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No excellence sans autonomy

Political intervention and excessive centralisation are major factors in the decline of higher education institutions



DEEPAK NAYYAR

EVERY GOVERNMENT LAMENTS the absence of world-class universities, without realising that their interventions and the growing intrusion of political processes are an important underlying cause. The downward trajectory of universities in India is no surprise. Political interference by the central government or state governments, which encroaches on the autonomy of universities, inevitably accentuates problems in higher education.

Such political intrusion in universities is not new. Starting in the early 1970s, state governments began to interfere in universities. It was about dispensing patronage and exercising power in appointments of vice-chancellors, faculty and non-teaching staff.

It was not long before similar reasons began to influence the attitudes of central governments towards universities. The turning point might have been the Emergency (1975-1977). This phenomenon increased in its incidence and spread during the quarter-century of coalition governments from 1989 to 2014. The competitive politics unleashed by changes in governments soon spilt over into universities not only as spheres of influence but also as arenas for political contests. Both Congress and the BJP were part of this process. Yet coalition governments provided a few checks and balances.

Political intervention and encroachment by governments with an absolute majority gathered momentum after the general election in 2014. The period since then has witnessed a pronounced increase in intrusion and government intervention in universities, which has gathered further momentum since mid-2019.

The blame for the state of our universities cannot be laid at the door of politics and governments alone. Universities as communities, and as institutions, are just as much to blame. The quality of leadership at universities has declined rapidly, in part because of partisan appointments by governments of VCs who are simply not good enough as academics or administrators, and in part because most VCs simply do not have the courage and the integrity to stand up to governments, but have an eye on the next job they might get. The professoriate is mostly either complicit, as part of the political process in teachers' unions, or silent, preferring to look the other way, engaged in their narrow academic pursuits. Those who stand up are too few. The students are either caught up in the same party-political unions or opt out to concentrate on their academic tasks.

For university communities, it is imperative to recognise that such compromises are self-destructive as acts of commission. So is opting out, as an act of omission. Indeed, if universities want autonomy, it will not be conferred on them by benevolent governments. They have to claim — indeed, consciously protect — their autonomy, simply because autonomy is as autonomy does.

At universities, the appointment of VCs is the essential first step, if not a necessary condition, for subsequent intervention. In central universities, it is the prerogative of the Visitor — the President of India — who is not bound by the advice of the Council of Ministers in this matter, to select the vice-chancellor from the panel submitted by the search committee, which includes two distinguished persons from outside, nominated by the executive council of the university. Alas, these checks and balances embedded in the statutes are now circumvented by design



C R Sasikumar

with purposive choices.

Once the VC is appointed, the appointments of deans of faculties and heads of departments are now an administrative decision, as the non-discretionary principle of the appointment by seniority or rotation has been dispensed with. Deans and heads are no longer independent voices. Thus, the process of shortlisting candidates cannot be objective or fair. The checks and balances built into university statutes for appointments of faculty members are circumvented further through purposive manipulation in the choice of subject experts in selection committees, who are mostly not qualified for the role. And these subject experts often refuse to sign the minute unless the specified candidates are selected.

It would be no exaggeration to state that faculty appointments at universities, as well as constituent undergraduate colleges, are increasingly driven by RSS ideology and BJP preferences in politics, with a focus on loyalty rather than talent or merit.

The ideology of the BJP and the RSS, which shapes their social and political perspective, is now exercising a profound influence on higher education in India. There are two apparent manifestations of this unfolding reality. First, there is a visible emergence of institutionalised control mechanisms that decide what universities can or cannot do. Second, appointments at universities, which should be the domain of universities alone, are increasingly influenced, if not shaped, by the political motivation and the invisible hand of governments in office.

The primary instrument of control in the sphere of teaching, whether appointments or curricula, is the University Grants Commission (UGC). There are subsidiary instruments of control in the sphere of research, indirectly through institutions such as the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), Indian Council of Philosophical Research (ICPR), Council of Scientific & Industrial Research (CSIR), Department of Science & Technology (DST), etc. Even admissions processes have been centralised in the National Testing Agency — CUET, JEE, NEET — the competence and integrity of which has been repeatedly questioned as leaks and scandals have surfaced. The rationale for such a centralisation is questionable and flawed.

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research at universities is among the primary functions of the UGC. How can it independently evaluate the quality of university appointments if it is such an integral, if not complicit, part of the process? The UGC is the problem — it cannot be a solution. It performs the functions of licensing, regulation and disbursement. These three functions are not performed by one institution anywhere in the world because this eliminates all checks and balances.

Such power enables the UGC to exercise enormous control over universities. Its interventions at political behest and its belief that one-size-must-fit-all drives its fetish for standardisation, whether curricula, appointments, promotions, salaries, evaluation, administration or institutional architecture. Such levelling crowds out or pre-empts excellence, because it stifles diversity, pluralism and differentiation in higher education, all of which are necessary to develop academic excellence.

It is clear that the process of appointments at universities, undergraduate colleges and other higher education institutions in India is now seriously flawed. It is no longer objective. Selections are shaped by political preferences and political networks. The quality of those appointed to leadership positions in higher education, even if for limited tenures, is critical, because they willingly cede the autonomy of their institutional space for their political commitment or simply their career paths.

