

Essay

Political Intolerance and Declining Academic Freedom in India



Zoya Hasan



A view of the University Grants Commission building, in New Delhi. File photo: Sushil Kumar Verma/The Hindu.

Academic freedom has gained a sense of urgency in India over the past decade. While there were fleeting attempts in the past, the current rightward shift in politics has placed restraints on knowledge creation in India and across other democracies.

*In this Essay, **Zoya Hasan, Professor Emerita, Centre for Political Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi**, examines and connects the prevailing political intolerance to the spawning of a culture of anti-intellectualism, which have combined to fetter scholarly pursuits in India. This process has manifested itself in predictable forms – many direct, some indirect. Although such censorious and conformist tendencies are from the right-wing playbook, Professor Hasan also points out that there is pushback from the academia and elsewhere.*

Academic freedom is a central issue of concern in contemporary India. It has been one of the focal points of public debates on higher education. Rising government interference, incremental political pressure, and a string of ideological curbs on teaching and research, have had a direct bearing on the functioning of universities and academic institutions. A direct fallout has been an erosion of critical inquiry associated with a vibrant education system.

Academic freedom is the freedom of inquiry, the freedom to teach, to determine who may teach and what may be taught, to research, and to disseminate and publish such findings without interference or censorship from external entities, including the state. This would include the right to dissent and the freedom to deliberate and express opinion – individual and collective – on public issues within and outside institutions of higher learning. In its complete form, the UN’s Special Rapporteur on the right to education places academic freedom as a “fundamental right, not a professional freedom limited to education personnel or traditional institutions such as universities”.¹

Related articles from The Hindu Centre

1. Kumar, K. 2023. *Textbooks and the Curriculum: Understanding the Politics*, July 6.
2. Subramanian, S and Kannabiran, K. 2022. *On Rights and Duties – Two Essays*, February 3.
3. Ahmad, S. A. 2017. *Ramjas and the Purge of Dissent*, March 9.
4. Dhillon, H. 2014. *Doniger and the Struggles of Academic Inquiry*, March 14.

This freedom lies at the heart of the production of knowledge. It promotes critical thinking,

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rationality, scientific temper, and, at the broadest level of intellectual engagement, fosters diversity. Academic development and intellectual debate is difficult without education providing access to different

perspectives, a respect for expertise when one's own knowledge is not enough, and a rich enough language to precisely describe this reality.

Right-wing regimes, irrespective of geographies, adopt familiar strategies. One is the resort to populist rhetoric that is dismissive of intellectual pursuits. Often harking back to claims of past glory, this seamlessly morphs into anti-intellectualism – a fundamental tenet of these regimes. In India, the combined impact of intolerance and anti-intellectualism is evident from the concerted attempts to impose a specific political agenda on higher education institutions.

Corporatised academia and compromised critical thinking

One of the biggest threats comes from the neo-liberal corporatisation of the academy. This, despite what India needs is increased public funding for education; greater autonomy for a more inclusive education; and above all, environments that cultivate capacities to think, talk, and raise questions without the fear of being branded 'anti-national', 'seditious', or any of the other such epithets that have entered the vocabulary of an increasingly polarised political ecosystem.

What India does not require is a public discourse that is devaluing education, expertise, and debate, choking off resources, or placing other impediments to the functioning of centres of learning. This anti-intellectual approach has been strengthened through a variety of methods and tools. It is promoted by fake news and trolls demonising critics and glorifying the ruling dispensation and its ideological proclivities. This results in an obfuscation of truth which can be sustained only through the mainstreaming of unreason and prejudice.

Declining academic freedom

Decline in academic freedom is not unique to India. It is under attack globally, most noticeably in American universities. From issuing new hate speech guidelines to banning encampments, university administrations quelled pro-Palestine protests in the aftermath of the genocide in Gaza, without meeting student demands. Colleges and universities tightened rules around protests, locked campus gates, and handed down stricter punishments after the disruptions and encampments that roiled the country in 2023-24.²

Related articles from The Hindu Group

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1. **Porecha, M. 2024.** [*India slipped on academic freedom index over the past decade: report*](#), October 8.
2. **Rajendran, C. P. 2024.** [*The fading role of universities as conscience of society*](#), January 18.
3. **Bhargava, R. 2019.** [*The perilous state of academic freedom*](#), August 13.

