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## Fuss over Emeritus: We don't need no thought control

DECCAN CHRONICLE. | ANJALI MONTEIRO AND K.P. JAYASANKAR  
(/byline/anjali-monteiro-and-kp-jayasankar)

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***Conferring emeritus professorship on scholars of impeccable academic standards is an honour to both the university and the academic.***



📷 Professor Romila Thapar

The screening of a national award-winning documentary film is forcibly stopped by a rightwing student organisation. Teachers are prosecuted for exercising their right to protest. Universities are asked by the Ministry concerned to mandatorily celebrate certain days and provide visual evidence to this effect. Colleges and universities receive a circular to appoint “social media champions” and ensure that their students are “voluntarily” connected on social media with their institutions and the Ministry of Human Resource Development. These may seem like disparate events, but they add up to a single overwhelming logic: freedom of expression within the system of higher education is under threat more than ever.

The Indian public sphere has never ranked high on freedom of expression. The prevalent censorious response to dissent and difference is to ban any literary, artistic or media forms that “offend” sentiments. Hindu supremacist social groups disrupt and vandalise with impunity. But within academia and civil society, there did exist circumscribed (though precarious) spaces for critical thinking, fearless listening and responding to marginal voices; spaces where it was possible to reflect on operations of power and to resist these in various ways. These spaces have shrunk drastically as a hard, jingoistic nationalism informed by the politics of hate and exclusion has

begun to enter the University system.

Over the past few years, particularly in public educational institutions, the state has changed the leadership, making it easier for University administrations to crack down on students and teachers who exercise their right to question. Many students in JNU have been slapped with sedition cases. The series of events that led to the tragic death of scholar Rohit Vemula at the Central University of Hyderabad and the consequent repression is another such episode. All this has deepened processes of self-censorship by both teachers and students, afraid of endangering their careers and future prospects by speaking out. The price to pay for freedom of expression appears to be too high for most. Emboldened by the regime in power, rightwing student organisations call the shots in many universities and colleges. They take upon themselves the mission of deciding what should be screened, who should be invited to speak at events, what banners and posters are permitted and who get dubbed as 'anti-national'.

As a result, many universities have become arenas for toxic masculinist posturing and intimidatory tactics. In this polarised environment, students from Dalit and Muslim minorities are targeted in everyday normalised ways, including bullying, ostracism, and derogatory remarks. The silencing of these marginalised students and the growing number of suicides are testimony to the rising intolerance to diversity within the university.

Perhaps never before have we had a government that is so anti-intellectual. The list of far-fetched and unscientific pronouncements made by those in power, from plastic surgery on gods to ancient aeroplanes, from climate change to evolution, is too long and too well-known to catalogue. Rigorous research, critical thinking and scientific temper are casualties of a narrow, authoritarian and insecure world view that asserts that ancient India was a Hindu kingdom and the source of all knowledge, past, present and future.

History is the first discipline to be attacked, as historical research does not conform to preconceived notions of a monolithic and mono-cultural history. The pulping of books, indoctrination of students by rewriting textbooks and the humiliation of noted scholars have become business as usual.

A university that can ask a renowned historian Romila Thapar to furnish her curriculum vitae in order to justify her continuance as Professor Emerita has truly lost the plot. Professor Thapar's contribution to our understanding of ancient India has been seminal and challenges the ongoing reinvention of history as triumphalist rightwing propaganda. The current developments in JNU and elsewhere amply demonstrate how the very basis of academic life, which is the spirit of inquiry, is being endangered by bigoted mediocrity.

There are other insidious processes inimical to freedom of expression. The first is the rapid growth of education in commerce, management, technology, engineering and medicine at the expense of liberal arts education. Today, higher education in humanities and social sciences, which potentially exposed students to ideas of social justice and equity, is a second choice for those who cannot make it to more 'hard' disciplines. This turn to an instrumental, pragmatic, skill and career-oriented education at the expense of an education that teaches students to understand their social, political and historical spaces, does little to nurture independent thinking and expression.

There is a mechanistic ritualisation of teaching-learning and research, a shift towards meeting targets (publications, projects, patents, student strength, marks, placements), as universities compete with each other on institutional mechanisms for accreditation and rating. Education becomes more about showcasing one's institutional worth and less about creating thinking citizens.

The shift towards a market-driven model of higher education, which goes hand-in-hand with an instrumentalist education,

has further constricted free thought and expression. Education at market rates, with no state subsidy, excludes students from certain class-caste locations. It also curtails the possibility of bringing in a diversity of lived experiences into the classroom, making the institution an elite bubble.

Student-teacher relationship becomes one of consumer and service provider, aimed at maximising returns on educational investment in terms of employability and skill development. What this does to freedom of expression and association is demonstrated by the plethora of private universities all over the country, offering engineering and management education, where there are no teacher or student unions and where placements take priority over everything else.

Today, the public university, set up with the objective of nurturing students from all social locations, which has a space, however imperfect, that allowed both teachers and students the right to organise, debate and discuss, is slowly withering away under the onslaught of three forces: saffronisation, instrumentalisation, and privatisation of education.

It is up to those who are committed to freedom of thought and expression to resist these changes and affirm the idea of an education that inculcates critical thinking and commitment to social justice and equity.

Borrowing from Pink Floyd: "We don't need no thought control!"

***(Authors are documentary filmmakers and academics)***