

Autonomy in Higher Education, a Trojan Horse for Privatisation

Sunday 8 April 2018, by [BHATTACHARYA Debaditya](#), [RAMDEV Rina](#) (Date first published: 23 March 2018).

Is the Indian government really so short of funds that it feels forced to abandon its constitutional pledge to education?

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At a time when public universities across the country are on the boil – at the behest of ruling-party cut-outs masquerading as vice-chancellors – the human resource development minister's announcement of “complete autonomy” for 62 higher education institutions should have been a welcome move. One would expect that the charmed word – “autonomy” – stands for an attempt at self-correction, and might in fact signal the receding shadow of ideological/state control over public-funded higher education.

Following what was hailed as a “historic” decision, it was easy to suppose that the sustained resistance to forms of political propaganda and provocation within academic spaces had finally borne fruit. That the martyrdom of Rohith Vemula or the disappearance of Najeeb might – and an impending election – had finally taught the nation a lesson in non-interference. The mainstream media convinced us that ‘autonomy’ was demanded and eventually achieved, even if for a select few – but with a promise and a word of encouragement from the minister for all those limping behind by inches or yards.

Autonomy as freedom

Why, then, do many of us in academia believe this autonomy is a lie? Put very simply, the answer is that autonomy is meaningless without ‘academic freedom’. But what is the substantive content of such freedom? How does it argue for the continuing relevance of independent thinking within institutional infrastructures funded and maintained by the state? A public institution of education, we passionately believe, is committed to nurturing the constitutional ideals of scientific temper and a spirit of inquiry. By facilitating access to quality instruction at low costs, such an institution preserves ‘autonomy’ as the ground for a democratic training of the imagination.

By refusing to consign the poor and the historically marginalised to a future of intellectual damage, the practice of freedom is produced not as a fantasy but as a right. It calls upon all of us, labouring through the everyday routines of a life of the mind, to shun the ease of tutored truths and

unquestioned certainties. It forces us to question the given, encounter the unknown, unsettle the comfortable and unnerve the complacent – through a relentless effort of the critical faculty of thought. Autonomy, phrased otherwise, is about reclaiming the right to think as the fundamental right to democratic citizenship.

An autonomous institution is expected to not only steer clear of the electoral anxieties of the state, but also the demands of the market. Neither the political powers that be nor the possible configurations of profit can drive the limits of intellectual labour. Autonomy thus means the pursuit of knowledge free from considerations of benefit – whether in numerical or material terms.

Academic autonomy amounts to a non-commissioning of research by the state (as was evidenced in the Gujarat government's listing of central schemes as model Ph.D topics, or Lucknow University's recent B.Com. question papers urging praise to state policies), as well as by the market (in the forging of ties between corporate industry and academic departments for patents and licenses). The truly 'autonomous' public university is one where students and teachers are not labelled 'anti-national' for critiquing state policy, accused of intellectual terrorism for refusing to let themselves be mowed into patriotic censure, rendered vulnerable to arbitrary 'codes of conduct' for little daily acts of truth-telling.

The 'other' meaning

How does the "historic" declaration of March 20, made public by HRD minister Prakash Javadekar himself, measure against such an idea of 'autonomy'? Do the Gazette notifications, published a little over a month ago and titled 'UGC (Categorization of Universities for Grant of Graded Autonomy) Regulations 2018' [henceforth, GGA] and 'Conferment of Autonomous Status Upon Colleges) Regulations 2018' [henceforth, ASC], bear any resemblance to the 'autonomy' as imagined above?

On the contrary, the letter of these regulations uses the ruse of 'autonomy' to insist on a policy of withholding state funding for the expansion of 'quality' higher education. Evidence of 'excellence' is taken to be potentially self-generating in terms of both revenue and resources – and therefore, the charge of 'good' public education is left to fend for itself. The 'performance' of the best universities – named by either domestic or international ranking frameworks – is made to rest on fantasies of wider access via greater private capital inflows.

Astonishingly enough, the best public universities thus 'autonomised' are also the ones that have visibly courted controversy in the past few years and invoked the wrath of legislators – namely, JNU, Jadavpur University, University of Hyderabad, Aligarh Muslim University, Banaras Hindu University, Panjab University and TISS-Mumbai. The order of administrative-financial 'autonomy' that enlists these 62 institutions is thus fundamentally different from the practice of freedom that marked the historical destiny of the university. In fact, one may discern a revenge motive in the government's linking of higher educational opportunities with a stock market ethic of institutional 'branding' and its potential to inspire investor confidence.

A stealthy insertion

The timing of the release of these regulations further confirms the mischievous play with 'autonomy' that they were designed to unleash.

Published on February 12, 2018, the regulations that were to effectively change the course of Indian higher education went largely unnoticed. This was because they consciously came in the wake of

another UGC Draft Regulation seeking public feedback on the long-contentious issue of faculty service conditions. The soliciting of public response – which has hardly ever been the *modus operandi* of UGC legislations – threw the academic community into a sudden state of urgency, and in the climate of distraction thus manufactured the ‘autonomy’ regulations stealthily found their way into the Gazette.

