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## ACADEMIC FREEDOM – NO MORE A LUXURY



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**ABSTRACT :**

**A**cademics and freedom should go hand in hand. Academic autonomy is the core value of education. It should be practiced at all levels but more so in higher education. Autonomy encourages spirit of inquiry which helps developing critical thinking among the students.

**KEYWORDS :** Academic Freedom , higher education , British education system .

**INTRODUCTION**

The independent India carried forward the legacy of British education system in the form of affiliation system. The simple presumption behind continuation of such pattern of academic administration must have been that the people then working in colleges were either inexperienced or they didn't have enough exposure and thus it would be better if they all remain under the umbrella of some University then the 'Academic Standards' and the 'Academic Sanctity' could be maintained. If it is true, then another obvious inference one can draw that people who were handling University at that time were capable of doing all these things. Academic freedom was, thus, denied to the colleges by showing distrust about their capabilities. It, in a way, was the beginning of a new slavery system.

**HISTORY**

The term 'Academic Freedom' and 'Academic Autonomy' are to be used interchangeably. Thus Academic Autonomy is not a new concept. Before the establishment of the first 3 Indian universities all the colleges prevailing then were autonomous colleges. After the establishment of these 3 affiliating Universities they became the affiliated colleges.

Many prominent educationists and philosophers tried to suggest the path of reforms. Their vision and thoughts were so pragmatic and perpetually relevant that even today we have to refer back to their reports. If we would have implemented their suggestions in those days, may be today the Higher Education Sector would have been more vibrant and dynamic.

First unsuccessful attempt of autonomous college was made by the Presidency College in Calcutta in 1921. In 1953 legislative formalities could be completed but no college came forward to become autonomous because of the fear of Academic Mafia prevailing then. Mahajan committee and Siddhant committee in 1964 and 1965 respectively elaborated the need for autonomous colleges. Dr.D.S.Kothari made the first formal and specific recommendation through his report. However, nobody actually gave enough thought to this concept and therefore it took 14 years to have the first Autonomous College in India and even today there are just 613 autonomous colleges (UGC website July 2017).

## ELABORATION

After independence, in due course, India witnessed quantitative growth in education sector as the number of Universities and colleges increased and also the country witnessed increase in gross enrolment ratio. However, the affiliation system not only just remained but became more restrictive. This growth in education sector was not mere geographical but also sociological as it encompassed varied diverse sections of the society.

The profile of the students started changing and students having varied aspirations started coming under the ambit of Higher Education. Unfortunately till today they have been catered in a very generic way and their varied requirements or aspirations have been either neglected or if at all been addressed then been addressed partially. It is not surprising that on one hand we have poor gross enrolment ratio as compared to many developed countries and on the other we have a very acute problem of educated unemployed youth. They are unemployed because the standardised education offered by our universities did not equip them with any specific job skill or life skill. The biggest irony is that such situation has occurred in spite of narrowing down the focus of higher education to job oriented programmes.

The situation, though getting deteriorated, was not hurting much as our economy was very much a 'closed economy' till the 90s. However once the era of globalisation started, the lacunas prevailing in our education system got exposed very easily. Therefore, the need for academic freedom has been felt like never before.

It is important to clarify at this juncture that an academic autonomy does not suggest demolition of the present Affiliation system. It is the need of the hour that both these systems must prevail simultaneously. Academic autonomy is a kind of encouragement to those colleges which have the capacity and willingness to offer better quality education.

The simple principle behind academic autonomy is to have a complete academic operational autonomy to the colleges so that the needs and aspirations of the students can be addressed satisfactorily. Academic autonomy is not meant for all colleges. Academic autonomy is a privilege. The college which has established and proved academic credentials is only supposed to think of academic autonomy. The academic autonomy refers to reforms in two major areas i.e. academic delivery and student evaluation system. In short the academic autonomy aims to make education meaningful and relevant.

## PHILOSOPHY OF ACADEMIC FREEDOM

Academics or the process of imparting knowledge best flourishes in a free environment. The objective of acquiring knowledge is not just to be able to earn livelihood. Knowledge enriches and empowers a person. The enrichment is meant for self-development and self-evolution. Whereas empowerment is meant for social development and social evolution. The empowered person is supposed to use the knowledge for the betterment of the society and in return is expected to get the reward in the form of livelihood. Thus the knowledge has dual utility of evolving oneself and evolving the society. The quality of the society and civilisation depends on the quality of the people living in such society. In other words, education decides the quality of civilisation. True education cannot flourish in restrictive or confining environment. The spirit of education simply doesn't tolerate any kind of bindings. That does not mean it is not disciplined but the real meaning of any academic pursuit lies in an 'enquiry' and creativity is a great stimulus for such pursuits.

The process of academic creativity is unbound but not chaotic. It has its own system yet it is not channelized.

In modern days unfortunately education has been reduced to job oriented training process and thus the true academic pursuit has almost disappeared. This process must have started gradually somewhere in the decades of 50's or 60's however very few people perceived it as deterioration. The socio-economic conditions prevailing in India in a way compelled the education system to focus only on the job skills. However, this led to, in a way, death of the creative sides of the academic pursuits. Such education cannot create a 'sensible and thinking society'.