The constraints on academic freedom have now been visibly mainstreamed. The Trump Administration's actions against Columbia University, where students protested in support of Gaza are telling. These measures, which directly impinge on its functional autonomy, if implemented would deprive the university of academic freedom and normalise state interference into teaching, research, and admissions.³

Elsewhere in Hungary, the Central European University was forced to relocate to Vienna in 2019 after the Hungarian government, led by Prime Minister Viktor Orban, passed legislation effectively banning it from operating in Budapest. Similarly, in Türkiye, the aftermath of the 2016 coup attempt resulted in a widespread crackdown on the academia. Thousands of scholars were dismissed and several universities, particularly those perceived as linked to the Gülen movement, were shut down. These moves were widely condemned as attacks on academic freedom – a part of a broader strategy to establish hegemony over institutions of learning. Although the current regime in India has enjoyed uninterrupted power for more than 10 years and holds a larger number of Parliamentary seats than previous ones, in particular the coalition era governments; it is intolerant of criticism and dissent. This intolerance arises from its realisation that despite winning popular mandates in three consecutive elections, its thought

control ‘is not complete’.⁴ Hence, the propensity to further control, which has affected academic institutions as well as the functioning of the executive, judiciary, and media. There is an acceleration of threats against free speech, digital rights, and an uptick in online trolling and harassment.

In the event, academic freedom has faced pressures to an unparalleled extent. This is reflected in the sharp drop in India’s position in the Academic Freedom Index developed by the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute, a global collaborative social science research-oriented data collection programme, headquartered at the Department of Political Science, University of Gothenburg, Sweden, which tracks academic freedom in 179 countries, including India.⁵

Its update for 2022, gave India a score of 0.38 out of 1.⁶ The update for the year 2024, released on March 13, 2025, points to a further slide and places India in a group of countries where academic freedom is “completely restricted”. The latest update, which explored “the political influence of anti-pluralist parties”, concluded that “it is primarily anti-pluralist parties in government that contribute to the decline in academic freedom”.⁷

This decline parallels India’s poor ranking in global press freedom indices too. This trend contrasts sharply with the earlier history of fostering independent inquiry.

Ideological constraints on academic freedom

Over the past decade, the question of academic freedom has acquired urgency because of the rightward shift in Indian politics. Its impact on higher education can be seen in increased state interference, which is openly ideological and partisan. This is not an entirely new trend, academic freedom was curbed before 2014 too, especially in State universities and undergraduate

colleges. Academic norms were not always firmly followed, and teachers were careful in what they taught or wrote. As it began to lose its dominance in the late 1960s, the Indian National Congress had started becoming increasingly unprincipled and interventionist. But even then, there was no serious threat, certainly not on the scale we see now. The Emergency (1975-77) interregnum apart, there are not many instances of seminars being monitored, academic research being scrutinized, or the castigation and suspension of academics for their views. Generally, faculty were free to teach without fear of being disciplined. They were able to do

research, to speak, write and travel freely for conferences, undertake research projects of their choice with government funding and to publish their work without restrictions. Universities occasionally faced allegations of political interference in the recruitment of faculty members, but overall, they enjoyed relative autonomy when it came to internal matters such as the promotion of faculty, among others.⁸

In contrast, the current regime has been active in trying to impose its own views on many academic institutions. Politicisation of heads of institutions, faculty appointments, changes in curricula, and more generally, checks on institutional sovereignty combined with constraints on academic freedom are commonplace.

