

A downward slope: Space for dialogue shrinking in India's universities

Faculty and students at universities across India are being targeted by the administration for expressing their opinions. What does this mean for academic freedom?



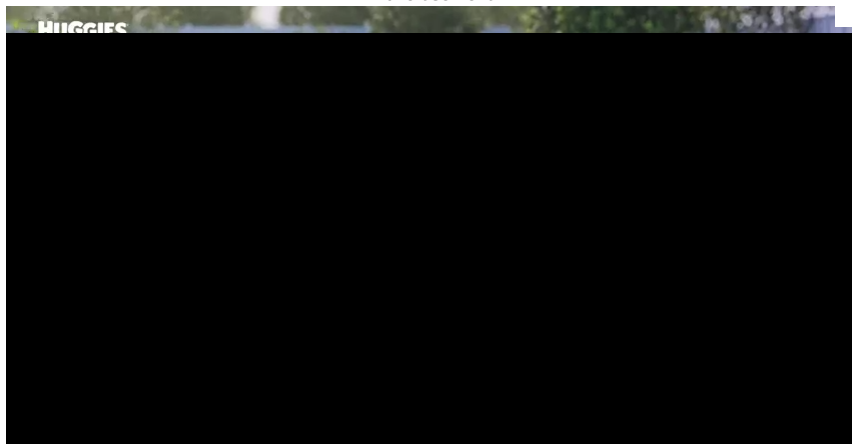
Apoorvanand, JUL 15 2023, 18:34 IST | UPDATED: JUL 16 2023, 07:30 IST



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Two faculty members of the Indian Institute of Science Education and Research (IISER), Mohali, have been asked to explain why they endorsed a petition to the authorities of the Indian Institute of Science (IISc), Bengaluru, expressing disappointment over the cancellation of a conversation on “Unlawful Activities Prevention Act, Prisons and the Criminal Justice System” on June 28. The institute cited the service rules which prohibit faculty members from expressing their views without the permission of the authorities. These service rules have been adopted by many higher education institutes (HEIs), making it a crime for teachers to express themselves freely.

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... s. They know that excellence cannot be achieved without freedom. Yet, Indian HEIs are now introducing new cards on their faculty and students. The memory of the University of Delhi penalising its students for screening the BBC documentary on Narendra Modi is still fresh in our minds.

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Such news no longer shocks us. At Delhi University, JNU, Jamia Millia Islamia or Aligarh Muslim University, it is nearly impossible to get a space for discussion on topics not sanctioned by the authorities. But now, classrooms are being monitored too.

For instance, Dr Gilbert Sebastian was suspended by the authorities of the Central University of Kerala for teaching a class on fascism in which he made a comparison between the German and Indian situations. A teacher of Sharda University, Delhi, was suspended for framing a question for the students of first-year political science: “Do you find any similarities between Fascism/Nazism and Hindu right-wing (Hindutva)?”

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Dr Tejaswini Desai, an associate professor of Physics at Kolhapur Institute of Technology's College of Engineering in Maharashtra, was sent on forced leave for telling her students that it was wrong to say that only Muslims were rapists and offenders could be from any religion or community. A teacher suspended for a play, another for holding a seminar is not even news for many in this country.

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Following dictated norms

Many people agree with the Bharatiya Janata Party leaders, that teachers should confine themselves to the four corners of the syllabus. But that too is designed on the directives of an external agency, the University Grants Commission (UGC). Universities are not free to design their own curriculum, nor are they free to decide the method of selection of faculty or students. It is the UGC which keeps dictating norms on these matters. Research grants are now being given primarily to those who promise to promote the ideology of the regime.

It goes without saying that one of the responsibilities of universities is to help society have an informed dialogue within itself. To achieve this, teachers must be free to participate in public debates and discussions.

Many times, this may upset the authorities. For example, what is a teacher supposed to do when the head of the state agency says that abnormal rains or floods or heat have nothing to do with climate change? It is his or her duty to challenge these views. When the government was denying deaths or casualties due to Covid-19, it was the duty of academics dealing with data to examine this claim.

Universities are places where you experiment with ideas and have the freedom to challenge authorities in all fields. Without this freedom, knowledge cannot advance. When we say authorities, they are not only political. The task of universities is to pursue truth and create spaces for contestation. But if inculcating nationalism is made the objective, universities turn into propaganda machines of the regime.

The authorities at the University of Delhi feel that topics such as caste, sexuality and feminism promote divisiveness and conflict and should not be taught. Similarly, anything to do with Marx has to go. They seek to nationalise the curriculum by removing all 'alien' elements from the syllabi. Iqbal, as a political philosopher, is unwelcome. Texts by people deemed not nationalist or 'Indian enough' are being removed.

'Authorised, official knowledge'

Online teaching, through pre-recorded lectures hosted on a central portal, is being promoted and physical teaching is being derided as a thing of the past. This is again meant to do away with the uncertainties associated with human-knowledge interaction, to ensure that only authorised, official 'knowledge' reaches students and they have no way to deviate from the official line.

Just as I write this, I learn that the government has now decided that it will decide on issues of leadership at institutions like the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS). It has also created a consolidated body — the National Research Foundation (NRF) — which will decide on the nature of grants in all fields of knowledge, and also on the worthy recipients. This body will be headed by the PM and led by a government official.

One need not say that the quality of democracies is intrinsically linked to the quality of their universities, as it is their job to pursue excellence. Excellence cannot be imagined without freedom. As the histories of countries like the Soviet Union, China or Iran show, regimented universities lead to poor knowledge creation which impacts the quality of life of the country. Universities should not be allowed to turn into mouth organs of the ruling party. It is therefore the task of society as a whole and not only academics to defend academic freedom. In India, unfortunately, it has been left to the teachers and students to fight for this. They cannot do it alone.

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A difficult phase at work could lead to great success; your natural ability to focus on details will bring you awards and accolades. A project you've been working on for a long time concludes successfully. Expect celebrations and a reunion with old friends.

Lucky Colour: Magenta

Lucky Number: 9

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A surprising encounter could lead to a lifelong friendship. Your instincts will be at their sharpest and it would be best to trust your gut feeling about all matters. Expect delays in communications and travel.

Lucky Colour: Saffron

Lucky Number: 2

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Learn to trust more and believe that everything happens for a reason. Try not to obsess over things from the past, make the most of your present moment. Pay attention to your dreams, your sleep patterns may change and some premonitions may come true.

Lucky Colour: Violet

Lucky Number: 5

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A friend may turn against you so watch your words and be sure to return favours. A dominating woman will need to be tackled diplomatically. Your relationships start to improve, so you should no longer feel anxious about being confronted by certain people.

Lucky Colour: White

Lucky Number: 4

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