

Academic Freedom in Flux: The Grip of State Apparatuses on Public Universities in India

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Abstract: Universities serve as academic forums where intellectual debates, protests, and discussions of national significance take place. The unbridled quest for knowledge safeguarded by academic freedom is at the core of a university's mission. Academic Freedom fosters critical thinking by allowing for the exchange of diverse ideas. It protects researchers, teachers, and students by ensuring methodological independence, expertise, and institutional autonomy. A comprehensive higher education framework is only attainable with academic freedom. In this context, this paper examines the factors contributing to the absence of academic freedom and autonomy in public universities in India. The paper explores within a structural Marxist framework how the state advances its agenda within public universities by utilising ideological and repressive apparatuses, drawing upon numerous illustrative examples. Additionally, it sheds light on the potential for state apparatuses to serve as tools for counter-revolution, challenging the dominant ideologies.

Keywords: Academic freedom, Institutional Autonomy, State apparatuses, Public Universities

Introduction

Universities are the vanguard of higher education, shaping the landscape of knowledge creation, analysis, and dissemination for centuries. Public universities occupy a vital space within the higher educational system. They function as institutions for disseminating established knowledge and as crucibles for challenging and re-evaluating existing ideas. These institutions foster an environment where traditional notions of reality, truth, and even the fabric of our understanding are questioned, analysed, and potentially reformulated. Public universities are vital in promoting educational equity, facilitating universal access to education, and fostering social advancement through academic opportunities.

Academic freedom is the cornerstone of a thriving intellectual environment within universities. It grants scholars and scientists the liberty to delve into any area of inquiry, unconstrained by external pressures. This freedom extends to disseminating their findings, allowing them to publish and teach their discoveries openly. However, maintaining academic freedom necessitates rigorous scientific methods and peer review, ensuring the objectivity and integrity of research. This commitment to objectivity acts as a shield, protecting universities from undue political or religious interference.

In democratic societies, academic freedom takes on an even broader dimension. It empowers scholars to transcend the walls of academia and actively participate in public discourse, offering their expertise on critical issues. This fosters a culture where universities become nurturing grounds for public intellectuals and independent thinkers who contribute significantly to the cultural landscape. Through academic freedom, universities are not just learning centres but vibrant cultural forces that drive innovation and progress.

Indeed, academic freedom in higher educational institutions faces threats from various quarters worldwide. From government interference and ideological agendas to corporate interests and societal pressures, the autonomy and integrity of academic inquiry are increasingly under siege.

Recently, American universities have witnessed a surge in student-led movements condemning Israel's military actions against Palestine. These movements often centre on protests, rallies, and academic boycotts, aiming to raise awareness about the humanitarian crisis in the region and advocate for Palestinian rights. However, these initiatives have also faced significant backlash, with some university administrations and external groups attempting to curtail academic freedom by suspending protesting students and suppressing discussions and events critical of Israeli policies. Often framed as protecting academic neutrality or preventing disruptions, such actions have been criticised for stifling dissent and limiting open dialogue on important social and political issues. This attempt to restrict academic freedom underscores the complexities surrounding free expression and activism within university settings.

Today, Indian universities are also grappling with similar issues surrounding academic freedom. Vice-chancellors of universities often align their decisions with the union government's directives, compromising universities' autonomy. Instances of intimidation and threats targeting teachers and students engaged in social and political activism have become increasingly common. Moreover, students and faculty members frequently face arrest on charges of sedition, while professors are detained under allegations of affiliations with Maoist groups. The state's interference in curriculum and syllabus development further exacerbates

concerns regarding academic freedom. Additionally, there are accusations of exploiting higher educational institutions to advance the religious and political agendas of the ruling party, highlighting a broader trend of encroachment on academic freedom within universities and other higher educational institutions.

Today, India's higher education sector must meet global standards and achieve recognition among the world's top universities. The policy decisions of the Indian state have greatly disadvantaged public universities, particularly central universities. Public universities serve as microcosms of India, facilitating extensive academic and socio-cultural exchanges of ideas. The central government's policies directly influence central universities' conditions. These institutions often face limitations on their autonomy, with frequent interventions from the government. Instances abound in India where state authorities have encroached upon the independence of central universities.

According to the latest available data from the Global Academic Freedom Index, India's academic freedom index score is 0.38, which places it in the bottom 30% among 179 countries (Kinzelbach et al., 2023,p.3). The index report notes that India's academic freedom score has declined significantly since 2012, when it ranged between 0.60 and 0.70 (Krishnamurthy,2023). The decline in academic freedom raises concerns about the quality and openness of the educational experience. This could hinder critical thinking and debate, essential for a well-rounded education.