What this entails was made clear by a letter from the Secretary of the University Grants Commission (UGC) to Vice-Chancellors and Principals of colleges and universities in 2022,⁹ pushing the idea of lectures on the theme, *India: The Mother of Democracy*, on the occasion of Constitution Day to mark the 75th year of *Independence*. In his speech on November 26, the Prime Minister also referred to India as the ‘mother of democracy’ citing examples of the existence of a democratic ethos from Hindu texts and history.¹⁰

Related articles from The Hindu Group Frontline

1. Umar, M. 2024. *Once bastions of dissent, Indian universities now face a suffocating environment of surveillance and censorship*, April 2.
2. Apoorvanand. 2022. *How the UGC creates consensus for the ruling regime*, December 14.
3. Patnaik, P. 2019. *A case to make higher education free*, December 5.

As a consequence, the state is accused of interfering with not only what can be taught,

Although public universities are more directly affected, private universities too either self-censor or work in conformity to avoid running into trouble.

but *how* the said module (in this instance, democracy in ancient India) has to be taught, or restricting what is taught specifically in public universities. Although public

universities are more directly affected, private universities too either self-censor or work in conformity to avoid running into trouble with the government.

The urge to control premier institutes had begun early in the term of this government, currently in its third term of office. This trend can be traced to the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) agitation of February 2016 – barely two years after it won its first public mandate. From its inception, JNU has been home to progressive ideas, questioning the dominant ideologies of power or mainstream nationalism. For this very reason, JNU was chosen to send a message: Dissent is unwelcome. In short, it was an attack on critical thought, to silence voices, as well as to send out a signal to those who do not conform to a specific ideological agenda.¹¹

Besides this, research and doctoral positions have been reduced in numbers in various institutions, and supervisors no longer have control over the subjects researched under their supervision, in some cases with universities providing topics that are explicitly pro-government and promote its political positions and politics. The controversy involving the South Asian University, established in New Delhi by the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC), a regional bloc of eight South Asian countries, underscores this vulnerability: A senior faculty member was compelled to resign in July 2024

**Related articles from The Hindu Group
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1. Jayasankaran, N. and Mony, S. 2022. *What ails higher education in India?*, November 7.
2. Jayan, T. V. 2019. *Academics under attack*, November 29.
3. Ram, V. 2018. *Free speech row: British academia rally around Indian-origin Cambridge lecturer*, April 13.

after a Research Scholar included Noam Chomsky's quote about a political leader in his Doctoral proposal. In March 2025, the scholar reportedly withdrew from the programme.¹² Such episodes raise concerns about the ability of institutions to remain as independent spaces to explore ideas

free from censorship.¹³ The exclusion of several important books from university syllabi, entirely on non-academic grounds, further exemplifies this.

Teachers employed at Central universities could find themselves in trouble if they participate in any protest or speak at an event that questions the government's policy or its functioning. Their salary and pension could be stopped. In July 2018, the JNU administration issued show cause notices to 48 faculty members for participating in a protest against the Vice-Chancellor's policies. The notices invoked the Union government's Central Civil Services Conduct Rules, prohibiting government servants from making anti-government statements or joining political associations. JNU's Teachers Association pointed out that imposing such rules on teachers would take away their "freedom to dissent". Many of them who retired soon thereafter were denied pension and other benefits. They had to knock on the doors of the court to get justice. Many are still awaiting justice.

Scrutinising academic deliberations

Guidelines by the Union Ministry of Education in 2021 had laid out that all online academic

Related External Resources

1. Kinzelbach, K. et.al. 2025. *Academic Freedom Index*, FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg and V-Dem Institute. 2025, March 13
2. United Nations General Assembly, 2024. *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the right to education*, Human Rights Commission, June 27.

events or conferences taking place at or with the participation of government-funded institutions would have to be subject to prior approval and registered with the Ministry of External Affairs. These meetings could not discuss internal affairs, sensitive issues, or matters of national security. The directive was later withdrawn

following a backlash from scientists and academics.

