The perilous state of academic freedom

The present wave of anti-intellectualism, where informed opinions are ridiculed, poses a serious threat

RAJEEV BHARGAVA

To express opinions is the fundamental right of every Indian; so also to claim that her opinions are true. But whether in fact they are true isn't in the hands of the person who expresses them. Their truth, validity and even plausibility are determined through contestation and scrutiny by others.

More importantly, some types of scrutiny are more scrupulous, thorough and rigorous than others. They uncover indefensible, baseless or unsustainable opinions. They demonstrate that other opinions are less-biased, withstand the test of time, and have a greater openness in accepting their fallibility. In doing so, these inquiries produce a better, clearer understanding of the world, providing a deeper insight into the complexities of the human condition. Therefore, they are of a different qualitative worth than others, more deserving of being called 'knowledge'. Knowledge-production begins with opinions but does not end with them.

Academic freedom protects such spaces of contestation and scrutiny through which knowledge is produced. It refers to the freedom of scholars to conduct critical enquiry, and the freedom of teachers and students to collectively deliberate on any idea without fear of sanction, censure or illegitimate interference. To sift knowledge from mere opinion requires a sound training in research and an awareness of professional standards of scholarship, norms of peer engagement and time-tested, disciplined ways of knowing (methodologies). This is true of all practices involving standards of excellence. For instance, it is not my subjective opinion that Viv Richards was a great batsman. This fact is established by the collective judgment of the greats of international cricket.

Patiently acquired skills

In short, academic freedom protects the patiently acquired skills and practices of all such knowledge-producing and knowledge-transmitting agents (teachers, researchers and students). Since academic practices are sustained within institutions, academic freedom includes the autonomy of institutions where teaching and scholarly research is conducted.

My intellectual interest in academic freedom was provoked when, in 1999, I was asked to contribute a short essay on the state of academic freedom in India to *Academe*, a journal of the American Association of University Professors. In that article, I claimed that the freedom of scholars and autonomy of academic institutions is usually threatened by internal as well as external factors.

Internal threats appear when academic institutions are weakened from within, as when academics themselves lose sight of the standards of excellence internal to the practice of research and teaching. External threats develop, on the other hand, when academic institutions are undermined by oppressive communities, the coercive apparatus of the state or unbridled market forces. I had then argued that Indian academia was severely threatened by oppressive communities and self-imposed impediments by academics, but less so by the market or the state.

I took my own community to task for having succumbed to what I called the over-ideologisation of the mind. Many academics, in a hurry to bridge the gap between theory and practice, seemed to me to have replaced patient, open-ended deliberation with dogma and prefabricated, lazy solutions. Other internal threats to academic freedom flowed from wider societal malaise. For instance, merit-based institutions were being converted to little fiefdoms run by academic tin gods doling out petty patronage to loyal supporters and creating suffocating tyrannies for others. In such contexts, ideas were applauded or condemned not for their intrinsic worth but with an eye on who articulated them – one of 'us' or one of 'them', A person's caste, creed or political proclivity mattered more than the evidence or argument provided. Such habits of the mind were hardly conducive to the growth of a tradition of scholarly work.

A more serious danger to academic freedom in India came, I believed, from illiberal communities. I illustrated my point by pointing to the fate of the late historian Mushirul Hasan, who was victimised by extremist fellow-Muslims for a rather innocuous remark on the ban on Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*.

Interestingly, barring the brief period of Emergency, academic freedom in post-Independence India, I claimed, was not throttled by the state. I did not remember instances of seminars being monitored, academic books being banned, or the imprisonment of academics for their views. However, covert and overt pressures on academic institutions by democratically elected governments were commonplace. As it began to lose its dominance, an edgy and insecure Congress Party had started becoming increasingly unprincipled and randomly interventionist. In West Bengal and Kerela, the Communists could never resist illegitimately interfering in college and university appointments.

The Bharatiya Janata Party-led coalition, in power at the Centre then, had harmed the institutional integrity of the prestigious Institute of Advanced Study, Simla. Its governing body was packed with hand-picked supporters.

What is the state of academic freedom today, twenty years after that article was written? I fear that more and more academics in positions of power appear to be not just over-ideologised but politically indoctrinated. A deepening societal intolerance has only intensified attacks on academic freedom. The exclusion of several important books from university syllabi, entirely on non-academic grounds, exemplifies this. State interference has increased, sacrificing critical pedagogical practices in the name of the government's idea of national interest. The continuing victimisation of the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), one of the premier academic institutions of the country by the current government's own reckoning, illustrates this.

