

Academic freedom stifled

A glimpse at the vanishing academic freedom in India

India's right-wing nationalist government has held the country's academic freedom hostage, as evidenced by an unprecedented increase in the incarceration of scholars, instigation of violence at educational campuses, internet shutdowns, censorship, and relentless peddling of pseudoscience since it came to power. With a severe drop in the academic freedom index over the last seven years, the atmosphere in the country's institutions, which were once renowned for free debate and critical thinking, is now stifled.



In January 2015, about eight months after emphatically winning the general election, Prime Minister Narendra Modi delivered his first address at the 102nd Indian Science Congress. The annual event, which brings together India's leading scientists and researchers, is organized by the Indian Science Congress Association (ISCA). »Our institutions of research must become more broad-based. Our universities must have a higher degree of academic freedom and autonomy,«¹ declared Modi in his address. The attendees cheered at these words and hoped for brighter days to come in academia. After all, Modi projected himself as the harbinger of ›Acche Din‹ (or ›better days‹) for the country if he was elected to power.

If the happenings of the five-day event were any sign of things to come, it was anybody's guess as to where the current government stood in its scientific understanding. The uneasy juxtaposition of India's successful mission to Mars with tales about extra-terrestrial flight in the second millennium BCE left the public puzzled. Government ministers and sundry officials urged young researchers to mine ancient religious texts for scientific knowledge that could help humanity today.

In recent years, scientific and academic fora such as the Science Congress are being turned into platforms for propagating jingoism. Cultural fables are being cited as evidence of incredible scientific prowess in ancient India. A case in point was Modi citing² the example of Lord Ganesha, a Hindu deity depicted as half-man and half-elephant, as evidence of India's genius in genetics and cosmetic surgery, in an address to medical doctors. While a section of scientists and acade-

mics have continuously called out these remarks, the absurd claims and unscientific approach have significantly damaged the scientific temper in the country.

Narendra Modi leads the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which traces its roots to an organization known as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). The RSS was founded as a right-wing paramilitary organization in 1925 and is committed to Hindutva (literally Hinduness, but generally translated as Hindu nationalism). It was inspired by interwar European fascist groups, modelling itself on their volunteer corps, uniforms, rallies and rhetoric. The RSS has spawned several organizations that cater to diverse aspects of social life, including a religious body, a student wing, schools and trade unions. Perhaps its most successful programme has been establishing a vast network of branches across the country where its cadres conduct meetings to disseminate ideological training. In power, the BJP has facilitated the RSS's long-term goal of entrenching its people across all institutions of public life, who can then be relied upon to promote its vision of building a Hindu nation.

A victim of this drive has been India's diverse academic edifice. Political loyalty and a background in the RSS, rather than competence or intellectual accomplishment, have become the criteria for appointments of University Vice-Chancellors, Heads of Department and Professors. By villainizing professors, academicians and students favouring a different political opinion, the Hindu nationalist regime has successfully impregnated the academic world with its toxic narrative. Protests, a democratic right of citizens in the country granted by the constitution, are labelled ›anti-national‹.

Students raising their voice against repressive and oppressive national policies have been hounded and thrown into prison or penalized with disciplinary actions. Academic institutes, which had hitherto served as a safe space for their students, have witnessed grotesque violence unleashed by religious fundamentalists and police. Battlelines have been drawn where none existed before.

Traversing India's academic landscape

Academia is often envisaged as a community engaged in science and scholarship, free debate, and critical thought, and in short, a place for free and unfettered inquiry. At the same time, it also serves as a training ground or even a production line for a technically skilled workforce. Indian academia is no different. Its diversity, however, makes realizing academic freedom only trickier. According to the All India Survey on Higher Education 2018-19³, India has 993 universities, 39,931 colleges and 10,725 standalone institutions. Of these, 385 universities and 78 % of the colleges are privately managed. Public and private universities have different kinds of regulatory structures, incentives, and legal guarantees. Often, privately-managed institutes are for-profit ventures and are closer to production lines than hubs of critical thought. While it is debatable what 'autonomy' and 'academic freedom' mean to scholars in these institutes, public universities, some of which are solely funded by the central government, should hold the beacon for academic freedom in its truest sense.