The quality of those appointed to faculty positions is perhaps even more critical because it will shape the future of higher education. If persons who are not fit to teach are appointed, it is bound to hurt successive generations of students, as these are permanent positions until the age of retirement at 65 years. This can only mortgage the future of public universities or other higher education institutions in India, for there are long-term consequences of what appear to be short-term interventions at a point in time. Moreover, it is exceedingly difficult to reverse such processes, even if and when governments change, because the time lags in implementing correctives are long.

It takes decades to build universities or higher education institutions, months to destroy them, and at least a decade to rebuild them.

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WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

“To have to return to the discussion on mob violence every other week feels like a Sisyphean exercise by now—an unlikely fate given the promise of the July uprising to make a break from past authoritarian practices.”

— THE DAILY STAR, BANGLADESH

An unequal justice

Differing trajectories of Malegaon and Mumbai blast cases raise disturbing questions about criminal justice system



M R SHAMSHAD

THE EDITORIAL 'Malegaon questions' (*IE*, August 4) correctly points out that the acquittals in the Malegaon case and the Mumbai train blasts case "just 10 days apart" raise "serious and urgent questions about the perils of the due process of justice". However, the two cases proceeded in very different ways and present shocking contrasts — including in the political response to the verdicts — in the lapses they underline.

A bomb blast took place in Malegaon, Maharashtra, on September 29, 2008, killing six people and injuring 101. The prosecution examined more than 300 witnesses. Over the time, several accused were discharged from various charges, and some of those discharge orders were later set aside by the High Court. Despite the involvement of three premier investigating agencies, the Local Crime Branch (Malegaon, Nashik), the Anti-Terrorism Squad (ATS), and the National Investigation Agency (NIA); the trial concluded after 17 years. Ultimately, all the accused were acquitted.

The trial's outcome underlined a glaring failure of our criminal justice system. Despite exhaustive efforts, the agencies could only establish a suspicion of involvement, not evidence strong enough to secure a conviction. The court categorically held that the prosecution must prove guilt "beyond reasonable doubt" and that "no reliable, cogent, and acceptable evidence" existed to warrant a conviction. Furthermore, it reminded us that courts are not meant to "proceed on popular or predominant public perceptions".

Even more shocking is the prosecution's failure to validate the administrative sanctions required to prosecute the accused under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA); sanctions issued by top-level bureaucrats. The court attributed this to selective evidence collection and procedural lapses. It remarked that the investigation showed signs of "unwarranted procedure in collection of samples" and a "failure to perform their own duty."

Contrast this with the July 11, 2006 Mumbai train blasts, in which seven coordinated explosions killed 187 people and injured over 800. The ATS arrested and charge-sheeted 13 accused. The trial concluded in six years, with all 13 being convicted. However, on appeal, the Bombay High Court found that there was no legally tenable evidence to sustain the convictions. All 13 were acquitted.

In both cases, the investigating and prosecuting agencies stand exposed. The heads of these agencies should hang their heads in shame. They have betrayed the trust of victims, their families, and the pub-

lic at large. These failures are not just administrative lapses; they are systemic breaches of a constitutional duty.

In our system, criminal prosecutions too often serve as tools for propaganda rather than delivering justice. From the day of the incident through the trial, media coverage tends to focus on narratives based on the identity of the suspects or the political sensitivity of the matter, rather than objectively examining the facts. This creates a "feel-good" atmosphere for investigators and prosecutors, encouraging complacency and negligence.

What investigators must understand is this: Guilt must be proved with solid, admissible evidence. Courts are not meant to be sympathetic to investigative lapses. They are bound by constitutional mandates and legal precedents set by the Supreme Court of India. Courts cannot and must not lower evidentiary standards to accommodate poorly built cases.

Now, consider the responses of the Maharashtra government and political leadership to these two verdicts. In the

Mumbai train blast case, when the Bombay High Court pronounced its acquittal on July 21, 2025, the state government filed an appeal in the Supreme Court on the same day. A stay on the acquittal was granted on July 24, 2025.

In sharp contrast, when the Malegaon blast verdict was delivered on July 31, acquitting all accused, the Chief Minister

of Maharashtra immediately issued a public statement exonerating them. He claimed that the previous government had falsely implicated the accused due to their affiliation with a "saffron group", conveniently forgetting the facts of the Mumbai train blast case. Instead of committing to finding the real perpetrators or announcing that the verdict would be appealed, as was done in the Mumbai case, the government gave a clean chit to the accused within hours.

Most of the accused in the Malegaon case were granted bail during the prolonged trial, after spending seven to nine years in custody. Once released, one went on to contest elections and served as a Member of Parliament, while another rejoined the Indian Army. Others resumed their lives outside prison. In stark contrast, the accused in the Mumbai train blast case remained incarcerated from 2006 until their acquittal in 2025; nearly two decades behind bars.

These blatant disparities raise serious questions about the fairness, consistency, and accountability of our criminal justice system; questions that the system must answer.