Knowledge a 'commodity'

Alarmingly, new threats to academic freedom have emerged. One comes from the corporatisation of academia, by which I mean the modelling of universities on business corporations. This has naturalised the viewing of administration as management, faculty as paid personnel, and students as consumers who have a right to demand what should be taught, as if knowledge can be purchased as a commodity according to one's taste! When corporate power exercises control over faculty and curricula, vice chancellors and college principals can hire, fire, and change faculty assignments with as much whim as any corporate CEO.

But the most serious threat to the world of knowledge comes from 'anti-intellectualism' that finds the very idea of thought reprehensible. Thinking, reasoning, questioning and critique are deemed dangerous, to be treated with utter disdain. The distinction between knowledge and opinion is entirely blurred; ideas of informed authority, professional academic standards and academic expertise are ridiculed. The very idea that the task of education is to transform students into critical agents, who actively question the common sense of a society, is severely undermined.

If these trends continue, the university as a site of autonomous scholarship, independent thought, and uncorrupted inquiry will be disassembled. Our best young minds will emigrate and the very future of our country imperilled by another 'brain drain'. India may not easily recover from this blow.

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Rooting AI in ethics

A technology should be evaluated both on the basis of its utility and the intention of its creator

N. DAYASINDHU

We can intuitively recognise whether an action is ethical or not. Let us look at the theoretical basis of understanding ethics with an example. A cigarette company wants to decide on launching a new product, whose primary feature is reduced tar. It plans to tell customers that the lower tar content is a 'healthier' option. This is only half true. In reality, a smoker may have to inhale more frequently from a cigarette with lower tar to get the flavour of a regular cigarette.

Let us analyse this from three dominant ethical perspectives:

First, the egoistic perspective states that we take actions that result in the greatest good for oneself. The cigarette company is likely to sell more cigarettes, assuming that the new product wins over more new customers. From an egoistic perspective, hence, the company should launch the new cigarette. Second, the utilitarian perspective states that we take actions that result in the greatest good for all. Launching the new cigarette is good for the company. The new brand of cigarette also provides a 'healthier' choice for smokers. And more choice is good for customers. Hence, the company should launch the product.

The egoistic and utilitarian perspectives together form the 'teleological perspective', where the focus is on the results that achieve the greatest good.

Third, the 'deontological perspective', on the other hand, focusses more on the intention of the maker than the results. The company deceives the customer when it says that the new cigarette is 'healthier'. Knowingly endangering the health of humans is not an ethical intention. So, the company should not launch this cigarette.

The flawed facial recognition system

In the context of Artificial Intelligence (AI), my hypothesis is that most commercially available AI systems are optimised using the teleological perspectives and not the deontological perspective. Let us analyse a facial recognition system, a showcase for AI's success. An AI system introduced in 2015 with much fanfare in the U.S. failed to recognise faces of African Americans with the same accuracy as those of Caucasian Americans. Google, the creator of this AI system, quickly took remedial action. However, from a teleological perspective, this flawed AI system gets a go ahead. According to the 2010 census, Caucasian Americans constitute 72.4% of the country's population. So an AI system that identifies Caucasian American faces better is useful for a majority of Internet users in the U.S., and to Google.

Going by intention

However, from a deontological perspective, the system should have been rejected as its intention probably was not to identify people from all races, which would have been the most ethical aim to have. In fact, the question that comes to mind is – shouldn't digital platform companies, whose markets span many countries, aim to identify faces of all races with an equal accuracy?

Social media is not the only context where AI facial recognition systems are used today. These systems are increasingly being used for law enforcement. Imagine the implications of being labelled a threat to public safety just because limited data based on one's skin colour was used to train the AI system. Americans are taking note. Recent news reports suggest that San Francisco has banned use of facial recognition by law enforcement.

The ethical basis of AI, for the most part, rests outside the algorithm. The bias is in the data used to train the algorithm. It stems from our own flawed historical and cultural perspectives – sometimes unconscious – that contaminate the data. It is also in the way we frame the social and economic problems that the AI algorithm tries to solve.

With the proliferation of AI, it is important for us to know the ethical basis of every AI system that we use or is used on us. An ethical basis resting on both teleological and deontological perspectives gives us more faith in a system. Sometimes, even an inclusive intention may need careful scrutiny. For instance, Polaroid's ID-2 camera, introduced in the 1960s, provided quality photographs of people with darker skin. However, later, reports emerged that the company developed this for use in *dompas*, an identification document black South Africans were forced to carry during apartheid.