India did not realise effects of this change in the education system almost till late 80's and early 90's. The primary reason could be that the students or people in general were pursuing the creative and thinking aspect on

their own, informally, through various hobbies and social activities. Therefore, the ill effects of lopsided education system could not be surfaced so prominently.

However, impact of globalisation along with advanced technology changed the entire dynamics of education. In 90's we could realise how fragile our education output was. As the world started coming closer this deficiency became more prominent. It had all happened just because we tried to regiment our education. We tried to reduce it to job oriented skill delivery system and very importantly we did not take cognizance of diverse capabilities, aspirations, intelligence of our people. We tried to serve them the same old flavourless education. We have been categorically proud of the diversity that prevails in our country. In fact, we cherish such plurality and still we have been offering the same education to everybody. Unfortunately, nobody realised the inherent contradiction in that.

If the target audience is diverse, and one knows about it, and one is also proud of the diversity, yet one has not made any efforts to cater to the diverse needs of such audience. This is not just shameful but also insulting.

As there was no alternative the society accepted the quality as it was. In such situation as well some of them were getting some employment somewhere. There were some success stories to refer to and hence nobody felt it necessary to give a proper fresh look at the situation.

If one takes a review of the changing perception of the society towards the paper qualifications, such deterioration and rising degree of competition would be very much evident. In 40's and 50's a mere matriculation certificate was perceived as a symbol of well-educated and such person was getting a reasonably good job in spite of low level of industrialisation and other private sector enterprises. Today MBA has become the minimum qualification even for the engineers and yet there is no guarantee of a decent employment. Such qualification has become a minimum expectation and therefore is not being perceived as a symbol of a highly educated person.

This brings us to the fact that now the contents will be more important than the paper qualification.

Today the affiliated colleges precisely do not have the freedom to change the contents which is the very essence of the academic delivery.

The regimentation has deprived the students from learning wide range of subjects. This has adversely affected the thinking ability of many generations. Neglect towards education of languages has further deteriorated the quality of thinking among the youths.

The globalisation demands different skill sets to be successful and it does not pay heed to the paper qualifications. It expects not just thinking ability but unorthodox / creative thinking. It expects one to have holistic approach while making a decision. Unfortunately, our youth fails on these criteria. The present rigid administrative structure of academics will never allow dynamism and vibrancy to be the focal point of any academic activity as this would challenge their age old forts and kingdoms.

Many academicians are in the denial mode and do not want to understand the disaster that would occur if not changed gears now. India is approaching a very unique demographic situation where majority of the Indian population would be in the employable age by 2025. However, our present education system is simply not capable enough to equip them to face the employment challenges that would be unfolding soon. The second important aspect of this demographic situation is that many countries in the world would be facing shortage of employable youths during the same period. In other words, India would be the sole exporter of trained Human Resources to all these countries. The million dollars' question is whether our education system is ready for this.

There is still time. There is still hope. If academic freedom is reintroduced through academic autonomy mechanism, we still can control the damages.

The academic freedom would be the key element for this turn around. The academic vision and creativity of each autonomous college should help to equip our youth to face the global challenge. Academic freedom suggests internationalisation of education and more emphasis on knowledge creation through research. Academic freedom also suggests 'breaking the barriers' of age old streams of science, commerce and arts and thus further suggests imbibing multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approach. All these aspects are pertaining to academic contents and delivery. Under the academic delivery section, the college gets freedom to

device the program structure, decides the titles of the courses, add or delete various courses depending upon the student profile. The college is supposed to device innovative teaching methodology and use the modern academic tools to enhance the effectiveness of the academic delivery.

However, freedom is also expected to reform the evaluation system. The prevailing evaluation system has not changed right from the inception of formal education in India. It really doesn't serve any purpose in understanding the calibre of the student. It is still in existence because it caters to the convenience of the administrators. In the new era of academic freedom, the new methodologies of evaluation have to be brought in the main stream and not just rote learning but other facets of intelligence can also be judged.

## CONCLUSION

Academic freedom does not suggest neglecting job skills or it does not anyway demean the importance of such skills. However, it, in fact, aims at supporting the job skills with various life skills and thus making a person eligible to dream success. Another effect of academic freedom is that it gives the courage and confidence to the student to pursue any branch of knowledge without getting worried about the employment. The innovative programme devised by the college is expected to inculcate the required employability so that the student can handle any kind of work. It is expected to give right inputs and confidence to the students that he can be successful in spite of following his heart in choosing the academic stream.

Today people presume the path of success has very limited lanes of paper qualifications e.g.: engineering, management, medicine etc. However, the autonomous college by using the invaluable academic freedom can show that success can be achieved by following an unconventional trail as well.

To achieve these things there are few pre conditions such as dedicated and talented teachers and their wholehearted involvement, pragmatic and encouraging leadership etc. If teachers are convinced of the positive impact of the academic freedom they can make the difference. In short the academic freedom has to be student centric and teacher driven.



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