Justice cannot be selective. The detention of accused persons cannot continue without accountability. Justice cannot depend on who the victim is or what religious or political group the accused belongs to. Until our investigative agencies are made accountable, we will continue to see such tragic failures, and victims will continue to be denied justice.

The writer is senior advocate, Supreme Court of India



VASANA BALA

MY GENERATION INHERITED the *Sholay* fandom; I had heard the story of the film for more than half a decade before I even watched it. I come from the *Mr India* generation, but my father and grandfather insisted the classics were *Mackenna's Gold*, *Enter The Dragon* and *Sholay*. I know that my father's actual favourite film was *Zanjeer*, but such was the peer pressure to call *Sholay* the all-time favourite that my father briefly succumbed to it.

I keep saying "favourite" because that was the word we used back then when talking about the films we loved. We never used the word "love" itself to describe our feelings towards anything, including films — an odd hesitation that led to the word "favourite" becoming the very pinnacle of our expression of approval.

For a while, until the age of nine or 10, I resisted the hype, although my older cousins who had access to *Sholay* on VHS were already converted (yes, unfortunately, our

Gabbar Singh sold us biscuits

Such was our love for 'Sholay'. It made Hindi cinema cool in new ways

Sholay experience came via VHS tapes, not the big screen). Maybe it was the violence in the film or the menace of Gabbar Singh (Amjad Khan) that kept them from letting us younger ones watch *Sholay* earlier, but when they saw I could brave Tina's death in *Mr India* — watching it multiple times to boot — they knew I was ready. I was ready to see Gabbar and watch *Yeh dosti...*, and brave the death of Jai (Amitabh Bachchan). We got the *Sholay* VHS, making sure it was a good print. I clearly remember the tape we got from the video library — it was one of the most important in their collection, with the title embossed in silver.

Not once did I imagine that a film whose every scene, song and dialogue I was already familiar with would make my jaw drop. I cried inconsolably when Jai died — no, Tina's death had not prepared me for this. In fact, it's still difficult to watch Tina die on screen in *Mr India*, nor have I made peace with Jai's death in *Sholay* or Jack's in

Titanic (okay, maybe Jack's demise isn't as much of an issue). Soon, I was among the "if *Sholay* is not your favourite film, you are not my friend" gang.

The current generation might not give in to such bullying from the *Sholay* fandom, but there was a time when its status was undisputed. The denims, the motorbike with the side-car, the theme music and the bromance got us all picking our respective Jai or Veeru in childhood.

The image of the dreaded, tobacco-spitting Gabbar was even used to sell us Parle-G — such was the extent of our love for *Sholay*. Orchestras exploded with songs from the film, and mimicry artists had a bumper season imitating not just Gabbar but also his henchmen Kalua (Viju Khote) and Sambha (Mac Mohan) as well as Soorma Bhopali (Jagdeep). *Chakki peesing* was probably the first and the most popular Hinglish phrase of Indian cinema.

Thank God we didn't have studio exec-

utives and algorithms back then asking director Ramesh Sippy to trim scenes that were not taking the "plot" ahead. The flavour of a great film goes beyond the "hero" and "heroine"; it comes from its characters, everyone who lives in that world — no one in *Sholay* is a "junior artiste", everyone is an "artiste"!

It was in *Sholay* that we first encountered a fusion of Western cool and heartland epic. Earlier, films were defined by the coolness of Dev Anand or Shammi Kapoor, or they were Dilip Kumar or Manoj Kumar heartland epics. *Sholay* gave Indian audiences something they had never experienced before. Even 50 years after its release, it remains one of the most talked-about films, inspiring as many jibes of "you haven't seen it yet!" as ecstatic declarations of "I have seen it more times than you."

Bala is the writer and director of Mard Ko Dard Nahi Hota and Monica, O My Darling

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

SC AND DOGS

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'A convenient smokescreen' (*IE*, August 13). The Supreme Court's order on relocating stray dogs violates existing laws and undermines its constitutional role as the guardian of the law. It overlooks the real cause as well. Rabies spreads not because street dogs exist, but due to poor immunisation and sterilisation by municipalities. Instead of addressing this systemic failure, the Court's order wrongly targets animals without a voice, ignoring their legal and constitutional protections.

Swarnava Mitra, Kolkata

SINISTER DESIGN

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'The Munir Show' (*IE*, August 13). It is clear that Asim Munir is being used as a prop and mouthpiece by the Donald Trump administration, perhaps to warn India not to make any moves against Washington, DC given the recent tensions around trade. India should, however, not be rattled by such hollow bluster.

Ravi Mathur, Noida

HASTY ORDER

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'The Court Strays' (*IE*, August 13). The Supreme Court's recent judgment on stray dogs has seemingly not gone down well with animal enthusiasts. The decision to rehabilitate them to shelters in a short period of two months is not well-thought-out. The current infrastructure is certainly not enough to handle the large street dog population of Delhi-NCR. Further, the move requires the earmarking of substantial funds and hiring of experts. The apex court is putting the cart before the horse by not focusing on the need for a sterilisation drive and taking all stakeholders into confidence.

Aanya Singhal, Noida