Academic Autonomy: Needed a Holistic Societal Perspective

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Preliminary

• Based on

• Mainstream article of the same title

• My own experience at Princeton, DU and my parents experience of Allahabad Univ. and DU.

• Society today confronts huge challenges in the field of education

• These need to be recognized to rectify them to make society dynamic
Introduction

• IIMC faculty has protested the code of conduct imposed on them. Under the rules meant for the government bureaucracy. What autonomy will the faculty be left with?

• The resignation by Pratap B. Mehta from Ashoka University, a `liberal university’, had also highlighted the issue of autonomy.

• Autonomy in institutions funded by businessmen is literally non-existent

• Institutions run with direct government funding have had little autonomy – like NIPFP.

• The publicly funded universities can offer greater protection to academics but with few exceptions even they have substantially regressed
Academic Pliability

• Most academics do not even attempt to be critical of the government of the day and are smart enough to know what will help them move up the ladder.

• In June 1991, when the economic policies changed 180 degrees, many economists who till then were supporters of the earlier policies quickly switched sides.

• The politics and the power structure changed and that was persuasive. Where does all this leave the issue of autonomy?
Institutions of Higher Learning and Knowledge Generation

• All Reports on Education refer to strengthening autonomy in Institutions of Higher Learning

• In reality most have been traversing in the opposite

• There is little protest in academic circles. So, curtailment of autonomy is proceeding apace.

• It is impacting knowledge generation

• Why is society indifferent to the issue of academic autonomy?

• If society does not value generation of socially relevant and cutting edge knowledge why would it prioritize autonomy?
Institutions of Higher Learning and Knowledge Generation

• They appear to be esoteric subjects
• Society has largely accepted the situation since it can simply borrow and move ahead
• It creates a mindset of copying rather than originality
• This undermines the very institutions that can deliver in the long run.
• Heads of institutions adopt an attitude of benign neglect towards knowledge generation
• The struggle involved in knowledge generation appears futile to them
Bureaucratization of Institutions of Higher Learning

• If the task of knowledge generation is not to be the primary one then these Institutions are like any other institution
• But they have a large number of young people who naturally question things, are volatile and have high expectations
• Presently given the bad job situation they are frustrated
• Presently they have little interest in what is poorly taught
• Political parties looking for cadres trap them
• This leads to trouble in the institutions of higher learning
Bureaucratization of Institutions of Higher Learning

• Given these factors, the primary task of governance in such institutions becomes control

• So, often non-academics are appointed as the heads

• Or, those appointed are often the favourites

• So, in most Institutions of higher learning, knowledge generation is not the focus

• The result is bureaucratization of governance

• Bureaucrats expect academics to be in office for these hours

• They start by suspecting that freedom is misused by academics
Bureaucratization of Institutions of Higher Learning

• So, agencies like UGC have set mechanical standards of work
• They believe standards in can be achieved via standardization.
• This undermines autonomy and in turn originality
• Those who want to play truant can anyway do so - not difficult to fulfill the mechanical criterion
• In India, this is the picture in most institutions
• Often privately funded institutions are coaching places or profit making
• Institutions under government control, fulfill Ministries’ desires
• It is in the public institutions that autonomy is feasible if the right conditions prevail.
Role of the Head of Institutions

• Till the 1980s a VC of JNU or DU was listened with respect in the UGC and Ministry of Education and could assert autonomy

• Since the 1990s, often VCs argue with the faculty that we have to abide by the rules

• The university bureaucracy finds this convenient to truncate academic autonomy.

• Increasingly imposed in JNU, made administering projects and laboratories difficult

• When they become VCs, they have not been able to reverse them and restore autonomy.
Role of the Head of Institutions

• As more and more institutions give in, it becomes easier for the government to impose such rules
• Helps the administration to tighten its hold over the academics.
• Elite institutions, like, Medical Colleges, IITs and IIMs, were first to lose autonomy.
• Their faculty claimed they were too busy doing their academic work
• To most of them autonomy has meant being allowed to earn more – consultancy etc..
Role of the Head of Institutions

- Elitism has also taken roots in the universities – seniors and juniors
- The seniors largely did not participate in the meetings of teachers’ associations
- They got used to resolving problems via individual negotiations with the authorities
- The associations which could take up the teachers’ issues have weakened.
- That has made it easy for the authorities to marginalize the democratic bodies
- All this has led to growing bureaucratization in the universities
  - Controlling academics via leave, housing, etc.
Narrow View of Autonomy

- Teachers and their associations have to bear their share of blame for this state of affairs.
- There is much politicking
- This plays directly into the hands of the authorities.
- A direct result of a vast majority of academics holding a narrow view of autonomy.
- Most academics do little research and follow a set pattern of teaching determined by some other
- UGC had devised syllabi for various subjects in early 2000.
- What is autonomy for if one does little research and largely teaches set syllabi?
- Autonomy is needed for teaching what one considers to be important
- Most teachers hardly have a view of their own
Narrow View of Autonomy

• Because they are not researching that area
• Research in the subject forces one to explore the state of the knowledge
• Developing a critique of existing knowledge is crucial to advance it.
• Academics committed to learning feel constantly challenged
• They confront the limits of their own understanding of the subject and that leads to research questions.
• One should not be limited by a standard syllabus to be taught
• If not, questioning in the classroom or outside becomes a hindrance and is discouraged and autonomy becomes a dispensable luxury
Narrow View of Autonomy

• Autonomy is often treated as a black box
• It cannot be limited to the subject but extends to how exams are held, research is conducted, getting funding, the functioning of the university academic bodies, selection of students, how they are to be encouraged, etc.
• The authorities don’t like this wider questioning but that is inherent.
• For them autonomy is a nuisance - to be tolerated, at best.
Categories of Academics

• Academics may be divided into three categories – ‘good’ by western standards, ‘bureaucratized’ academics and the ‘independent’ ones
• The first two groups are challenged by the third. To marginalize them, they team up
• These two groups undermine the critical role of unions in checking arbitrariness in institutions
• It is largely the bureaucratized academics who become the VCs, the Directors and the Principals
• They are expected to fulfill the agenda of their mentors
• They govern the institution not by dint of their intellect but through a coterie of loyalists
• Intellectual capability becomes secondary to the loyalty quotient
Categories of Academics

• This raises the critical issue of the importance society attaches to higher education
• Search committees consist of favoured people
• An apparently fair system is often gamed
• Example of letter exchange between Prof Bhatnagar and Prof Hill
• Some did have a broader vision like in the case of JNU and the institution delivered
• But DU and JNU have declined with recent appointments of VCs
• This illustrates the fragility of our educational institutions in the face of determined onslaught by vested interests
Conclusion: Autonomy a Societal Issue

• Society should have a high stake in quality education to become dynamic.
• This loses importance if knowledge is increasingly imported and recycled.
• Academics also then have no special place in society and get marginalized and this impacts their self-perception.
• Societal attitudes seep into general milieu and systems deteriorate over long run.
• Elite further marginalize by sending their children abroad to study.
• So, there is an ongoing process of curbing autonomy in Indian institutions of higher learning.
• Its reversal requires a holistic societal understanding and action.