Since the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came into power in 2014, the ruling party, in collaboration with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and other Hindutva groups, has increasingly restricted academic freedom in public universities. The freedom of teachers, researchers, and students to freely express themselves and explore ideas has been hampered by persistent and unchallenged government interference.

This ongoing encroachment underscores the authoritarian tendencies becoming increasingly evident within Indian democracy. In this context, the paper explores the idea of the university, academic freedom, and institutional autonomy. The analysis delves into how the state apparatuses, particularly Hindutva forces, have encroached upon the institutional autonomy of public universities, thereby curbing the academic freedom of the academic community.

Methodology

The research employs qualitative, analytical, and evaluative methods, supplemented by historical analysis derived from literature reviews. Secondary sources such as books, articles, newspapers, columns, journals, and online resources have been utilised to investigate significant shifts in higher educational institutions, particularly in public universities, since

2014. The analytical framework focuses on Structural Marxism with two key concepts: Ideological State Apparatuses and Repressive State Apparatuses.

The Idea of University: Brief History

Universities are envisioned as bastions of knowledge, fostering critical thinking and the exchange of diverse ideas. They play a crucial role in shaping democracies by nurturing informed citizens engaged in societal issues. Ideally, universities provide a safe space for unfettered knowledge exploration, free from external pressures (Guru, 2020).

The year 1809 witnessed a pivotal moment in the global landscape of universities with the founding of the University of Berlin by Wilhelm von Humboldt. This institution needed to be more content with simply replicating existing models. Instead, Humboldt envisioned a university that actively fostered a culture of competitive research interests to propel the University of Berlin to new heights, setting a precedent that would influence universities worldwide. Based on his visionary principles, Humboldt's German model sought to realise three key objectives. Firstly, it prioritised contemplation in the educational system at the university level, shifting away from merely absorbing practical skills. Secondly, it emphasised integrating teaching with research, recognising the symbiotic relationship between the two. Lastly, it advocated for the university's autonomy, free from undue influence or control by the state (George, 2020).

Friedrich Schleiermacher, a leading theologian and philosopher, significantly shaped the thinking of Humboldt. In his writings dating back to 1808, Schleiermacher envisioned universities "moving beyond mere vocational training and outlined the purpose of university education as enabling students to become acquainted with the principles of scholarship, so that they gradually develop the capacity to inquire, innovate, and articulate their findings" (Zimmer, 2015,p.241).

The idea of university finds its roots in the work of John Henry Newman. His influential lectures, "The Idea of a University Defined and Illustrated," delivered in Dublin during the 1850s, helped shape this vision. Newman (1852) argued that universities should prioritise a well-rounded liberal education for students. He believed a truly autonomous educational structure would empower students to develop critical thinking skills. This framework would allow them to learn facts and concepts and analyse, compare, distinguish, and ultimately form informed opinions (George, 2020). He suggests and anticipates numerous debates to take place at universities. However, he believed teaching and research required different skill sets and proposed separate institutions. While not entirely dismissive of research, Newman saw a university's primary purpose as

the “diffusion” of existing knowledge, not its “advancement” through original research (Alemu, 2018, p.213).

The university concept flourished in Britain when education was the exclusive domain of a social elite (Yang, 2023). However, the Robbins Report of 1963 recognised the need for change. It sought to democratise access to higher education without dismantling the existing system entirely. This cautious expansion continued until the 1980s, with polytechnics offering a valuable, more vocational alternative pathway (Anderson, 2010).

Later in history, the University of Chicago emerged as a trailblazer in redefining the university system. This emphasis on openness embraced diverse perspectives under rigorous scrutiny and fostered a deep connection between research and training, thus ushering in a new academic culture.

The credit for the modern university, characterised by a focus on research alongside teaching, emerged partly from the German university system. German universities prioritised the rigorous and systematic quest for truth (Stone, 2015). This focus attracted leading scholars, and instead of a purely teacher-led system, Germany fostered a collaborative environment for research.

Institutional Autonomy and Academic Freedom

Institutional autonomy and academic freedom are interrelated concepts indispensable to a university’s educational system. While institutional independence is essential for ensuring academic freedom, it is not the sole factor.