Very often university administrations have acted *post hoc* against organisers, as in the case of seminars in Ramjas College, Delhi University and other institutions in Jodhpur, Bhopal, Lucknow, and so on. Since November 2023, IIT-Bombay has prohibited teachers and students from organising events that 'may be viewed as political' without permission. Cancellations also

happen when affiliate organisations of the Hindu right protest against events in an aggressive and militant manner.¹⁴

The *Times Higher Education Supplement* (London) reported that in some cases academics were given the sense that ‘we are noting who from which institutions’ are indulging in actions such as signing petitions. They were called into meetings with university officials after publicly criticising government policies. One academic who was called for such a meeting said administrators gave her the ‘impression’ she should be careful about what causes she is seen to support.

What happened to a teacher in Kolhapur¹⁵ in 2013 – when she pointed out to first year undergraduates that odious crimes could be committed by persons from any religion or community – illustrates the nexus between intolerance and anti-intellectualism. This nexus took a harmful turn when a doctored video made the rounds. She was asked to apologise, a demand she refused and, according to reports, was then “forced to work from home until the situation calmed down”.¹⁶ Such occurrences negate the essential concept of universities as autonomous spaces, where freedom of expression, exploration of ideas are an integral part of the academic process.¹⁷

In the same vein, student activism, within universities, has faced challenges. Policies limiting student protests have been implemented in institutions like JNU and SAU. The JNU has restricted protests near academic buildings, while the SAU required students to take a pledge against participating in protests. Politically unaffiliated students and intellectuals in general, and Muslims in particular, who either extended support to, or protested against, the abrogation of Article 370 (which provided autonomous status to Jammu and Kashmir) and the new Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019 (which excludes Muslims from neighbouring countries while fast-tracking citizenship for other such minorities) were accused of indulging in ‘anti-national’ activities, arrested, and detained without trial. In October 2023, more than 200 students from the JNU, the Jamia Millia Islamia, and the University of Delhi were detained by the police for a pro-Palestine protest outside the Israeli embassy.

Structural restraints

Public universities in India provide large numbers of people from varied socio-economic backgrounds access to institutions of higher learning.¹⁸ Thanks to public universities, higher education enrolment has increased, and thanks to reservations the class, caste, and gender profile of students has changed, it is much more heterogeneous and diversified than it was decades ago. These institutions constitute the only sites where all major social groups interact in more or less egalitarian conditions. Social diversity has also brought in new strands of thought to university campuses.

However, there is a new emphasis on private education.¹⁹ Far from increasing funding of public universities, there has been a general decline in higher education funding. This decline has been accompanied by a rise in private institutions, most of which offer education in only a few disciplines – for instance, engineering, medicine, and management. Also, private universities, by and large, exclude those belonging to non-affluent households.

Neo-liberalisation in lockstep with Hindutva

The rise and expansion of economic liberalisation and majoritarian politics is likely to change the trajectory of Indian education. The direction that higher education is now slated to take represents the convergence of the interests of neo-liberalism and Hindutva. The New Education Policy (NEP) will reinforce these trends. It envisages significant privatisation of education, which will clearly make it more expensive, well beyond the pockets of the socially and economically deprived.²⁰

The report of the Parliamentary Standing Committee of the Ministry of Education, submitted in January 2025, flagged the government's retreat from public education and the growing privatisation of higher education. It blamed the 'increasing influence' of neo-liberal policies for the rise in appointing 'temporary' teachers in universities across the country and contractual jobs.²¹ Most appointments to academic posts in institutions, especially those under the Union Government, have a higher amount of contractual workforce. The shift towards casual,

short-term contracts has been driven by the ‘government’s retreat from public education and the increasing influence of neo-liberal policies’.

The Standing Committee’s report also expressed concern that the draft Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) Bill – that seeks to replace the UGC as a single regulator – will remove state control and ‘would indirectly fuel privatisation especially in rural areas.’²² An important consequence of this will be greater central control over higher education. The syllabi will be centrally prepared, with States adding only dashes of local flavour, and admission being determined by a centrally administered entrance test.

