

Respecting academic freedom

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Freedom and liberty are hallowed concepts which have been the bedrock of civilization for centuries. Martyrs for the cause of freedom have always upheld the principles and willingly suffered great hardships to keep the torch of civilization burning.

Recent events, particularly the video of a movie on Prophet Muhammad has brought the issue into focus once again. A number of questions have been raised by individuals and organizations alike. Where does the right of freedom of speech begin, and where does it end?

Is freedom of speech an absolute right unfettered by any restrictions? Should freedom be circumscribed by regulations?

Can the freedom of speech of one individual clash with the rights of another individual? Also, among conflicting individuals and groups, does one individual have greater freedom than another?

For people working in academe, freedom of expression acquires a totally different dimension. Universities have long acted as centers of new ideas and new thoughts. They have challenged established notions and norms and given rise to new ones. Universities have been trendsetters and trailblazers when it comes to giving birth to new paradigms.

All this would not have been possible had it not been for the freedom that universities have long enjoyed. Freedom of expression and work has given universities space and allowed them to explore the boundaries of knowledge.

For freedom to be enshrined within the portals of academia, there has been a long list of sacrifices and struggles. The Greek philosopher Socrates was forced to drink hemlock, accused of spreading new ideas that corrupted the youth of Athens. Galileo had to bow before the clergy when he challenged the then prevalent notion that the sun moved around the earth.

Had it not been for freedom of thought, humanity would have been bereft of numerous revolutionary ideas which were later unanimously accepted as the truth.

All this led to a situation where freedom became one of the foundations of academia.

However this continued to flourish beside a number of other ideas and ideals, and universities did not face many issues related to freedom of expression.

Teachers were treated with reverence and students, despite the flourishing idea of freedom, rarely challenged them. Institutional respect ensured that even the most disgruntled elements did not challenge institutions and their foundations, and instead concentrated on either attacking individuals or individual acts.

The system, which had its built-in checks and balances continued to perform and hence the system was rarely under threat.

The last decades of the previous century and the emergence of the 21st century have altered these concepts. Wearing the cloak of freedom of expression, disgruntled elements, wayward anarchists, disruptive forces and parties with vested interests are now threatening to wreak havoc on the system.

By claiming to be followers of the hallowed principle of freedom of expression, they use every conceivable means, including social media and new technology to launch a propaganda blitzkrieg intended to paralyze the system.

In the garb of freedom, they indulge in malicious attacks, which are sometimes personal to cause

utmost harm to individuals and institutions.

While academic freedom is the foundation of universities, many elements consider academic freedom to be the same as personal freedom.

Academic freedom allows a person to undertake research in a university which may otherwise be difficult. But individual freedom is different. Within a classroom, the student is supposed to follow the instructions of his teacher.

A student's freedom does not allow him not to attend classes and yet claim a right to be awarded a degree.

Similarly a professor has the academic right to study, analyze and research of a multitude of issues.

Yet, the professor's academic freedom is different from his personal freedom.

While academic freedom allows a teacher to freely conduct research on any topic, the law of the land may prohibit personal participation in such an activity.

Does academic freedom imply that the same person may claim immunity from indulging in such acts? Certainly not.

This takes us to another aspect of academic freedom: the ideology and position of the sponsors. In a money-driven world, sponsors often call the shots when supporting programs or projects.

When submitting a project, researchers and academicians go the extra mile to ensure that the project is fine-tuned with the funding priorities of the partners.

Often donors and funding agencies are very specific about the desired result, the methodology of research, the format of the results and even the techniques to be used for program management and financial accounting.

In this context the limits of academic freedom are prescribed by the donor agency.

If the donor agency can draw the boundary lines of academic freedom because it is funding a project, then does the university which employs the person and provides a salary and other perks also claim a right to restrict academic freedom?

Happily that is not the case. Universities and other institutions of higher learning have granted considerable, if not absolute, freedom on academic matters.

This takes us to the concept of "absolute' freedom". Is there something called absolute academic freedom? If so, then in the context of a state, people claiming to be freedom fighters, who kill and promote random violence and death through teaching, social media and preaching to crowds, would not be labeled and dealt with as terrorists, even in the most conservative democracies.

What about rogue states? What about the hate speech and racist comments?

Freedom competes with other values, and operates within a social context; therefore, there are constraints, rules, regulations and laws in every state and in every organization. Mill's harm principle and Feigberg's offense principle apply while defining the boundaries of academic freedom — whether state versus subjects or one group or individual versus another.

The freedom of one individual may come into conflict with the freedom of another individual.

Freedom is based in a social setting and it cannot be an abstract debating concept. The setting in society and the academic setting in an institution govern the idea of freedom.

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