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Revelations about the intersectional struggles for academic freedom within Indian Universities

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Abstract: Recognising that the university is a site of struggle for democracy and justice, this paper prevents insider insights into academic citizenry within four Indian universities over 70 years after its independence. Drawing from data generated from academics within four Indian universities, we analysed responses that revealed the limits and possibilities of academic freedom as 'professional freedom' within teaching, research, community engagement, governance and administration. Insights were gained into the politics of participation between academic citizens within this transforming sector. Intersectional analysis revealed varied experiences of identification, in addition to constraints to exercising power. Substantial differences in 'being' and 'belonging' in academic functions emerged in relation to academic position and social location.

Paper: This paper contributes to deliberations about the conditions for academic agency in the post-colony, where constructions of academic freedom, their relation to ethico-political obligations and to the institution of higher education may be interwoven with dynamics from the past that persist in the practices and imaginaries of the present. Such legacy dynamics may be enacted *on* and *by* higher education institutions (HEIs), shaping the limitations of their autonomy for providing the conditions for academic freedom. They may also be enacted *within* institutions, on and between members of the academic community due to their social categorisations, backgrounds and/or their ethico-political or epistemological stance. It is in recognition of this that within many postcolonial contexts, including India and South Africa, the university has long been recognised as a site of struggle for democracy (Mkandawire 2005), traversed by "contractions of a class, gender, ideological and other nature" (Sall 1997: ix).

From India's extensive public HE sector of over 600 public institutions, we purposively selected an old and large university of high national ranking (UI1), a previously old college upgraded to university status (UI2), an institute of technology of national importance (UI3), and an institution of eminence (UI4). From these, 136 participants elected to respond to questionnaires, analysed for statistical signification, using Chi square test, test of proportions, descriptive statistics for likert scale responses and concordance calculations. Where no statistically significant differences between institutions were evident, the responses were combined. In our presentation, we provide colouration where it emerges, looking closely at responses to note the intersectional nature of responses. In addition, 37 participants from 3 of those institutions participated in semi-structured interviews, including those in

leadership positions, and academics inclusive of those acting in gender mainstreaming within institutions ('gender persons').

Questions, within the questionnaires and interviews, were design to elicit insights on the situated nature of 'academic citizenry' including experiences of 'being and belonging', and agency within 'decision-making' in various aspects of academic practice (teaching, research, community engagement, governance and administration). This allowed insights into academic freedom as 'professional freedom', the first of Hoffmann and Kinzelbach's (2018) conceptualisations. This conceptualisation is aligned with UNESCO (2008) formulation of freedom as a state without constriction to doctrine, teaching, discussion, research, opinion about the institution or system and from censorship. This includes substantive elements of the freedom of 'what' and 'how' to teach and research in addition to the supportive elements for academics to safeguard those freedoms, such as through self-governance and tenure (Karran & Mallinson, 2017). By analysing these perceptions and experiences, we sought to comprehend the conditions for academic freedom, and for individual agency to enact just changes, recognising that within the academy there is both leadership that is assigned by position or social contract, and leadership that is non-assigned, informal or emergent within academic practice.

Intersectional analysis revealed varied experiences of identification, in addition to constraints to exercising power. Substantial differences in 'being' and 'belonging' in academic functions emerged in relation to academic position and social location. In teaching, research and collegial relations, gendered impacts emerged. The least accord was with administration, favourable only to those in leadership positions and half of the senior academics, which over a third of early career academics and those with rural upbringing found alienating. Differences emerged in terms of caste, with only a third of those categorised by Other Backward Class finding accord with administration compared to half of the other categories.

When it came to cultures of decision-making, over a third of the participants indicated that decision-making conditions within university governance, administrative responsibilities and the management of staff matters were exclusionary. Closer analysis revealed that conditions for participation in governance decision-making differed according to discipline, caste, gender, and age.

While academics who identified as ST and from rural upbringings, who had been previously marginalised in their countries legal, educational and social structures, were most positive about 'being' the types of academics they wished to be when interacting with non-academic communities; these very same participants were least positive about their inclusion within institutional decision-making about such community engagement interactions. However, we are tentative about this finding, as one of the insights of the project was that there was not a well-developed lexicon of community engagement in the Indian institutions, albeit that interview respondents indicated that it was indeed practiced in many parts of the institution, as 'activism' and 'extension activities'.

In our discussion, we will outline how tensions between individual agency, constraining structures from the top and hierarchical, exclusionary cultures were experienced across institutions, particularly by change-agents, with indications that these were becoming exacerbated by glocal tensions.

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