According to Nandini Sundar, “Academic freedom is about the right to do research, teach and study, and express oneself on different platforms, in keeping with academic conventions that are laid down by peers in the field and not on extraneous non-academic grounds” (Sundar,2018,p.55). That means academic freedom goes beyond research and teaching. It includes the freedom of faculty members to participate in the governance of their institutions by academic principles. This includes aspects such as curriculum approval, faculty hiring, and setting graduation requirements for students (Areen, 2009).

Professor Kalven’s report (1967) emphasises the vital role of academic freedom in fostering a vibrant intellectual environment. He argues for five key points: 1) Unrestricted Inquiry: Universities must encourage rigorous questioning and debate by faculty and students. This requires the highest intellectual freedom, achieved through an open and supportive atmosphere. 2) Institutional Neutrality: The University itself should avoid taking political stances. This neutrality safeguards an

environment where faculty and scholars can freely express their views without fear of representing the university's position. 3) Protection of Individual Voices: The University's non-partisanship fosters a safe space for diverse viewpoints. Faculty and students can hold and express their own beliefs without those views being misconstrued as the university's official stance. 4) Safeguarding Academic Freedom: The university's neutrality protects academic freedom from internal and external threats. 5) Limited Exceptions: Despite advocating for a neutral stance, the report acknowledges a solid tendency to discourage universities from engaging in collective actions or issuing official statements on political or social issues

Similarly, as defined by UNESCO, institutional autonomy suggests "a degree of self-governance necessary for effective decision-making by institutes of higher education regarding their academic work standards, management, and related activities" (Sancheti & Pillai,2020,p.1). It encompasses self-governance in all aspects of academic work, including setting quality standards, managing resources, and making administrative decisions. Financial management and control are crucial to this autonomy, allowing universities to operate efficiently and pursue their academic goals.

Institutional autonomy acts as a shield for academic freedom, allowing universities to cultivate an environment where the pursuit of knowledge flourishes through freedom to study, teach, and conduct research (Sundar and Fazili,2020, section III.2). The Kothari Commission on Higher Education in India (1966) offered a clear definition of university autonomy. The commission argued for autonomy in three key areas. This included the freedom to select students, faculty, courses of study, and research themes. The commission also envisioned autonomy operating on three levels: within individual university departments, the university system, and the entire university system with the government.

Universities have the prerogative to assert their institutional academic freedom, which may include decisions on grading systems and the boundaries of permissible discourse in academic settings. However, tensions can arise when academics seek greater involvement in university governance, potentially conflicting with the institution's desire to maintain control over its internal affairs. This dynamic reflects the intricate interplay between institutional autonomy and academic freedom within the university setting. When asserting the right to academic freedom within the university, university councils or faculty committees predominantly composed of professors and scholars typically operate with a considerable degree of autonomy in academic matters. As a result, they are not subject to external interrogation, allowing universities to exercise significant decision-making autonomy in scholarly affairs.

In recent years, governments worldwide have increasingly sought to exert control over universities through legislative measures. This intervention extends to various aspects of academic affairs and governance, including decisions related to promotion, tenure, termination, hiring, and the establishment of academic standards for research and teaching. Furthermore, political appointees are often chosen to serve as academic heads, further blurring the lines between academic autonomy and state influence.

Conceptual Framework and Analysis

Structural Marxism

French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser's neo-Marxist perspective on the state underscores its structural nature within capitalist and fascist frameworks. In his seminal work, 'On the Reproduction of Capital,' Althusser emphasises the significance of both Repressive State Apparatuses (RSA) and Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA) [(Althusser, 2014)]. RSA refers to the institutions and mechanisms through which the state exercises repression and controls society, such as the police, military, and judiciary. ISA refers to the institutions and structures, such as education, religion, media, and culture, through which the dominant ideology of the ruling class is transmitted and reinforced, thus securing the consent of the masses to the existing social order. Althusser argued that the state goes beyond simply using force or violence and instead utilises a complex network of institutions to achieve its goals.

Althusser elucidates how these apparatuses sustain the prevailing dominance over citizens. In the Indian scenario, class-based dynamics are not the primary determinant; instead, understanding the Indian state requires delving into its caste-based, intertwined Hindutva-fascist ideologies. However, while both apparatuses play a role in solidifying the Hindutva socio-political landscape, the Ideological State Apparatus exerts a particularly influential role. Groups advocating Hindutva politics, such as the RSS, BJP, and ABVP, along with other Hindu religious and communal organisations, leverage the Ideological State Apparatus extensively to exert influence and pressure. This apparatus encompasses various institutions like education, media, and cultural bodies through which these groups disseminate their ideology and shape public discourse in alignment with their agenda.