During the British colonial rule, the primary role of Indian universities was to produce administrators who would act as a bridge between the colonial rulers and the native population. Ever since independence from colonial rule in 1947, their role increasingly became training people with the technical skills needed to build an industrialized nation. While that has been successful to an extent, it has come at the cost of limited critical thinking and the stymied development of indigenous research capabilities. Over the years, several committees constituted to review the educational policies in India have highlighted the lack of academic freedom in the country's universi-

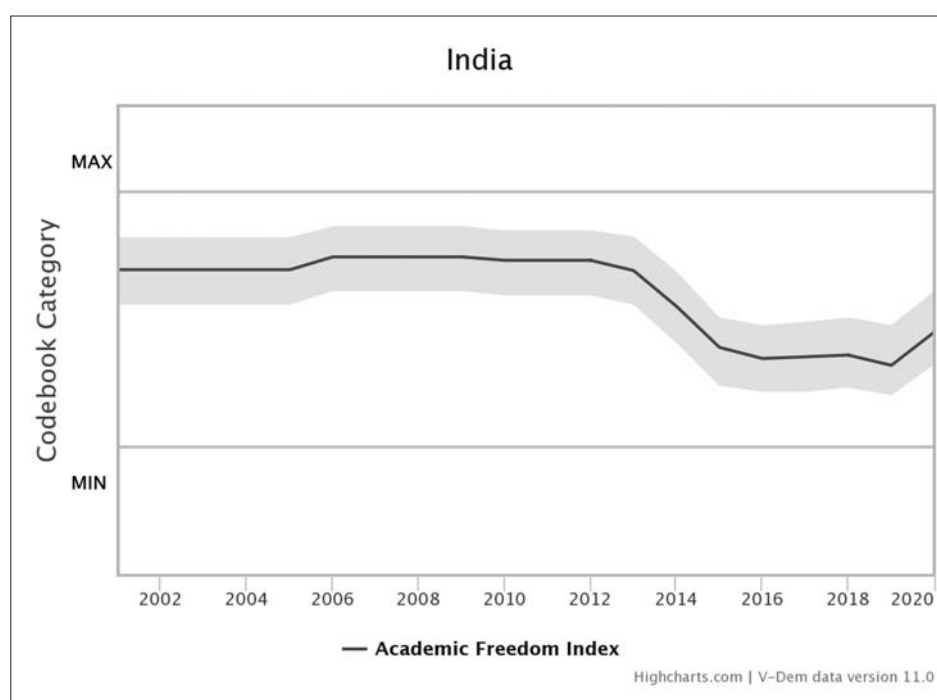


Figure 1: India's Academic Freedom Index from 2001-2020⁷

ties—including how research is conducted and what curriculum is taught. However, barring a few incidents of right-wing political organizations persecuting scholars who shared a different view⁴, or local governments imprisoning academicians on frivolous charges⁵, things seemed to be moving towards greater academic freedom, albeit often too slowly and at times in fits and starts.

In 2013, India ranked as a country with reasonable academic freedom, scoring 0.65 or 'Grade B' on the Academic Freedom Index (AFI) developed by the V-Dem Institute of the University of Gothenburg, Sweden. [Grade A is the highest with a score between 0.8 to 1.0]. This score had remained somewhat similar throughout the previous decade [See Figure 1]. After the Modi government came to power in 2014, India's AFI plummeted and reached an abysmal low of 0.36 or 'Grade D' in 2019, joining countries like Saudi Arabia and Libya, which are controlled by authoritarian regimes. Although 2020 has seen a slight recovery⁶ of AFI to 0.46 or 'Grade C', there is little to cheer about.

The modus-operandi of the Modi government in stifling academic freedom in the country takes many shapes and forms. What makes it harrowing is the continuous use of all those tactics across the length and breadth of the country. Here's a quick glimpse of such tactics and what have been their results

as we stand today amidst a devastating pandemic.

Peddling pseudoscience

Science and technology have a long history in India, dating from the sophisticated drainage and irrigation systems of the Indus Valley Civilisation in the third millennium BCE. Sushruta's treatise on medicine and the development of zero and the system of numerals are notable early achievements. But in modern times, ever since the industrial revolution, the pace of scientific progress has been extremely rapid in the western countries, and India fell behind.

