

PREFACE

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Scholars around the world are routinely reminded that the freedoms so central to their enterprise are always under threat. These threats are not confined to any corner of the world nor are they necessarily a feature of less developed or less democratic societies. In many instances, academic censorship and intimidation are meted out at the same time, and sometimes by the same agents, as record levels of investment are simultaneously sown into academic research and the expansion of higher education institutions.

Ironically, attacks on academic freedoms in Asia (the focus of this volume) are on the rise and are evident even in countries like Japan that are considered beacons of democratic practice. Of course, state repression remains the most common source of threat, especially in those parts of the world (and Asia) with authoritarian-inclined governments. Increasingly, however, societal, political, and commercial actors are also attacking scholars and scholarship that challenge their values or interests. In some cases, threats emerge from within the academy, with administrators, colleagues, and students putting pressure on topics and voices they disagree with (the digital age has also meant online vigilantism). As a result, pluralism, tolerance, and open dialogue are no longer synonymous with democracy or with academia.

In an important intervention on the topic, this Asia Shorts volume brings together a comprehensive discussion on the issue of academic rights and freedoms in different parts of Asia. A grim picture emerges as the chapters survey a range of societies in Asia. In order to add to the discussion, in this short preface, let me build on the excellent contributions and share my own understanding of academic freedom in contemporary South Asia.

India, the most populous democracy in the world, has made vast investments in higher education, with over 1,000 universities, more than 42,000 colleges, and around 20 million students. After India gained independence in 1947, the early political leadership sought to ensure that the Indian academy subscribed to the highest standards of intellectual freedom and autonomy, and the state, for the most part, obliged. Today, India's universities are seeing their international rankings rise. Once a top sending country, India is now also a destination for international students. All this is a function of India's growing economy, but it also belies the fact Indian scholars and students, typically those working in marginal fields (the humanities and social sciences) and from marginalized backgrounds (often minorities, lower castes, and women), are working under increasingly dire conditions.

In recent years, clashes over whether India ought to be a secular democracy or one that celebrates its dominant Hindu majority, at the expense of its many minorities, have left the autonomy of Indian universities precariously hollow. The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has overseen a years-long crackdown on critics of its Hindu-nationalist policy agenda under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA), a law purportedly intended to prevent acts of terrorism and other national security threats, but also used to silence academic and non-academic critics. In 2021, the Ministry of Education (MoE), in coordination with the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), announced that scholars working in public universities would need prior approval before participating in international virtual conferences or seminars on matters related to the security or "internal matters" of the state. Although the guidelines were ultimately scrapped, Indian scholars must still seek MEA approval for discussions (or to organize workshops/conferences) on sensitive subjects. Meanwhile, the safety of students and faculty on Indian campuses is increasingly called into question, as state and non-state actors wield violence and intimidation against critical voices with impunity. Readers may recall the widespread violence in 2019 and early 2020, when Indian students and faculty came under attack for protesting the revocation of Jammu and Kashmir's special administrative status and the passage of a controversial citizenship law known as the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). Further, the BJP government has been replacing the higher administrators at federal and provincial universities with its own chosen people and the autonomy of Indian universities has been sharply eroded.

These changes and the intervention by the state forces are not new. For example, in 2016 there were protests at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in New Delhi by a section of India's civil rights activists and scholars against the high-handedness of the Indian state's attacks on one of the country's most

prestigious public universities. JNU was a special case, as it received international press coverage at the time. Yet it may be forgotten that the intrusion of the state into academic life in India has a more complex history. The anger of academics, civil rights activists, and liberal politicians on the happenings at JNU and at other campuses was clearly justified, but the fact remains that such disruptions of academic life have consistently occurred in India despite its stable democratic tradition with no history of military takeovers. I would argue that even with this history, JNU was not an exception.

Where there have been concerns about the integrity of the nation-state, security forces have regularly entered and occupied universities in the Northeast of India or in Kashmir (and other places). Similarly, lest we forget, in the late 1960s the Maoist-influenced Naxalite revolutionary movement was joined by a number of urban intellectuals and became popular among students in Kolkata colleges. In early 1970, presidential rule was imposed on West Bengal to combat the internal threat of a communist uprising and, subsequently, through militarized state action, thousands of activists and innocents were tortured, incarcerated, or killed in police encounters. By the time the movement's force subsided in 1972, the region had lost some of its best and brightest. What needs to be remembered is that the violence inflicted on the students, workers and peasants in West Bengal was not perpetrated by an emergent right-wing religious party, but under the orders of an established and secular nationalist party i.e. Congress.

