

# Biometrics in Indian Universities: Seeking Excellence through Surveillance

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## Abstract

*The moot idea behind the introduction of biometric attendance is to keep a tab on teachers. It's a mechanism to track teachers' regular presence. This will aid in providing more teaching hours to students. It's a weapon to counter late arrival of teachers. The moot conundrum that strikes one's imagination is quite intriguing: is university a mere teaching institution? Does teaching constitute the exclusive and only function of universities? Is there any difference between a school and a university? Is there any similarity between a teacher in a school and a university academician? Is it necessary that a university must function in accordance with the schedule followed in schools? Unfortunately, there is a veiled drive to colonize the domain of education and academics. The modern bureaucracy has begun to show its crass intolerance towards the autonomy available to the domain of academics. A different form of colonization has begun in the domain of academics that seeks to plunder academic freedom/ growth, stop continual growth of learning, terrorize teachers and treat them as mere salaried teaching employees. Armed with weapons of crass bureaucratic codes and technological devices, the modern State seeks to restrict teachers' growth/ academic freedom and paralyze them as teachers on permanent basis. The recent weapon of biometric attendance to record and restrict teachers' presence inside the university boundary is just a tip of the iceberg.*

*Key words: Biometric attendance, Surveillance, Bureaucratization, Terror Psychosis*

## **Introduction**

Universities are increasingly reeling under multiple batteries of academic feudalism, centralization, biometrics and bureaucratization. Autonomy appears merely rhetoric. Contrary to hitherto held convention, universities are no more autonomous bodies. They are no longer regulated by academic norms. Instead, they are increasingly brought under the state's centralized governance and monitored by bureaucratic norms. As one looks at the contemporary reality, the State's agenda is quite conspicuous: there is a well-orchestrated attempt to turn university into another government office, bureaucratize its functioning, ruin its sanctity / uniqueness and deprive itself of its liberal ethos. Academic autonomy remains a mere rhetoric. State has begun to develop a reductionist approach to academics. It now seeks to reduce a university academician to a mere teaching employee and education to a mere commodity. It has begun to manufacture alternative mechanisms to monitor and evaluate teachers. It believes that commitment can be quantified, sincerity can be measured and productivity can be attained through scientific tools, techniques, technology and terror psychosis. The recent move to install biometric machine for recording teachers' attendance in universities in India is a case in point.

The din and bustle concerning biometric attendance across universities is yet to settle down. There has been stiff resistance to the move by the university communities. The reason is obvious. A university is a centre for higher excellence. It is rooted in production and dissemination of knowledge that is universal (Bhushan 2016). Teaching, research and related assignments constitute primary responsibilities of a teacher. It is preposterous to presume that the job of a teacher begins and ends in classroom. A teacher is one who is a continuous learner/ researcher in his own subject matter. In that sense, a teacher's 'stage' is not limited to his classroom/ department: it encompasses his study room, Department chamber, libraries, reading rooms, laboratories etc where he defines himself, where he is engaged in learning, where he undertakes his research, where he discovers new ideas/ knowledge and where he promotes his young generation of researchers. In that sense, a teacher never rests; a teacher never stops learning; a teacher never stops reading; a teacher never stops writing and a teacher never

retires. He reads/ learns round the year. A teacher works much more hours as a part of homework for his performance in university.

