‘No anti-nationalism’ clause threatens critical thinking

Khinvraj Jangid 27 July 2019

Private universities are growing in India in the fields of humanities and social sciences and making quite a lot of noise about their global academic ambitions.

They intend to deliver what government universities have not – a higher education of potentially global standards. Government universities are insufficient in number as well as simply not in a position to offer the best higher education due to the paucity of government funding.

One can see the gradual decline of higher education in the inner workings or academic output of government-run universities. They not only suffer from government negligence, but also from the political interventions and administrative controls that governments tend to impose.

One example of this is the recent unilateral ordinance in Uttar Pradesh, India’s most populous state, which has over 232 million people living there.

One of the clauses of the ordinance with which the state government intends to restrict the autonomy of 29 private universities concerns freedom of thought and critical thinking. According to the proposed draft of the ordinance, these universities must ensure that no ‘anti-national’ activities (no definition given) will take place on their premises. Nationalism is the sacred ideal universities must serve rather than critical knowledge.

The private university ordinance route was taken instead of the more democratic legislative route of passing it as a bill in the assembly. It is arbitrary by definition as it allows no discussion, debate or questioning from the political opposition.

Positive impacts

The stated goal of the ordinance is to ‘regulate’ private universities so they do not charge exorbitant tuition fees and have some common parameters for admissions. That is to be welcomed if it means private universities will have to abandon a random fee structure which is often very high and, as a result, inaccessible for millions in India who cannot afford to pay much for education.

In most private universities, including where I teach, you don’t get to meet students from villages, from lower castes and Dalits (‘untouchables’) or Muslims. Obviously these many groups cannot pay for private education.

Another good point in the legislation is a mandate that private universities cannot have less than 75% of faculty paid on a contractual basis. This will ensure more jobs, a better pay scale and much-needed job security.

Paradoxically, most of the government universities are run by ad-hoc faculty in Uttar Pradesh and India. There is no such instruction to government universities.

The significant problem embedded in the proposed ordinance concerns the threat to critical thinking and freedom of thought in the ‘anti-national’ clause. Asking any university to give an undertaking to control national or anti-national activity on campus is bizarre. What that activity might be is not defined so any interpretation by politicians or bureaucrats can turn critical thinking into anti-nationalism.

For example, a historian’s talk about medieval India and the Mughal period might be questioned if it does not concur with a right-wing narrative against Muslim rulers.

Any public gathering of students on campus can be termed as anti-national if it is about human rights in
Kashmir or the burning of copies of *Manusmriti*, the legal text of some Hindu laws, by the *Dalits* who have a problem with this book as it codifies and legitimises the caste system.

Student politics will likely be the first victim of this ordinance. Interestingly, private universities are usually fairly 'apolitical' and most do not allow students' unions. What I suspect is that this order is intended to make it difficult for critical historians, political scientists or sociologists to work independently in the emerging private universities.

**World rankings**

The government of India, under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, is also taking desperate measures to reform higher education at the national level.

The ‘new India’ is distressed by the fact that none of the Indian universities are earning a good position in the various world rankings of universities.

The Modi government came up with the idea of ‘**Institutions of Eminence**’, which is a way of granting extra financial assistance to some government universities and full academic autonomy to some private universities.

The institutions defined as eminent will have the academic, administrative and financial autonomy to do better and to achieve a worthy ranking globally.

Apparently, for the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh Yogi Adityanath, who was appointed by Modi, the goal of higher education is nationalism and not global ranking. Encouraging critical thinking, broad-ranging knowledge or individual self-realisation are no concerns in either case.

*Dr Khinwraj Jangid is assistant professor of Israel studies at OP Jindal Global University, Delhi NCR, India.*