Hindutva forces are consolidating their presence within academic spaces through several strategies. The RSS reportedly prioritises shaping education to strengthen a Hindu nation and promote values rooted in Hinduism (Bhatty & Sundar, 2020). Numerous examples illustrate how governments utilise higher educational institutions and educational bodies as vehicles for propagating their agendas. These include political

appointments of heads of public universities, shaping curricula to reflect Hindutva narratives, establishing university centres dedicated to nationalism, directing research towards nationalist themes, and fostering an ideological bias in academia favouring Hindu nationalism.

Since 2014, the government has appointed individuals aligned with right-wing ideologies or supportive of the ruling party to academic leadership roles, often lacking substantial academic records (Kanungo,2019). Some appointees have promoted anti-Muslim sentiments under the pretence of scholarship, which has also raised concerns (Sundar,2018).

An “Ancient Sciences through Sanskrit” symposium was hosted at the Indian Science Congress in 2015. During this event, some presentations made dubious claims, including assertions regarding aviation in ancient India, among other topics (Chari, 2015). Similarly, in 2018, a meeting between MHRD and UGC with central university vice-chancellors aimed to align research with “national priorities” (Sarkar, 2020, p.23). Subsequently, the Central University of Kerala (CUK) implemented a directive mandating incoming PhD students to select research topics from a list determined under “national priorities.” Per the circular, students are restricted from pursuing “irrelevant” research, limiting independent scholarly exploration’s scope. This raised concerns about the instrumentalisation of knowledge and the stifling of independent inquiry (The Wire, 2019).

An inter-ministerial funding program titled “Scientific Utilization through Research Augmentation Prime Products from Indigenous Cows” (SUTRA-PIC India) was proposed in 2020 with the backing of multiple governmental bodies, including the Ministry of Science & Technology, the Ministry of New and Renewable Energy (MNRE) and the Ministry of Ayush, among others. The program aimed to promote Hindu-oriented subjects or direct research funds toward RSS priorities like cow protection (Sundar and Fazili,2020, section IV, para.3).

Additionally, beyond advancing their agendas, the RSS-affiliated teacher unions have challenged the inclusion of certain books in the university curriculum. The RSS vision of education faces opposition from faculty and students within universities, resulting in a secondary assault on academic freedom, manifested through both physical and legal means (Bhatty & Sundar,2020,p.10).

Further, The BJP’s effort to establish dominance over esteemed universities such as Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), Jadavpur University, and Hyderabad Central University (HCU) has significantly contributed to shaping an ultra-right hyper-nationalist narrative. This narrative seeks to delegitimise academic scholarship by portraying it as irrelevant, misusing taxpayer funds, and biased (Bhatty & Sundar, 2020,p.10). JNU has been

embroiled in controversies surrounding allegations of “anti-national” activities in support of Kashmir. This has created a climate where media outlets, political organisations, and even the government readily label students and professors as “anti-national” for dissent, exacerbating tensions within the academic community. As a result, academic seminars have faced frequent cancellations or refusals for permission, often justified because the proposed topics of the workshops are deemed seditious or the invited speakers are labelled as “anti-national”. These incidents raise serious concerns about the shrinking space for critical thought and free expression in Indian universities.

Ideological State Apparatuses function by disseminating and reinforcing ideology throughout society. They project messages that define acceptable behaviours, roles, and values. These messages permeate everyday practices within the institutions where individuals interact. This constant exposure leads individuals to recognise themselves within the offered identities and internalise the associated values and behaviours. In the current context, the infiltration of right-wing Hindutva ideologies into higher educational institutions serves as a potent illustration of this phenomenon. This process, termed interpellation by Louis Althusser (2014), effectively constructs individuals as “subjects” within the dominant ideology.

Like ISA, The concept of the RSA also finds resonance in the context of academic freedom. The RSA, with its primary function of enforcing the dominant ideology and maintaining social order through coercion and violence, both physical and psychological, manifests in various ways that restrict academic freedom. The RSA comprises institutions with a clear monopoly on violence, such as the police, military, court, and prison. These institutions maintain order through various methods, including arrests, detentions, incarceration, and even torture. They also use the threat of violence to deter dissent. Incidents of arrests, detentions, and even physical assaults on faculty members and students for their critical views exemplify the RSA’s role in curbing academic freedom.