Eroding democratic spaces

My own university, the JNU, was a pioneer in academic autonomy. It was built as a self-regulating university with a high level of democratic participation of teachers and students at every level, starting with the student-faculty committee in every Centre. What came out of this participative democratic structure was that consensus was built within the university community from Centres to the School and up to the University. But alas the University has been centralised to the detriment of decentralised democratic processes.²³

The structural problems of academic freedom have been exacerbated with important academic and administrative posts being filled with people who are ideologically close to the ruling party. These are not the first instances of appointment of persons with proximity to ruling parties. Academic appointments before 2014 were sometimes politicised. But in the past those appointed at the behest of the government had a semblance of professional attainment to their credit, whereas now the record of many appointments displays a lack of academic credentials or achievement.

Education belongs to the Concurrent List of the Constitution, but contrary to this structure, the current trend represents a drive towards central control. This is affecting the selection of Vice Chancellors, recruitment of faculty, and several other functions performed by universities. The UGC’s draft regulations, 2025, for the appointment and promotion of teachers and academic staff

vividly underline the centralising drive.²⁴ It has sparked considerable debate and opposition mainly because of its disregard of constitutional requirements and role of States.²⁵

The new selection process for Vice-Chancellors is a case in point.²⁶ The Search cum Selection Committee is to consist of three members: nominees of the Visitor/Chancellor, who is the President/Governor or Lieutenant Governor, the UGC Chair, and the university's apex body or Syndicate. The Chair of this Committee, who used to be a nominee of the State government, has been changed to the nominee of the Visitor/Chancellor. The role of the State government has been completely downsized as two of the three members of the Committee, including the Chair, are effectively nominees of the Union Government.

Moreover, the Guidelines allow people with no academic experience to head Universities. Vice-Chancellors, therefore, need not necessarily be distinguished academics, opening up space for political appointees of the Union Government even if they are from outside the academic domain. Neither universities themselves nor State governments, which almost entirely fund and support State universities, have any role in the process. This system effectively ensures the Union government's total control over appointments of Vice-Chancellors. This will lead to packing of State Universities with political favourites ready to follow the Centre's agenda at the expense of State and university autonomy.

De-emphasising Humanities and Social Sciences

Another manifestation of the anti-intellectual bias is the deliberate under-emphasis on Humanities and Social Sciences. The idea is to downgrade the Social Sciences and Humanities to inconsequential subjects.²⁷ Their significance has been reduced partly because they are seen as less useful in a world where economic calculations matter most, but also because they are seen to be disciplines that open the mind and encourage students and teachers to think critically and, therefore, more trouble for university administrations. Both these groups of disciplines provide crucial intellectual space for reflection and concern for the lives and interests of others that simply cannot be provided by an education system that equips graduates only with technical

skills that have immediate economic application. As the philosopher, Martha Nussbaum, points out in *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*:

“By de-emphasizing the liberal arts, we are devaluing and weakening democratic citizenship...A healthy democratic society needs independent-minded and creative individuals, who have the character and confidence to resist arbitrary authority and hierarchical attitudes.”²⁸

Re-scripting the past

Unlike the Social Sciences, History does not suffer from neglect under this government. Rewriting history is an essential element of the plan to impose a singular ideology in academic institutions so as to make Indians

understand their Vedic heritage, replacing the study of India’s syncretic history with mythology and the rich diversity of Indian philosophy with

The right to differ and express dissenting views, which is at the core not just of democracy but of knowledge production itself, gets endangered.

Hindu doctrines. The emphasis on Hindu nationalism has promoted a narrow and exclusivist view of Indian history and culture which undermines the diversity of Indian society.²⁹ It marks a rejection of India’s cultural and political plurality.

Hindu consolidation is the main objective of the reconstruction of history in stark contrast to earlier writing of Indian history, for example, which as U.S. historian David Kopf states, was done in a way “to preclude even the slightest nationalist bigotry and distortion”.³⁰ Currently there is an attempt to produce history by administrative fiat to reflect a view of history gleaned from mythology and religious texts, and by appropriating conservative icons from the nationalist pantheon to compensate for its absence from the freedom struggle.³¹

Finally, the decline in academic freedom impacts democracy itself. The right to differ and express dissenting views, which is at the core not just of democracy but of knowledge production itself, gets endangered.³² These restrictions reflect and reinforce a broader decline in free speech and expression in recent years.

