

## **Resisting the times: Reflections from case studies of critical voices and negotiations within public universities in India**

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### **Research Domains**

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

### **Abstract**

India is poised towards a surge of massification in higher education (HE), promising democratisation of access, particularly to those historically denied access to educational opportunities on account of caste, class and religious identities. This paper drawn on three case studies of curriculum and academic debates in public universities to discuss how the emergent socio-political context has engendered a discontinuity in the very ethos of universities, with stigmatisation of critical scholarship and scepticism around universities' role in initiation of young people into cultures of scholarship and critical thinking. The paper contextualises the case studies through a systematic mapping and review of public discourse around academic freedom and university autonomy over the last decade and argues that even as HE infrastructure expands with the aim of democratisation of knowledge and academic opportunities in the country it is accompanied by the prospect of an increasingly shrunken space of civil society and democratic ethos.

### **Full paper**

Universities are places of sustained enquiry and higher level analysis, with freedom to create and invent, openness to peer and public criticism, and where academic virtues of honesty, courage, and self-knowledge, among others are cultivated (Walker and Nixon, 2004, p.9). It is with this imagination of a public university that one senses an imminent need to engage with the changing circumstances for public universities in India. This paper drawn on three case studies of curriculum and academic debates in public universities to discuss how the emergent socio-political context has engendered a discontinuity in the very ethos of universities, with stigmatisation of critical scholarship and scepticism around universities' role in initiation of young people into cultures of scholarship and critical thinking. The primary research question for the study was "How does the academic community negotiate the democratic ideals and

claim academic freedom within a hyper national and neoliberal context of academic governance within public universities in India?”. The paper contextualises the case studies through a systematic mapping and review of public discourse around academic freedom and university autonomy over the last decade and argues that even as HE infrastructure expands with the aim of democratisation of knowledge and academic opportunities in the country it is accompanied by the prospect of an increasingly shrunken space of civil society and democratic ethos.

Academic community finds itself responding to a systematic de-intellectualization of the public discourses (political and social), where the democratic ideals infused common sense is being actively reshaped, and many argue, abandoned in favour of a sustained propaganda serving the project of neoliberal hyper-nationalism. We may soon be faced with a generation which does not have the means of a critique, with scientific rationality and reason being abandoned in favour of rigid assertions and ‘truth’ charged with political affect. The paper attempts to critically situate the implications for the civil society of hovering threat of an intellectual discontinuity of this kind and scale, signifying a broken tradition of people participating agentically in collective thinking and shaping of public intellectual ethos guided by principles of what Dewey and Ambedkar refer to as the heart of democracy-the ideal of associated living. Any attempt to salvage this breach requires us to revisit the idea/ideals and functions of a university and apart from the realm of generating knowledge, focus sharply on its role in anchoring and sustaining a critical public discourse.

The paper documents and maps the nature of institutional crisis in higher education in the country linking it to the very neoliberal context of policy steering by the State drawing on global market logics implementing regulatory frameworks that ensure pernicious control over university faculty and students’ thought-worlds through bureaucratic demands on their career and academic mobility, and enforcement of draconian disciplinary regimes through ‘code of conducts’ governing actions and spirit of university community of teachers and students. The paper explores these undulations through three case studies of political/institutional ‘crackdowns’ on academic autonomy and freedom through targeting of pluralistic and critical narratives/perspectives in curriculum as well as pedagogic practices. The paper argues that these disciplinary regimes that make it criminal to voice a dissent note or question the patrons, eventually have begun to seep into the teaching-learning regimes and life-space of the universities, being shaped by a new normal which actively seeks to rekindle a more systematic and sinister version of the ‘town vs gown’ debate in the Indian context.

The paper discusses the three case studies to signpost the ways through which the existing forms of resistance by the academic community are being manipulated by the surveillance and control economies of the state. I discuss how through the imposition of corporate sector norms within the collegial ethos of university spaces, public intellectuals, the intellectual realm and critical traditions of public discourse are being stymied. The three case studies are of public universities, even as private universities mushroom in the country and are subject to techno-managerial ethos of functioning through their very acts of constitution.

The material changes being integrated into the everyday schema and functioning of the university have contributed to normalising the neoliberal tendencies in the discourse and practices of HE. The case studies reflect that there is an imminent vulgarization of both 'academic' and 'organizational' ideas as they are forced upon the structure and functioning of institutions.

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