The BJP seeks to fill the gap not by bolstering the development of science and technology in India but by stirring up nationalistic fervour based on accounts of fictitious ancient achievements. Citing stories of Lord Ganesha as evidence for head transplants or plastic surgery may appear to be harmless tales at first sight. But fostering a blind belief in ancient texts and disregard for evidence and modern advances can have damaging effects.






The country's health ministry, led by a qualified medical doctor-turned-minister, has been instrumental in promoting such pseudoscientific nonsense in the wake of a pandemic. He was seen endorsing Coronil⁸, a herbal remedy that

अयुष मंत्रालय
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AYUSH

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GOV
मेरी सरकार

Guidelines for Ayurveda Practitioners for COVID-19 Patients in Home

General Guidelines

-  Gargle with warm water with a pinch of turmeric & salt. Water boiled with Triphala or Yashtimadhu can also be used for gargling
-  Nasal instillation/application of medicated oil or Sesame/Coconut oil or nasal application of cow's ghee once/twice a day
-  Steam inhalation with Ajwain or Pudina or Eucalyptus oil (1-5 drops) or Karpur (Camphor) once a day
-  Adequate sleep of 7 to 8 hrs; day time sleep preferably be avoided
-  Frequent intake of water processed with Tulasi (basil leaves) is advised

A poster from the Ministry of Ayush circulated on Twitter¹⁰

purportedly ›cures‹ COVID-19⁹, launched by the renowned yoga guru Baba Ramdev. In the last year, the Ministry of Ayurveda, Yoga, Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha, Sowa-Rigpa and Homeopathy (Ministry of AYUSH, for short) is actively propagating unverified ›guidelines‹ to use herbs and spices in treating and managing COVID-19. Such practices pose a massive public health risk to the peoples' lives, which are supposed to be protected by these ministries.

Promoting traditional systems of medicine like Ayurveda augurs well with the ruling party's agenda as Ayurveda is considered more ›Indian‹ and ›Hindu‹, with its roots in Hindu texts written in Sanskrit, compared to modern systems of medicine. When one adds the religious and cultural significance of the cow to Hindus to this mix of beliefs, what you get is the Rashtriya Kamdhenu Aayog (loosely translated as ›National Cow Commission‹), constituted by the Government of India. It aims to work for the welfare of Indian cow breeds and further scientific research on the therapeutic use of cow products like milk,

curd (yogurt), ghee (clarified butter), cow urine, and cow dung. Workshops on studying the properties of cow urine are being held¹¹ by the country's premier public institutes. The Kamadhenu Aayog had also mooted conducting an online ›cow science exam‹ early this year, a move propagated by the University Grants Commission, which has since been indefinitely called off¹² following protests by scientists. However, when there is a barrage of misinformation discrediting science, how long can a few scientists hold the fort?

Quelling descent

Throughout its rule, the Modi government has sought to use the full force of the state apparatus against its critics, both inside and outside of the political system. While politicians have been threatened with income-tax raids and other means, scholars and academics have been dealt with an even harder blow. Students have faced violence and death threats on their campus¹³, have

been arrested¹⁴ and slapped with harsh, unjustified legal charges or have faced bans of student groups.¹⁵ Scholars have been killed or intimidated by right-wing organizations for writing a book, participating in an event, or giving a talk—all on subjects that are seen as critical of the government or its views or Hinduism. Professors and faculty have reported increased interference of the government in deciding the academic curriculum, infusing the Draft National Education Policy with sectarian content, or erasing chapters of history that are found to be inconvenient to the narrative peddled by the ruling party.

In February 2016, India's attack on its students reached a new low when student leaders of Jawaharlal Nehru University, a premier public university, were arrested. The students, the police alleged, were holding an event to mark the anniversary of the hanging of Afzal Guru, a Kashmiri separatist, in which they raised slogans against India. Apart from being slapped with serious sedition charges, a narrative was built in the media accusing the students of indulging in anti-national activities and being part of the ›Tukde Tukde gang‹—a moniker indicating that they were demanding the country be divided. Since then, the activities of the students at the university have come under severe criticism by politicians and the public alike. The government-appointed Vice-Chancellor, who is believed to be affiliated with the ruling party's ideologies, is accused of administrative mismanagement and inaction. Under his watch, a student went missing with no trace yet, RSS's student wing members instigated violence on campus early last year, and disciplinary actions were taken against students involved in various protests against the government.