The controversial arrest of Teachers and students who voice dissenting political opinions often face accusations of traitors and subsequent imprisonment in India. The arrest of Delhi University associate professor Hany Babu, linked to the Bhima Koregaon case (The Wire, 2021), and the earlier imprisonment of GN Saibaba, a former professor accused of Maoist links (The Hindu, 2024), served as prime examples for this. Additionally, faculty members have been subjected to physical assaults or arrests for posting critical content on social media platforms such as Facebook, particularly targeting the government, further highlighting a pattern of state repression against academics who express dissent.

The political appointments of vice-chancellors whose ideologies align strongly with Hindutva, rather than a commitment to uphold institutional autonomy, have facilitated the suppression of dissenting voices against the government within universities. Universities increasingly used harsh measures like rustication, expulsion, and withholding scholarships to silence students who challenged the status quo. The tragic case of Rohit Vemula, a Dalit student from HCU who died by suicide after facing such punishments, serves as a stark reminder of the devastating consequences of unchecked caste discrimination and arbitrary university actions. Additionally, organised student protests, addressing various concerns such as fee hikes, the appointment of underqualified teachers, extending library hours, relaxation of hostel curfews for women, access to non-vegetarian food in hostels and canteens, and the freedom to convene public meetings on contentious topics like Kashmir or the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), have been met with harsh repression (Bhatty & Sundar, 2020, p.10).

Public universities have employed tactics like denying leave, stalling promotions, withholding retirement benefits, or even trying to impose service rules meant for government employees on the faculty. These actions could severely restrict faculty's ability to exercise academic freedom. Writing for the press, protesting, and participating in public discourse are all crucial aspects of academic freedom that could be jeopardised (Sundar and Fazili, 2020, section IV, para.2).

In situations like the BJP government's handling of alleged anti-national propaganda in institutions like JNU or accusations of Maoist affiliations, the state could easily justify its actions by framing them as necessary to counter threats to national security and nationalism. This framing can resonate with the general public, who might view anti-nationalism and Maoism as inherently opposed to national security and patriotism. Consequently, such actions may face limited resistance or public scrutiny. This phenomenon can escalate into a "State of Exception," where actions taken by the sovereign are accepted without question under the guise of serving the common good (Schmitt, 2005, pp.1-31). This dynamic extends to academic matters, where fascist agendas can become legitimised without scrutiny.

In Defence of Academic Freedom

For a considerable duration, universities have served as vibrant public spheres. However, State-sponsored vandalism has shattered this tradition. Paradoxically, even citizens collaborating with the state to silence dissent, truth, and resistance find themselves "interpellated" into the orbit of Hindutva ideologies.

Antonio Gramsci posited that consent, shaped by dominant ideologies, is a barrier to societal transformation. Moreover, he argued that state apparatuses could be employed for counter-revolutionary purposes, opposing prevailing ideologies (Harman, 2007). Consequently, the duty to confront the dual threats of neoliberalism and fascism rests with the university student-teacher community. This underscores the critical role of academia in challenging hegemonic narratives, fostering critical inquiry, and advocating for social change. By engaging in collective action and intellectual resistance, teachers and students hold the potential to be powerful catalysts for a more just and equitable society to dismantle oppressive systems within the educational sphere.

It is noteworthy that academic freedom is about more than just classroom learning or teaching. It must encompass the right to challenge the systems that can hinder their access to knowledge. This includes questioning structures based on gender, religion, class or caste that create barriers (Sundar and Fazili, 2020, section III.3, para.3). For students from marginalised backgrounds, especially first-generation learners, navigating these issues is crucial. However, asserting their rights or expressing their identities can be dismissed as “politicising the campus.” Education should equip students with facts and confidence to claim their social mobility and dignity (Sundar and Fazili, 2020, section III.3, para.3). A well-educated citizenry is the bedrock of a thriving democracy. This realisation blurs the lines between traditional classrooms and the real world, creating a holistic learning experience. Student activism and classroom discussions become intertwined aspects of a truly empowering educational experience.

According to Nandini Sundar (2018), academic freedom is most challenged when scholars engage with non-academics or participate in activities outside the classroom. In this “extramural” space, academic freedom resembles the broader concept of freedom of expression. When scholars take their ideas and expertise beyond the classroom and into the public sphere, their right to free expression will most likely be contested.

In the context described, accusations of treason, imprisonment, physical assaults, and arrests of academics and students for expressing dissent all reflect the use of repressive state mechanisms to silence dissenting voices and maintain the existing power structure. This underscores the shrinking space for critical thought and free expression within Indian universities as the state apparatus is deployed to intimidate and control those who challenge the status quo.