Democracy is not merely about protecting voting rights and conducting elections. While these are important, a functioning democracy requires free flow of information, unfettered inquiry, and a meaningful public discourse, which directly impact the future of knowledge and progress. Many of these features are under threat with serious consequences for the autonomy of universities and research institutions.

Pushback against anti-intellectualism

Despite enormous pressures, some of which have been discussed in this Essay, the academic community in India has not entirely fallen in line. Although some academics find it convenient to toe a line that they were unable to endorse in public earlier, there are many more who have not succumbed to the pressures of majoritarian politics or abjured subjects that the majoritarian and authoritarian regime find inconvenient.

This pushback takes forms ranging from statements, either collective or in individual capacities, against acts by the state that they find unacceptable. What is also noteworthy is that such protests from scholars and intellectuals are not confined to causes that have a direct bearing on their jobs but extend to those that disturb the constitutional ethos of India.³³ Pushback was evident when some scholars in a private university on the outskirts of Delhi chose to resign as a sign of dissent against incursions into academic freedom.³⁴ Despite the low visibility they get, there is still a great deal of dissent and criticism emanating from the academia.

(This Essay is based on the author's Keynote Address, *Democracy and Academic Freedom in India*, delivered at Loyola College, Chennai, on February 20, 2025.)

Also by the Author

1. [Media Matters: Manufacturing Dissent: The Media and the 2014 Indian Election](#), April 2, 2014.
2. [Women in Politics: Towards a gender-just society](#), April 1, 2013.

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Endnotes:

[All URLs were last accessed on March 12, 2025]

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[<https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/56/58>].

2. Taft, I. 2024. [‘How Universities Cracked Down on Pro-Palestinian Activism’](#), *New York Times*, November 25. [<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/11/25/us/university-crackdowns-protests-israel-hamas-war.html>].

3. On March 7, the Trump Administration cancelled “approximately \$400 million in federal grants and contracts” to Columbia University citing “continued inaction” despite “persistent harassment of Jewish students.” **Source:** U.S. Department of Education. 2025. [DOJ, HHS, ED, and GSA Announce Initial Cancellation of Grants and Contracts to Columbia University Worth \\$400 Million](#). [<https://www.ed.gov/about/news/press-release/doj-hhs-ed-and-gsa-announce-initial-cancellation-of-grants-and-contracts-columbia-university-worth-400-million>].

This was followed by a seven-day deadline issued through a letter on March 13, asking Columbia to comply with nine pre-conditions impinging on its administrative and functional autonomy for “formal negotiations” on federal funding to the University. The first of these directed Columbia to resort to “expulsion or multi-year suspension” of pro-Palestine protestors. Others include placing the Middle East, South Asian, and African Studies department under “academic receivership for a minimum of five years”, and “comprehensive admissions reform.” **Source:** General Services Administration, et.al. 2025. [Letter outlining immediate next steps a precondition for formal negotiations regarding Columbia University’s continued financial relationship with the United States government](#), March 13. **Source:** *New York*

Times. [<https://static01.nyt.com/newsgraphics/documenttools/6d3c124d8e20212d/85dec154-full.pdf>].

For its part, Columbia's administration reportedly "expelled or suspended some students" **Source: Offenhartz, J. 2025. Columbia University Expels Some Students Who Seized Building Last Year**, *Associated Press*, in *Time*, March 14. A day after the March 13 letter to its Interim President and Board of Trustees. [<https://time.com/7268085/columbia-university-expels-student-protestors-gaza-palestine-israel/>].

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5. The Academic Freedom Index developed by the V-Dem Institute has identified the following academic freedom indicators: the freedom to research and teach, the freedom of academic exchange and dissemination, the institutional autonomy of universities, and campus integrity, and the freedom of academic and cultural expression.

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