Silencing Academia, Weakening Democratic Space

Mains: *GS-II – Polity & Governance – Education & Governance*

Why in News?

India's shrinking academic freedom is directly weakening democratic space, with universities facing political interference, censorship, and punitive actions against dissenting voices.

What do the recent reports reveal about India's democracy and academic freedom?

- **Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute 2026 report** – India is still classified as an *"electoral autocracy"*, ranking in the lower half globally.
- Notes a steady decline in democratic freedoms, especially in free expression, media independence, and civil society, placing India among the *"worst autocratizers"*.
- **Erosion of Democratic Norms** – This signals a growing dismantling of institutions and norms that support accountability and pluralism, drawing increasing international scrutiny.
- **The Scholars at Risk Free to Think 2024 report** – India's academic freedom is *"completely restricted"* & university autonomy is *declining* due to rising political interference, and pressure on institutions.
- It emphasises that higher education faces systematic enforcement of a Hindu nationalist agenda — curriculum changes, limited scholarly exploration, and reduced space for dissent.
- **Broader Pattern of Erosion** – This classification is not an isolated judgment, as it aligns with a broader pattern of democratic erosion documented by global indices, from V-Dem to Freedom House.
- **Why Academic Freedom Matters for Democracy?** – Beyond elections, voting rights and laws, a healthy & functioning democracy depends on
  - A strong civil society,
  - Open access to evidence-based information, and
  - Space for genuine public debate — areas now under growing pressure, especially in academia.
- **Strain on Academic Freedoms** – Universities meant to foster inquiry and debate face funding cuts, regulatory pressure, and growing self-censorship, eroding their autonomy.
- **Centralisation of Control** – The Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan Bill proposes to further centralise control, prioritising uniformity over academic freedom.

What are the disturbing patterns prevailing in academia?

- **Punitive Actions Against Academics** – Between 2014 and 2026, 62 academics faced punitive action for their opinions or political stances.
- Freedom of expression is penalised on campuses using service rules that define faculty as "government servants".
- **India Academic Freedom Network report** – Highlighted a series of disrupted events, arrests of faculty and students, and visa hurdles for foreign researchers.
- **Shrinking Space for Dissent** – The contrast with British scientist J.B.S. Haldane, who became a citizen of India in the early 1960s and who openly criticised the government while working in India, highlights how space for dissent in academia has sharply narrowed.
- **Assault on Academic Freedom** – Data from 2024-26 show a broad assault on academic freedom, targeting students, researchers, and faculty.
- **Driven by** – Political pressure, institutional failures, and social biases make certain topics off-limits, certain voices dangerous, and the pursuit of knowledge must bow to political convenience.
- **Institutional Failures and Biases** – A consistent & disturbing pattern emerges as institutions are accused of failing to act against perpetrators.
- Internal complaints committees are described by critics as "ornamental", existing more for formal compliance than for substantive accountability.
- **Chilling Effect** – When the oversight bodies designed to protect students and faculty become complicit through silence or inaction, that deepens fear.
- Trust erodes, fear takes root, and power will be protected, and voices that challenge it will find no refuge within the walls meant to nurture free inquiry.

How does the erosion of academic and civic institutions impact democratic freedoms?

- **Erosion of the Knowledge Sector** – These actions undermine the ability of civil society and academic institutions to hold leaders accountable, eroding the very basis of a knowledge sector essential to Indian democracy.
- **Civil Society & Academia Undermined** – Violence going unpunished, caste and religious prejudice being reinforced, sexual predators are protected, and dissent is criminalised, all weaken the ability of universities and civil society to hold leaders accountable.
- Knowledge is increasingly forced to avoid challenging power.
- **India's stance on political rights** – Although a party to the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)* treaty since 1979, India refused to sign the *First Optional Protocol*.
- It does *not accept the UN complaint mechanism*, meaning citizens cannot seek international redress for rights violations after exhausting domestic remedies, which limits access to justice.
- **Constitutional Guarantees** – India's Constitution, through *Articles 14, 19, and 21*, guarantees many of the same rights enshrined in the ICCPR.
- The Supreme Court of India has often drawn upon international human rights norms to interpret and expand fundamental rights.
- **Government Reluctance** – Yet, the government remains unwilling to subject itself to the international complaint mechanism, leaving citizens — especially marginalised

groups — without recourse beyond domestic courts.

- **Case Study - The Umar Khalid & Sharjeel Imam case** – This young academic scholars have been in jail as undertrials for the last five years, the SC rejected their bail application and barred them from applying for bail for a year, stunning many legal experts.
- **Unequal Justice & Asymmetry** – When journalists such as Irfan Mehraj and humanists such as Sonam Wangchuk struggle through for bail, some high-profile godmen accused of serious crimes have repeatedly secured *parole or furlough*.
- This stark contrast shows whose freedoms are protected and whose are abandoned, exposing deep inequities/asymmetry in India's justice system.

What are the effects of homogenisation on universities & society?

- **Homogenisation vs Freedom of Thought** – India, calling itself the "Mother of Democracy", increasingly prefers homogenisation of thought rather than freedom of thought.
- Yet, Higher education institutions have always been refuges for those who challenge orthodox thinking and work toward generating new ideas.
- **Democracy & Dissent** – Democracies are revitalised by such encounters, even when they mean questioning majority opinion.
- **Slow Rise of Authoritarianism** – Authoritarianism does not always arrive suddenly, often emerges slowly and quietly from within democracies through the conditioning of
    - Manufactured victimhood,
    - Cultivated fear, and
    - The steady erosion of norms that once seemed unshakeable.
- Citizens and institutions may become complicit, unaware that freedoms are being stripped away.
- **Academic Freedom as a Democratic Measure** – The decline documented in the Academic Freedom Index reflects the health of Indian democracy.
- Silencing scholars, activists, and students, and allowing political interests to dominate universities, dismantles accountability step by step.
- **Reality on Campuses & Courts**
    - **Campuses** - Where voices once raised in inquiry now whisper;
    - **Courtrooms** - Where justice is increasingly influenced by power; and
    - **Society** - A silence that grows louder each day, while the state itself becomes more bureaucratic, punitive, and regulatory.

What lies ahead?

- The key question is whether institutions will continue down this path or reclaim their original purpose.
- For society, it is whether we choose to protect the spaces that allow critical thinking, challenge power, and help young people engage meaningfully with issues of justice and governance.

Reference

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