When the central government enacted the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) of 2019 that discriminates against refugees on the grounds of religion, several protests broke out across the country. Students and faculty in many central universities and institutes joined these protests and showed their solidarity. However, it did not go down well with the central government, which sought to rein in the protesting students through diktats. The Indian Institute of Technology Bombay, a premiere technology institute that has the creme-de-la-creme of the engineers in the country,

barred its students from organizing any ›anti-national activities‹ (read protests) on the campus. The Indian Institute of Technology Kanpur objected to the recital of a poem by Pakistani Urdu poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz, by students on its campus, as ›unsuitable to the time‹. During these protests, numerous seminars, meetings, and events on educational campuses by individuals or groups known to have opposed CAA were not allowed to be held in many central and state universities.

Professors who do not toe the gov-

Hampering education and collaboration

A hallmark of progressive academia is facilitating interactions, exposure and collaboration to cultures and ideas beyond the national borders. Numerous fellowships, student exchange programs, conferences and seminars are instituted and organized for this reason. Since the Modi government came to power, there have been numerous attempts to stifle academic collaborations and access to education for marginalized

for admissions into universities or entry into the civil service or study outside of the state were forced to let go of their dreams.

Before COVID-19 shut down universities in India, there were instances of denial of visas to certain scholars traveling to India for in-person seminars and talks. These include students and faculty from Pakistan, China, and Bangladesh. After the pandemic struck, when most universities carried out their teaching online, the government introduced a bizarre restriction on conducting online seminars with foreign faculty.¹⁶ Although this order was later withdrawn, thanks to social media protests from scientists and researchers, it mandated prior permission from the Ministry of External Affairs for scholars to participate in online international seminars. In yet another order, the Ministry has now made it compulsory¹⁷ to obtain special permissions for journalists and researchers of Indian origin to carry out their work in India.

In summary, educational institutes across India face threats to their existence and culture of debate and enquiry that have been painstakingly developed over the years. While some have persisted amidst the mounting pressures from its own administration, others have given up and shut down—physically or symbolically. If the government continues its multi-pronged tactics of stifling researchers, scientists, and academicians from their path of critical thinking and inquiry, the future of the country's scholars hangs on a thin thread. Perhaps, it is time to remind the Prime Minister of his own words— »Our universities must have a higher degree of academic freedom and autonomy.«



ernment's line have faced severe consequences. Many scholars who are vocal critics of the government face serious criminal charges based on scanty evidence. Some have been charged with instigating violence at Bhima-Koregaon, a small village in the Indian state of Maharashtra where deadly clashes broke out between Scheduled Castes celebrating a military victory of the past and upper castes. Others have been accused of having ties with Maoists and separatists. Those that have managed to evade arrests or charges have been terminated or asked to resign from their faculty positions for frivolous charges like participating in an anti-government protest or tweeting criticism of the government. While most of these incidences have transpired in public universities and institutes, the resignation of two accomplished professors, who were critics of the government, early this year from a private university known for liberal education stands out. The resigning professors cited that the government had pressured the university through its funders to force resignations.

student communities, which hamper academic freedom.

The region of Kashmir has been disputed between India and Pakistan ever since independence from British rule in 1947. The Indian-controlled part was constituted into a state called Jammu and Kashmir and granted substantial autonomy. In 2019, the Modi government unilaterally revoked the special constitutional provisions of Jammu and Kashmir, withdrew its statehood, and brought it under direct central government rule, increasing its hold on an already militarized state. The move prompted widespread unrest and protest in the region and across the country. The government responded by imposing a security lockdown and the longest communications blackout in the world (from August 2019 to February 2021) in this territory. As a result, schools, universities, and academic institutions were closed, and internet and phone services were blocked. The move severely affected students, jeopardizing their access to education and information. Those who aspired to write competitive examinations

Anmerkungen

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