Understanding and discussing the ethical basis of AI is important for India. Reports suggest that the NITI Aayog is ready with a ₹7,500 crore plan to invest in building a national capability and infrastructure. The transformative capability of AI in India is huge, and must be rooted in an egalitarian ethical basis. Any institutional framework for AI should have a multidisciplinary and multi-stakeholder approach, and have an explicit focus on the ethical basis.

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A mixed bag at film awards

The recently announced National Awards ignored some of the best Malayalam and Tamil films

KUNAL RAY

The recent announcement of the National Film Awards (NFA) produced mixed reactions, as indeed it has in every previous year. One wonders whether these awards are still reflective of the various quality benchmarks, and the public's expectations from them too seem to have consistently nosedived.

On the positive side, it is gratifying that recognition was bestowed upon a film such as *Badhaai Ho*, which, though made in the format of a mainstream Hindi film, touched upon issues that are usually never discussed. Most often, mother and father characters in Hindi films barely play supporting roles, as if they are nothing beyond their parent identities. They are either benevolent or the opposite, obsessing about their child's private life and matrimony.

But who are these parents as people? Hindi cinema doesn't concern itself with characters beyond a certain age but *Badhaai Ho* is different in its exploration of love and desire in the life of a couple whose eldest son is making his own marriage plans. The father character still recites love poems to his wife, they have an active sex life and the mother is soon pregnant. Have we seen this in Hindi cinema before?

A versatile actor

The film also underscores the versatility and talent of Ayushmann Khurrana, a leading mainstream film actor who has experimented with an array of unconventional characters. From his debut in *Vicky Donor* to his last outing as an honest cop in *Article 15*, here is an actor who has defied Hindi cinema leading norms. Very few of his contemporaries have risked the choices that he has made.

But having praised these films for having got what they deserve, were these really the finest produced in 2018?

Beyond the ambit of the NFA, some of the most daring Indian films of 2018 were made in Tamil and Malayalam. Zakariya Mohammed's *Sudani from Nigeria*, a film centred on Kerala's love for football, including the whirlwind of events that engulf a footballer from Nigeria who arrives in a small hamlet in Kerala, was awarded the best Malayalam film. But it deserved a wider recognition.

Devoid of nationalism

Sports films in India are prone to overtones of nationalism. Every rendition soon descends into a rags to riches story or transforms into a tale of survival of the fittest. *Sudani from Nigeria* (in picture) departs from convention in every way imaginable by locating the game amongst its people and eschewing all winner-loser narratives. It also breaks stereotypes in the representation of Muslim characters. Besides that film, there were many others like Lijo Jose Pellissery's quirky *Ee. Ma. Yau*; Amal Neerad's *Varathan* and B. Ajith Kumar's *Eeda*, an adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* set in conflict-prone Kannur. These films were replete with new stories, captivating performances and fresh possibilities for film language; their exclusion was rather unfortunate.

From Tamil cinema, Mari Selvaraj's *Pariyerum Perumal* and Vetrimaaran's *Vada Chennai* found no mention in the awards. Pa. Ranjith's *Kaala* and Lenin Bharathi's *Merku Thodarchi Malai*, a film that deals with the lives of landless labours, were also ignored.

Overall, there appears to be a trend in terms of films that have been omitted by major industry awards – they have all been movies whose narratives diverge from the mainstream political view. *Uri* and *Padmavat* were rewarded for their hyper-nationalism, and perhaps that is not surprising.

But should directors make films only for awards? Films are not remembered for awards but the stories they tell. Some of the films mentioned here will be remembered and seen across time purely for reasons of cinematic merit and the conviction of their craft. Award or no award, our films ought to chronicle different stories and voices because in diversity lie our deepest strength.

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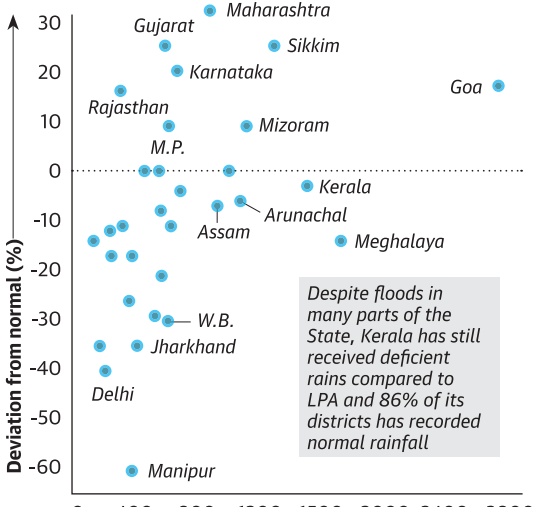

> YOU SEEM VERY CALM IN THE WILD...
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> YES, i HAVE LEARNT TO iGNORE DANGER!!

