

## 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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