In contemporary times, Indian universities comparably experience turbulent politics. The introduction of politically motivated policies or directives and the establishment of ideological training within educational

institutions further underscore the government's instrumentalisation of academia for its ends.

The incidents described in this article highlight the pattern of state repression against academics who express dissent. The threat of violence, both physical and psychological, looms large, creating a chilling effect on the free exchange of ideas within Indian universities and limiting the space for critical inquiry and dissent. This ongoing process of harmonising state apparatuses could significantly threaten the integrity, autonomy, and academic freedom of public universities.

Students and Faculties across public universities in India have been vehemently resisting these detrimental changes. Whether it is arbitrary government interference in appointing vice-chancellors, slashing of scholarships, or assaults on dissent and freedom of speech, student movements unequivocally assert their stance. They demand the preservation of public universities and academic freedom within and outside universities, recognising these institutions as essential for safeguarding their rights, particularly their right to express themselves in the face of threats that seek to silence and disempower them.

Indeed, the scholarly community within universities needs to be able to uphold the fundamental principles of academic freedom and autonomy or the university's idea. As Gopal Guru (2020) suggests, a responsible government, alongside university leadership, should strive to create a secure environment where students and faculties are valued members of society, not potential threats. Excessive state intervention and hostility towards universities harm their core purpose: fostering intellectual growth and social progress.

Academic freedom should be prioritised as a primary concern for the higher education community. Given the international scope of higher education, issues affecting one country invariably have implications for others. Thus, a nuanced understanding of the intricate issues surrounding academic freedom is essential (Altbach, 2007).

Enhancing mechanisms for investigating violations of academic freedom would elevate international awareness of the most serious offences. Therefore, it becomes imperative to develop policy initiatives akin to the "Declaration of Principles on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure" established by the "American Association of University Professors" (AAUP). AAUP's declaration is a cornerstone document outlining the fundamental principles of 'academic freedom and tenure'. It underscores the essence of academic freedom, comprising three basic tenets: "freedom of inquiry and research, freedom of teaching within the university or college, and freedom of extramural utterance and action" (Wilson, 2016,p.2). Such declarations provide a framework for protecting and upholding the

essential values of academic freedom, ensuring that universities remain bastions of free thought, critical inquiry, and intellectual exchange.

Academic freedom is legitimised when the public perceives scholarly inquiry as embodying intellectual qualities such as seriousness, sincerity, and accuracy. The diversity of perspectives on a given subject imposes rigorous academic obligations, ensuring thoroughness and integrity in scholarly pursuits (George, 2020). Hence, the faculty and scholars must be free to engage in academic deliberations, even if they involve disagreement or taking adversarial positions. However, universities themselves can threaten academic freedom, whether due to government control or influence from private partners and research funding agencies. It is essential to safeguard academic freedom from all such potential encroachments to maintain the integrity and independence of scholarly inquiry. Universities, state and government bodies, and the public bear a collective responsibility to uphold the virtues of academic freedom. This commitment is vital for fostering the continual advancement of knowledge and wisdom, ensuring that intellectual inquiry remains uninhibited and robust.

Conclusion

The assault on higher education and the public university system in India poses a grave threat to academic freedom. The global academic freedom index rank and numerous documented attacks on academic freedom raise serious concerns. These include imposing specific curricular content reflecting political ideologies, appointing politically aligned administrators and faculty members, allocating funding and resources to institutions or programs that align with the government's objectives, and suppressing dissenting voices through censorship or disciplinary measures.

The inclination to suppress dissenting voices undermines the academic environment and the principles of democratic citizenship. While universities worldwide strive to foster a free and open exchange of ideas, India stands out for its prevalence of discourse centred on dissent and state repression. The government's policies in higher education, coupled with actions taken against dissenting voices critical of the ruling party's ideology, threaten to deform the very essence of the idea of the university, where open inquiry and critical thinking are fundamental.

The suppression of academic freedom stifles intellectual growth and critical thinking and threatens the foundation of democratic principles by eroding the space for open debate and diverse perspectives. This troubling trend highlights a shift towards authoritarianism, where the state's power to control and silence the opposition is expanding, undermining the

core values of a democratic society. It is incumbent on us to resist these encroachments to uphold the principles of democracy.

The academic community advocates for academic freedom in public education systems that empower universities. It imperils the hard-won gains of previous decades, which must be safeguarded to benefit intellectual discourse and academic culture in India and globally.

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