant areas” and stated that PhD candidates should be allowed to choose only topics of “national priorities”. Nevertheless, a section of academics in the country feel that the current political regime has a disdain for scholars doing research in areas such as human rights, dalits, LGBTQ and marginalized communities and such moves curtail academic freedom⁷⁸. There is an ongoing conflict between intellectual opinion and national interest in India, where conformity makes you a patriot and critical thinking makes you anti – national.⁷⁹

7. Conclusion

Academic freedom is a concept many people laud without properly defining its essence and spirit. In India, academic freedom is synonymous with much freedom of speech and expression within and outside the campus and no one has tried to define academic freedom as an independent concept. In India, academic freedom is viewed mostly through the lens of politics. Education systems that are especially in the higher education sector have always been understood and examined in the political context they operate in and not as an isolated entity. While there have been calls to separate academic and political freedom, there are no real attempts to do so and the incidents that play out in higher educational institutions have got a political hue more than ever. The unfortunate part is that even the academic community has failed to acknowledge that the concept of academic freedom as something complex and never understood the fact that it needs to be placed in a wider institutional context. But at the same time separating politics from education and education from politics is not going to be an easy one as more and more intellectual discourses

⁷⁸ Rayan 2019. Once it snowballed into a controversy, government cited it as a bureaucratic blunder and said government doesn’t intend to do so.

⁷⁹See, Pullanoor (2016)

emerge where the existence of academic freedom is directly linked with democratic freedom or the political regime.

The Goal 4 of the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) talks about ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. Accomplishment of this goal is a challenging one and if one wants to achieve it one has to analyze how education system interacts with the political contexts that they operate in.⁸⁰ This itself suggest that the future course of higher education is deeply entrenched in the politics of the law of the land. Based on the political regime in each country one can understand the way academic freedom gets enacted in institutions of higher learning. It is generally considered that academic freedom is high in democratic countries and it barely exists in authoritarian regimes. The existence, sustainability, and longevity of academic freedom in a country also have a direct correlation with political regime in power. While authoritarian regimes have poor academic freedom, democratic regimes enjoy a good level of academic freedom. However, the same cannot be said about the academic freedom in the world's largest democracy which has now turned into a flawed democracy. In India, assaults on academic freedom have ranged from curbs on academic and extra-curricular events, intra – mural and extra mural speech to assaults on students and faculty and at times attacks and violence unleashed by members within academic community against themselves. Though the significance of academic freedom were stressed and highlighted by various commissions on higher education in India, there were no takers.

Academic community has the moral responsibility to demonstrate to those in power how healthy debates and discussions can take place without resorting to physical violence, intellectual

⁸⁰See, Wales, Magee and & Nicolai (2016)

intimidation, and fear mongering. The freedom to teach and conduct research without fear and intimidation becomes even more important in India as its education is undergoing a massive massification process⁸¹. With the emergence of massification, the social composition of students pursuing higher education in the country have transitioned from homogenous to heterogeneous. As a result, universities are filled with students from diverse backgrounds, ideologies, and values. So, the freedom to study and teach freely as well as to raise voice against oppression and abuse and critically evaluate the happenings in the society becomes critical for sustaining academic freedom in institutions of higher learning. Academic freedom is essential for the health and vitality of not only universities but also for democracy in nations like India.

Speaking at the Allahabad University, Uttar Pradesh, India, in 1947, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru said: "A University stands for humanism, for tolerance, for reason, for progress, for the adventure of ideas and for the search for truth. It stands for the onward march of the human race towards even higher objectives. If the universities discharge their duty adequately, then it is well with the nation and the people. But if the temple of learning itself becomes a home of narrow bigotry and petty objectives, how then will the nation prosper, or a people grow in stature"⁸²? As of now the universities which Nehru described as temples of learning have become breeding grounds of bigotry. Nehru in his speech added that "A vast responsibility, therefore, rests on our universities and educational institutions and those who guide their destinies. They have to keep their lights burning and must not stray from the right path even when passion convulses the multitude and blinds many amongst those whose duty it is to set an example to others. We are not going to reach

⁸¹ See, Altbatch(2015)

⁸² This is taken from the convocation address by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru on the occasion of the diamond jubilee of the Allahabad University on December 13, 1947. The same has been quoted by K R Narayanan in his book *Images and Insights*.

our goal through crookedness or flirting with evil in the hope that it may lead to good. The right end can never be fully achieved through wrong means.”(Narayanan, 1987) It’s high time that academic community in the world’s largest democracy takes up the responsibility to protect academic freedom.

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