In the course of the two documents a benign status quoism with regard to grants and funds continuing – “as being done before” (ASC, Clause 3.10) – is invoked time and again to allay fears of reduced funding Trojaning itself on the ‘gift’ of autonomy. And yet, in so far as any “new course/programme/department/school/centre” (GGA, Clause 4.2) may now be opened at will, this is conditional on “no demand for fund [being] made from the government”. A critical unpacking of the regulations hence reveals the model of privatisation that they seamlessly fit into.

Funding ‘choice’ and ‘change’

The grandest of autonomy’s promises is in the freedom held out to universities/colleges to, “restructure, redesign and prescribe” (ASC, Clause 3.1) their syllabi and programmes of study. And yet an unwillingness to give up complete bureaucratic control is obvious in the caveat that cautions against formulating new courses outside of the UGC’s specified nomenclature (Clause 3.2). For instance, a contending structure like semesterisation imposed upon universities would remain non-negotiable, even as the fate of the CBCS (choice-based credit system) and its common syllabi, now mandated as national policy across universities, remains uncertain.

In addition, universities/colleges can start diploma and certificate courses that could be skill based, opening up the possibility of a vocationalisation of higher education already underwritten in the neoliberal present and its futures (GGA, Clause 4.4). Instituting self-financed short-term courses would further feed into and perpetuate the contractualisation of a workforce that can be hired and fired at the will of a capricious administration. There is also a provision to create off-campus centres without approval from the UGC, which could double up as franchisee models instituted for revenue generation. (Clause 4.3) Add to these a new age installation industry harnessed by academic institutions – “research parks, incubation centres, university society linkage centres, in self-financing mode” (Clause 4.5) – and we have a complete overhaul of the university sector as a pilot public-private partnership (PPP) scheme.

Even as the autonomy regulations encourage the inception of new programmes and courses, they also lay out in no uncertain terms the resolute cap that remains on existing funding. This would, in turn, create an unsettling of the university/college’s mode of fund disbursement across departments and their courses. With extra programmes and the staff strength needed against these, institutions would face enormous pressure to meet both infrastructural as well as human resource demands. The easiest recourse that aids a self-financing model is typically the higher fee structure forced upon the student – whereby, colleges are now empowered to “fix fees of the courses at their own level” (ASC, Clause 3.7).

The neoliberal logic of ‘Make in India’ is clearly amenable to a restructuring of the university in the quota inclusions of foreign faculty and students, granted through a 20% excess over existing sanctioned strength (GGA, Clauses 4.6, 4.7). In this, two dangerous shifts would find legitimacy. The entry of foreign students through a variable higher fee in the first place, which signals a new capitation fee model of backdoor admissions. And the provision of incentivised salaries to foreign faculty, with no objective basis for salary structuring outside the shadowy zone of negotiation, which would usher in a cut-throat, competitive ethic mounted on profound disparities.

Autonomy in history

The order of administrative-financial 'autonomy' propounded by these regulations, in stark contrast to the mounting demand for academic 'autonomy', is not without precedent in the history of educational reform.

It can be traced back to the Ambani-Birla Report of 2000 - championed by the previous NDA government at the Centre - which vehemently argued for a "user-pay" principle in funding higher education. The policy directions charted in the report were clearly in favour of opening up the higher education market to trade interests and competitive bidding, thus unhinging the idea of the public university from any commitment to public interest or social justice.

This was only taken further by successive UPA governments to stress on the "need-blind" transformation of the higher education sector - as enshrined in the National Knowledge Commission reports (2006-2009). It was through a dispensing with state subsidies for tertiary education that 'autonomy' was thought possible, and the mandate of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) taken forward. The latter's insistence on a withdrawal of state support to facilitate the entry of multinational private players as education-providers was balanced by a demand for lesser regulatory interference - and thus more financial autonomy within university governance.

The current move accurately plays unto this long-standing demand by drastically reducing the regulatory purview of the UGC and restricting its powers of financial disbursement. The Subramanian Committee Report (*Draft National Education Policy*) 2016 reiterates this point, by proposing a clipping of the UGC's overarching jurisdiction - both in terms of maintenance of standards and provision of finances. The recent setting up of the Higher Education Financing Agency (HEFA) to aid a policy move from the subsidy paradigm to a loan-assistance model in funding universities is also significant in this regard. Insofar as it urges institutions to apply for loans in exchange of revenue deposits - to be subsequently serviced through increased internal extortions from students or research/consulting projects - HEFA already signalled a step towards making public universities self-reliant and 'autonomous'.

The reality, or the way forward

In all this debate around the meaning of 'autonomy' and its now-achieved distortions, there remains a question that lingers. Is the Indian government really so short of funds that it feels forced to abandon its constitutional pledge to education? Is the taxpayer conscience, so repulsed by the idea of funding public universities, aware of the treacherous statistics that puncture its self-righteous anger? The answer borders on a near-seditious act of 'revelation': as per the CAG reports tabled in parliament between 2016 and 2017, the entire tax collection of Rs 83,497 crore under the secondary and higher education cess (levied since 2006-07) lies unspent. Furthermore, a mere 7.73% of the taxpayer money accrued under the research and development cess (from 1996 to 2017) has been utilised thus far.

With such wealth languishing in the state exchequer for a sector that claims to be impoverished, Javadekar's 'autonomy' cannot but be a recipe for mass destruction of the nation's futures. There's no better time than now to look the gift horse in the mouth and expose every malafide intent that 'autonomy' carries in its murky trail.

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P.S.

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