

Ramachandra Guha: How political meddling is hurting academic freedom in Indian universities

Saturday 15 October 2022, by [GUHA Ramachandra](#) (Date first published: 9 October 2022).

The state is seeking systematically - and often ruthlessly - to control, manipulate and direct how students and professors on campuses act and think.

At a conference last month, I met the director of one of our prestigious Indian Institutes of Technology. Himself a fine scientist and excellent administrator, he told me that no fewer than eight IITs were currently without directors. In each case, the term of the previous incumbent had ended, and though a search committee had been constituted, in no case had the recommended candidate's name been approved by the government of India. This was because the personal and intellectual trajectories of the eight chosen candidates were apparently being vetted by "Nagpur" before they could be cleared.

That darkly meaningful word, "Nagpur", was used by this IIT director in a spirit of sarcasm. However, underlying all that he said was a sense of sadness. The scientist knew, from his vast experience in the public university system, that political meddling with higher education had not begun with the Narendra Modi government. Past regimes had also played favourites, with ministers of education often subtly (or not so subtly) directing search committees to pick this or that person as the vice-chancellor of one of the Central universities or as a senior official of the University Grants Commission.

However, for the first time, such interference had now reached the portals of the prestigious Indian Institutes of Technology and of the Indian Institutes of Management as well. No longer were scientific expertise and administrative experience the sole criteria in choosing the directors of IITs and IIMs; rather, ideological alignment with the sangh parivar was also sought for.

Anti-intellectual government

In an essay published in 2015, I had described the government headed by Narendra Modi as the "most anti-intellectual" this country had seen. This judgment was impressionistic, based on statements made by leading Bharatiya Janata Party politicians (including the prime minister) in their first few months in office, yet it has been resoundingly confirmed by the events of the subsequent seven years. What is being done with our IITs and IIMs is symptomatic of a much wider trend, whereby the state seeks systematically - and often ruthlessly - to control, manipulate and direct how students and professors in Indian universities act and think. Free thought and open debate are discouraged and sometimes even prohibited. Instead, conformity to the ideological and political agenda of the prime minister and the ruling party is asked for.

The attacks on intellectual freedom in recent years by the Indian state as well as by political activists have been documented in a set of tables compiled by the faculty and students of the department of

sociology in Delhi University. These scholars have tabulated their findings across six categories, as explained below.

Table 1 contains cases of books which have been withdrawn from university syllabi or even from public distribution because of perceived insults to the dogmas and prejudices of a particular religious group. The authors thus officially “cancelled” include the great American Indologist, Wendy Doniger, and the acclaimed Bengali novelist, Mahasweta Devi.

The statement from [@UnivofDelhi](#) over the changes in English syllabus, where two Tamil Dalit feminist writers were removed and *Draupadi* story by Mahashweta Devi was also removed. pic.twitter.com/hCxxYK7fMB

— Shradha Chettri (@Shrads_chettri) [August 26, 2021](#)

Table 2 lists cases where seminars organised by students or faculty members have either been cancelled by the authorities or disrupted by political agitators, these usually from the Hindu Right. This table has as many as 69 incidents of this kind. They include, among others, the screening of a film by the award-winning documentary film-maker, Anand Patwardhan, in Pune in December 2014; a talk by the sociologist, Professor MN Panini, at the Central University in Jharkhand in February 2016 (cancelled on the grounds that the professor, though himself scrupulously non-political, had once taught at the Jawaharlal Nehru University); a talk in Chandigarh in January 2018 on Gandhi and communal harmony by Professor Apoorvanand of Delhi University (disrupted by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh’s student wing, the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad); a Women’s Day event in Delhi University in March 2021, also disrupted by the ABVP, which is a serial (and almost always unpunished) offender in cases such as these.

Table 3 lists cases of criminal charges being brought against faculty and students of public universities for statements they made which the State considered defamatory or even “anti-national”. The thirty-seven instances here cover the usual issues about which the current regime is particularly paranoid: Kashmir, images of Hindu gods, the Citizenship (Amendment) Act and so on.

