

Webinar on "Academic Freedom in South Asia" attracts internationally renowned scholars

Concerned by reliable reports of harassment of academics in India, the South Asia Institute hosted the Webinar "Academic Freedom in South Asia" on 02 August, in which the following, internationally renowned scholars took part: Rehman Sobhan, freedom fighter and economist, Bangladesh; Mridula Mukherjee, JNU historian and former director of the Nehru Museum, Delhi; Nandini Sundar, anthropologist and prize-winning scholar of development and human rights, Delhi University; Krishna Bhattachan, sociologist and indigenous rights activist, Kathmandu; Fatima Ihsan, Educationist and Director of the Centre of Excellence in Gender Studies at Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad; and Kalinga Tudor Silva, sociologist, medical historian and former director of the Centre for Minority Studies in Sri Lanka.

The Webinar was introduced by William Sax, Professor and Head of Anthropology, South Asia Institute, after which the international guests were introduced by Rahul Mukherji, Professor and Head of Political Science and Executive Director, South Asia Institute. Each participant made a ten-minute presentation on the state of academic freedom in his or her country. This was followed by a short question and answer period and a discussion of the next steps to be taken.

Our working definition of academic freedom was "the freedom of teachers, students, and university institutions to pursue knowledge, teach, and conduct research without any undue interference or fear of repression from the state, or any other agencies, structures, or individuals." All participants supported equal access to university study for all persons, based on merit and without discrimination on the basis of gender, sexual orientation, religious community, ethnicity, or disability, except insofar as these play a role in established equal opportunity policies. All participants unambiguously condemned any attempt by governments, universities, or non-governmental organizations and institutions to restrict this freedom by means of arrest, imprisonment, physical assault, restricting movement, intimidation, blocking of career advancement, withholding permission to attend conferences, and cutting retirement benefits. They also condemned vigilantism directed against academics and students, along with violence and the stifling of free expression by student groups. It was suggested that such violence occurs where students do not share roles in the university's governance, and/or when there is a nexus between certain student groups and governments, ensuring impunity when students engage in violence. Access to the universities, and their public role, were seen to be important for making higher education relevant for the citizenry at large. It was agreed by everyone that along with academic freedom come academic responsibilities of various kinds: to support the free and open exchange of views, to honestly report and never falsify research outcomes, and to encourage criticism from all quarters, especially students.

Beyond these points of settled agreement, participants identified further ways in which academic freedom can be threatened. When academic appointments and administrative placements within the universities are politicized by making them on the basis of party loyalty, ideological purity, or communal identification, rather than on the basis of merit and established equal opportunity policies, academic freedom is threatened. When the media exacerbates negative images or reports news in a biased way, so that popular opinion turns against universities, academic freedom is threatened. When research is funded by for-profit businesses who attempt to influence its outcome, academic freedom is threatened. When those pursuing academic careers are pushed into the international "Precariat" so that their

financial vulnerability makes it difficult for them to resist pressures of various kinds, academic freedom is threatened. When the word "university" is used for trade schools or other educational institutions for whom "academic freedom" is not of great importance and therefore neglected, academic freedom is threatened. When private colleges are run as teaching shops or business enterprises, where faculty and students don't have much voice, academic freedom is threatened. Strengthening public tertiary education is therefore one important way to support academic freedom.

Some participants suggested that our working definition of academic freedom should be enhanced, modified, or even replaced. For example, it was suggested that we should ensure that the academic freedom of Indigenous Peoples be explicitly mentioned in our working definition, that academic freedom should not contribute to the colonization of Indigenous Peoples, and destruction of their collective ways of life, ancestral lands, territories and resources and customary self-government systems, and that we should add the phrase "and with due respect to Mother Earth" and its custodians. It was also suggested that the oral traditions which are the basis of indigenous knowledge be explicitly acknowledged. It was pointed out that most or all of those in the Webinar could be described as "liberal progressives," and that a more inclusive discussion would include "right wing" opinions as well. It was noted that the Webinar was hosted by a Europe-based institution which, by virtue of its organizing role, exercised considerable power over the outcome. It was suggested that it would be worth discussing whether the form taken by South Asian universities, deriving as it does from the colonizing powers, restricts academic freedom in some way, and whether one should consider alternative forms of higher education, and/or whether other forms of internal colonization restrict academic freedom. It is important to understand the post colonial context of higher education where English is the main language, and the research agenda is set by western standards and interests. How to make education more relevant to the local context, and to build on local knowledge, is a longstanding concern that we might wish to take up in the future, at the country level as well as internationally.