Academic Freedom in India

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Why in News

India has scored considerably low in the international **Academic Freedom Index (AFI)** with a score of 0.352.

> **Academic freedom,** in general, refers to a scholar's freedom to express ideas without risk of official interference or professional disadvantage.

Key Points

- **About the Academic Freedom Index:**
  - It has been **published by Global Public Policy Institute** as a part of a global time-series dataset (1900-2019) in close cooperation with **Friedrich-Alexander University Erlangen-Nürnberg, Scholars at Risk and the V-Dem Institute.**
  - It **compares** levels of academic freedom worldwide and enhances the understanding of its curtailments.
  - The AFI used **eight components** to evaluate the scores: freedom to research and teach, freedom of academic exchange and dissemination, institutional autonomy, campus integrity, freedom of academic and cultural expression, constitutional protection of academic freedom, international legal commitment to academic freedom under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and existence of universities.
  - The scores are **scaled 0-1.**
  - The index **did not report data for 35 countries -** including the United States and Australia.
- **Top Performers:** Uruguay and Portugal top the AFI, with scores of 0.971 each, followed closely by Latvia (0.964) and Germany (0.960).

- **India's performance on the index:**
  - India with a **score of 0.352,** is closely **followed by** Saudi Arabia (0.278) and Libya (0.238).
    In the last five years, the AFI of India **has dipped by 0.1 points.**
  - Countries like Malaysia (0.582), Pakistan (0.554), Brazil (0.466), Somalia (0.436) and Ukraine (0.422) have **scored better than India.**
  - India has **not fared well** in components like **institutional autonomy, campus integrity, freedom of academic and cultural expression** and **constitutional protection of academic freedom.**
  - The AFI has cited the **'Free to Think: Report of the Scholars at Risk Academic Freedom Monitoring Project',** to suggest that the **political tensions in India may have something to do with declining 'academic freedom'.**
    According to the Report, **political tensions** in India have led to **violent altercations between students, security forces, and off-campus groups,** and have driven legal actions and **disciplinary measures against scholars** critical of those in power.

Challenges for India

- **Freedom to Scholars:** India fails to provide desired freedom to scholars to discuss politically and culturally controversial topics, without fearing for their life, studies or profession.
- **Political Interference:** Most universities in the country are subjected to unsolicited interference from governments in both academic and non-academic issues. It is common knowledge by now that a majority of appointments, especially to top-ranking posts like that of vice-chancellors, pro vice-chancellors and registrars, have been highly politicized.
- **Corrupt Practices:** Political appointments not only choke academic and creative freedom, but also lead to corrupt practices, including those in licensing and accreditation.
- **Bureaucratisation of Universities:** At present, many educational institutions and regulatory bodies, both at the Central and State levels, are headed by bureaucrats.
- **Nepotism:** Favouritism and nepotism in staff appointments and student admissions. This reflects a **'rent-seeking culture'** within the academic community.
  Rent-seeking is an economic concept that occurs when an entity seeks to gain added wealth without any reciprocal contribution of productivity. Typically, it revolves around government-funded social services and social service programs.

Solutions

- **Implementing New Education Policy (NEP) 2020:**
    - The NEP 2020 claims that it is based on **principles of creativity** and **critical thinking** and envisions an education system that is **free from political or external interference.**
    - The policy states that faculty will be given the **"freedom to design their own curricular and pedagogical approaches within the approved framework,** including textbook and reading material selections, assignments and assessments".
    - It also suggests constituting a **National Research Foundation (NRF),** a merit-based and peer-reviewed research funding, which "will be governed, independently of the government, by a rotating Board of Governors consisting of the very best researchers and innovators across fields".
    - Further, it aims to **de-bureaucratise the education system** by giving **governance powers to academicians.** It talks about giving autonomy to higher education institutions by handing over their administration to a board comprising academicians.
- **Regulatory and Governance Reforms:**
    - **Restructure or merge different higher education regulators** (UGC, AICTE, NCTE etc.) to ensure effective coordination. Amend **UGC Act, 1956 to give legislative backing to regulatory structure.**
    - **Select Vice-Chancellors** of universities through a transparent & objective process.
    - Link **University grants** to performance.

Way Forward

- Every government laments the absence of world-class universities, without realizing that it is attributable in part to their interventions and the growing intrusion of political processes. Where politics is largely kept out—as in IIT, IIM or the IISc—institutions thrive.
- Higher education policy-makers must respond to declining AFi scores. This will also help in making "India a global knowledge superpower", aligned with the **United Nations Sustainable Development Goal-4 (SDG 4 -Quality Education).**
- Academic freedom is primary because universities are **places for raising doubts** and asking questions about everything. Exploring ideas, **debating issues** and **thinking independently** are essential in the quest for excellence.

Source:TH