Table 4 documents 39 separate instances of physical attacks against faculty and students of Indian universities. They include the death of a professor in Ujjain as a result of injuries suffered after being assaulted by right-wing students; the murder of the widely respected scholar, Professor MM Kalburgi, in Dharwad in 2015; the boycott and forced transfer of a Sanskrit teacher in the Banaras Hindu University because he was a Muslim and so on.

Pressure on professors

Table 5 lists cases where professors have not been allowed to take up teaching jobs to which they had been appointed as well as cases where scholars had to forcibly resign because of political pressure. (Full disclosure: among the two dozen instances in this category is one involving the present writer, who was unable to take up a position at Ahmedabad University because of pressure put on the governing body by the BJP and the ABVP).

Table 6, the final one in this series, enumerates instances of foreign scholars stopped from entering India or speaking at academic conferences in India. The compilers comment that “this list is the least comprehensive since foreign academics are reluctant to speak about their visa problems for fear of being denied a visa in future. There have also been several incidents of racism against African students which we have not listed here. Overall, the current atmosphere is not welcoming for foreign scholars.”

For those who wish to consult these tables in their entirety, they are available online [here](#).

Also valuable in this regard is a status report on academic freedom in the country, written by Professor Nandini Sundar and published in the excellent website, [The India Forum](#).

American Anthropological Association [@AmericanAnthro](#) calls on India to remove “no exit/entry” list in [#Kashmir](#), which severely limits academic freedom [#StandWithKashmir](#)

Link here —> <https://t.co/KO14myjxh4> pic.twitter.com/8DiVfI9kXf

— □ Haley Duschinski (@AnthroHaley) [November 23, 2019](#)

In their documentation of threats to academic freedom, the sociologists of Delhi University have tried to be as comprehensive as possible. As well as non-partisan. The cases they document have sometimes involved non-BJP regimes (as when Mamata Banerjee’s government in West Bengal disgraced itself by harassing a Jadavpur University faculty for publishing a cartoon of the chief minister). However, governments run by the BJP, in the states as well as the Centre, bear a disproportionate share of the blame for not assuring academic freedom, whether acting on their own or in concert with the angry and abusive young men of the ABVP.

This year marks the centenary of my *alma mater*, the University of Delhi. I owe to that university my own interest in critical thinking and the exchange of ideas. After five years in Delhi University, I went on to do a PhD in an institute funded by the Central government in Calcutta. In later years, I worked in four different public institutions in Bangalore, Calcutta, and New Delhi. As someone whose life and career have been so substantially shaped by the Indian university system, I view these intensifying attacks on academic freedom with anguish and dismay.

While public universities have borne the brunt of this assault, private universities have not been immune either. Fearful of retribution from ruling party politicians, they too have sought to curb the intellectual freedom of their faculty. One private university monitors and censors the social media postings of its staff. The vice-chancellor of another cultivates close ties with the leaders of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. These attempts to buy peace take one down a slippery slope, which leads ultimately to capitulation.

I have now known the Indian university for close to 50 years – as, successively, a student, researcher, teacher and observer. I have never known it to be as fragile, as burdened by threats internal and external, as it is now. The atmosphere is far less conducive to independent thinking, to the pursuit of teaching and original research, than at any time since the Emergency. In accounting for this state of affairs, one cannot lay all the blame on the State, or even on Indian politicians and their thuggish ways.

Also culpable are the administrators of the universities themselves, those vice-chancellors and directors who have succumbed too easily to threats from the state and, even more distressingly, from goons. The renewal of the Indian university, therefore, critically depends on a stiffening of the spines of those mandated to run it.

Ramachandra Guha

[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and/or French.

P.S.

This article first appeared on [The Telegraph](#).

Scroll.in

<https://scroll.in/article/1034539/ramachandra-guha-how-political-meddling-is-hurting-academic-freedom-in-indian-universities>