DATA POINT

On the dot

India has received an average rainfall of 558 mm in the 2019 monsoon season till Monday. This is neither below nor above the Long Period Average (LPA); in other words, the deviation from normal rainfall is exactly 0%. Considering that the rainfall was 33% deficient at the end of June, the monsoon has intensified rapidly. But, inter-State variations exist. By Vignesh Radhakrishnan

Inter-State variations

Scatterplot charts **actual rainfall** against **% deviation from LPA** across States as of Monday. States above the horizontal zero line received more rainfall than usual – the higher this are the more the deviation from normal (LPA). The States below the line received lesser rainfall than usual

Despite floods in many parts of the State, Kerala has still received deficient rains compared to LPA and 86% of its districts has recorded normal rainfall

Inter-district variations

Table shows the % of districts in each State across rainfall categories. For instance, 10% districts in Punjab had "large excess" (LE) rainfall while 40% had "deficient" (D) rainfall

LD: Largely deficient (-60% to -99% of Long Period Average rainfall)

D: Deficient (-20% to -59% of LPA)

N: Normal rainfall (-19% to +19% of LPA)

E: Excess (+20% +59% of LPA)

LE: Large excess (>59% of LPA)

State	LE	E	N	D	LD
Maharashtra	22	22	33	22	0
Karnataka	17	27	37	20	0
Meghalaya	14	29	0	57	0
M.P.	14	25	45	16	0
Mizoram	13	0	50	25	0
Punjab	10	5	45	40	0
Tamil Nadu	9	6	19	44	22
Gujarat	9	45	42	3	0
Rajasthan	9	39	30	21	0
Chhattisgarh	7	15	22	56	0
Arunachal	6	6	50	38	0
J&K	5	18	41	23	5
Assam	4	19	44	30	4
U.P.	1	7	37	51	4
Sikkim	0	25	50	25	0
Telangana	0	13	65	23	0
Bihar	0	11	39	50	0
Nagaland	0	9	18	64	9
A.P.	0	8	62	31	0
Uttarakhand	0	8	15	77	0
Kerala	0	7	86	7	0
Odisha	0	3	53	43	0
Tripura	0	0	100	0	0
Goa	0	0	100	0	0
Himachal	0	0	42	42	17
Jharkhand	0	0	21	75	4
Haryana	0	0	19	71	10
West Bengal	0	0	16	79	5
Manipur	0	0	11	33	56
Delhi	0	0	0	56	11

Source: IMD

FROM THE ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO AUGUST 13, 1969

T.N. Chief Minister's demand

The Tamil Nadu Chief Minister, Mr. M. Karunanidhi, has addressed a letter to the Prime Minister pleading for representation to the State Government on the boards of management of the nationalised banks of a regional character and on the regional advisory boards of all-India banks. In his letter, Mr. Karunanidhi has also urged that the States should have representation on the National Credit Council. Mrs. Gandhi's decision to nationalise 14 scheduled banks, Mr. Karunanidhi said, was a "bold and timely step – perhaps the most significant in the last 20 years of the history of independent India." He hoped it would mark the "real beginning of a new era" in which the Government, on behalf of society, would take command of the resources and use them for the uplift of the common man. He offered to Mrs. Gandhi, on behalf of the Government and the people of Tamil Nadu, "our solid and unflinching support" in implementing this measure and any further socialist steps she might undertake to bring light into the life of the common man. In the course of his letter, Mr. Karunanidhi referred to the fear in some political circles that there might not be much advantage to the interests of this State as a result of bank nationalisation.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO AUGUST 13, 1919

The Madras Council.

The first meeting of the Madras Legislative Council during Lord Willingdon's regime as also after its reconstitution under the recent elections and nominations of members, was held yesterday [August 12]. It must be admitted that the proceedings of the Legislative Council have of late lost much of their interest in the public mind, both on account of the futility of the popular voice in the discussions under its present constitution, and of the short period that divides the existence of the present Council from what is going to take its place under the Reform Bill, which is engrossing so much of the public attention at the present time. In the course of his opening speech His Excellency said that by a deliberate decision of the Government, the number of nominated officials has been reduced, and that of non-official members has been increased. The public must feel grateful for the adoption of this principle, which is a sound constitutional measure. It must be said, however, that in the opinion of the public, the nominations of non-official members have been, with notable exceptions, of a character such as not to diminish the support to the Government side, nor to increase the weight of the popular vote.