I mentioned the JNU event to bring forward the practices that the Indian state followed previously in "trouble" areas or in peripheral parts of the nation-state (the occupation by paramilitary forces of universities, the using of sympathetic student groups to silence dissent, the threats given to faculty members who have politically oppositional views) can now be used in more prestigious public campuses in India's major cities. The point I want to emphasize is that, when the integrity of the nation-building project is threatened, the Indian state, irrespective of its ideological bent, responds with violence against whomever it considers its enemy, internal or external.

Unfortunately, the issue of silencing dissent is present across all South Asian nation-states and India cannot be singled out. In the past decades during and after the civil war in Sri Lanka, dissent and questioning of state authority by academics was surveilled and continues to be silenced. In Bangladesh, there are recurring and recent examples of students, academics, and professionals being harassed and imprisoned on the grounds of the Digital Security Act (DSA) and other such laws that are being legislated to regulate online and internet communication.

To conclude this discussion, let me turn to Pakistan, and offer a historical perspective on the ongoing silencing of free speech and academic freedoms. Since the 1980s the country has witnessed the “occupation” of its universities by security services and the curtailment of academic freedom through the intervention of state authorities on a regular basis. Like India, Pakistan has a long history of student activism and struggle for justice (although, unlike India, it has a history of military takeovers); one recalls the student movement against the dictator, General Ayub’s regime (1958–1969) in 1962 or the participation of students in the 1968 struggle which ended in Ayub’s removal. Irrespective, various Pakistani governments, whether civilian or military, did not hesitate to use force to clamp down on student unrest, whether in Dhaka (it was part of East Pakistan then) in February of 1952 during the language protests or in January 1953 in Karachi, leading to several deaths in both cases. One should also remember the horror of the night of March 26, 1971, when many Bengali (then East Pakistan) intellectuals, academics, and students were killed in Dhaka University by Pakistani armed forces,

Yet, the systematic banning of student unions by General Zia’s regime (1977–1988) in February of 1984 was unprecedented in Pakistan’s till then turbulent history with its educated youth. The dictator’s aversion to political parties created opportunities for ethnicity-based student groups to be formed. Some of these may have had state sponsorship to create factionalism within more ideologically-motivated student parties. In the absence of student elections and unions, the implicit encouragement of certain religious and ethnic student groups created rivalries on campuses in Karachi and elsewhere.

One recalls, in the late 1980s, the increase of extreme intra-group violence at universities in Karachi. The state watched while mayhem reigned for a while and then sent in its paramilitary forces, Rangers, to control the situation, much to the relief of parents and students alike. In retrospect, one can now see how the situation may have been manipulated at these campuses to create space for the security services to enter colleges and universities. Those student groups and affiliated political parties may now regret the violence they had unleashed on each other for very small gains, but the damage to the general academic atmosphere of Pakistan’s universities remains. They have become securitized camps that remain under an unparalleled surveillance system (this is even before the more recent threat posed by Islamist groups). Once the security services entered the premises, in one form or the other, they maintained their presence physically and, in many cases, also by enforcing “ideological compliance.” Through various regulatory structures, the teaching of humanities and social sciences in Pakistan (much like in India) is constantly monitored by state-sponsored agencies, promoting a sanitized curriculum and a state-sponsored version of national history. The Pakistani civil

society was weak in the late 1980s after being brutalized by a harsh military regime for a decade, but the spectre of that period still haunts the country while academic independence and free speech, primarily in public universities, remains restricted.

Another legacy of the 1980s military rule in Pakistan is the introduction of anti-blasphemy laws. To give an example, languishing in a jail in the Punjab province of Pakistan for almost a decade is Junaid Hafeez who taught at the Bahauddin Zakariya University in Multan (Pakistan). Due partly to Hafeez' liberal views, and partly based on administrative rivalries, a segment of students was encouraged to accuse Hafeez of blasphemy: a very serious allegation in Pakistan. When a prominent human rights lawyer, Rashid Rehman took his case, he was murdered in his own office not even six months into the proceedings. Blasphemy accusations (the insult to the Prophet of Islam or other religious figures) are often used to target minorities. Yet in the case of Hafeez, who is Muslim and part of the religious majority, it is being used to curtail freedom of expression and opinion while Pakistan's over-burdened and flawed judicial system in most cases fails to protect the accused.

My detour into a brief (and incomplete) history of the relationship between South Asian states and academic freedom is to caution those fighting for civil rights in Asia and elsewhere to learn from their past, as under the pretext of law and order there can be repression of speech at universities to silence academic or social dissent. This important volume documents the structural and comparative perspective in order to historically situate the ways in which freedoms are being curtailed across Asia, and forces us to think about solidarities that may need to be created to struggle against such techniques of surveillance and silencing.