### **Mindless Bureaucratization**

Unlike government officials, teachers' actual working hour is not restricted to the 10 am to 5 pm official schedule and their working platform/ venue is not confined to their university departments. The modern State needs to realize, academicians cannot be made prisoners of bureaucratic codes. True, they are appointed by the modern State and they receive remuneration as a part of their service rendered to the State. Needless to mention, the state needs to realize that they cannot be equated with typical bureaucrats/ office employees; and for that matter they cannot be governed by the strict office schedules of bureaucracy. A true academician draws his wisdom from a series of quarters that transcends the university boundary: classroom, campus library, libraries across the nation, fieldwork in ground realities at local/ regional/ national levels, interaction with significant others, everyday experiences, journals, Jstor and other pertinent web sources. Constant engagement with all these quarters enables one to deliver best to one's students, researchers, peers and one's own subject. This is reflected in one's teaching, research and publication. Confining an academician to one's own university boundary renders one handicapped. Any attempt to curtail this flexible liberty meant for this profession will only render academicians as teaching employees. A teacher's intellectual substance primarily stems from two sources: text view and field view. Constant engagement with both these domains of knowledge enables one grow as a promising teacher and prolific researcher. Any attempt to deprive a teacher of his due right/ prerogative goes against the fundamental ethos of education and academics. Unfortunately, there is a veiled drive to colonize the domain of education and academics. The modern bureaucracy has begun to show its crass intolerance towards the autonomy available to the domain of academics. A different form of colonization has begun in the domain of academics that seeks to plunder academic freedom/ growth, stop continual growth of learning, terrorize teachers and treat them as mere salaried teaching employees. Armed with weapons of crass bureaucratic codes and technological devices, the modern State seeks to restrict teachers' growth/ academic freedom and paralyze them as teachers on permanent basis. The recent weapon of biometric attendance to record and restrict teachers' presence inside the university boundary is just a tip of the iceberg.

There is a constant pressure on universities to introduce biometrics system as a tool of surveillance on their faculty members (i.e., Assistant Professors, Readers, Associate Professors and Professors). No wonder, perhaps with an utter fear of being punished, certain universities have already introduced it. It goes without saying, in a university which is supposed to function as a centre of higher excellence in teaching, research and production/ dissemination of knowledge, an installation of surveillance of this kind represents a repressive measure to curtail academic freedom and inject crass corporate logic in the university. Undoubtedly, this is not only a matter of grave damage for the university teaching community but also an assault on the growth of university academics.

### **Assault on Academic Freedom**

It appears, some degree of violence has become ubiquitous. To argue in line with Pathak (2018), from school to community, from hierarchical villages to gated communities in urban centres, from temples to marketplaces, from university to police station, from traditional caste/gender hierarchies to hyperreal media simulations: violence surrounds our everyday existence. It varies only in form and intensity. Biometrics as a coercive machinery of the modern state is symptomatic of State's 'hegemony' that continues to conquer academic world with all its ugliness. As it is aptly argued, academic freedom is increasingly under assault from authoritarian governments worldwide (Sundar 2018). It is now increasingly devalued in favour of administrative centralization, bureaucratization and standardization. The superimposition of biometrics on university academics causes a serious violence on teachers' basic rights. For the first time in the history of modern India, the State seeks to employ such quantitative technique to judge teachers. In the fitness of things, the State need not look at the academic domain with mistrust and suspicion. In fact, no academics can grow in an ambience of mutual mistrust and mutual

suspicion. Far from being dictatorial and deterministic, the State must evolve an ambience that motivates teachers and that aids in their growth.

It is often argued (Sahu), the moot idea is to keep a tab on teachers. It's a mechanism to track teachers' regular presence. This will aid in providing more teaching hours to students. It's a weapon to counter late arrival of teachers. The moot conundrum that strikes one's imagination is quite intriguing: is university a mere teaching institution? Does teaching constitute the exclusive and only function of universities? Is there any difference between a school and a university? Is there any similarity between a teacher in a school and a university academician? Is it necessary that a university must function in accordance with the schedule followed in schools? A critical scrutiny of these issues can help one realize where we are heading to.

## The Myth of Autonomy

There is an organized effort on the part of the modern state to invade university and plunder its autonomy. Perhaps, with its material prosperity, administrative sovereignty and arrogance, the modern State finds it difficult to digest universities as autonomous enclaves, universities as sites for dissents/ debates/ dialogues/ free thinking. It seeks to bring such enclaves under its surveillance and bureaucratic control. As it is rightly observed, surveillance has become a key mechanism through which the State tries to discipline, control and order everyone (Lyon 2001). State's conquest of academics operates in many ways.

- One, it seeks to trap university teachers in a different kind of 'iron cage' and continually remind them of their subjection.
- Two, there is a bureaucratic design to deprive a university of its relative autonomy. The grim situation in most of the universities, especially State universities is a case in point. No teacher's promotion/ service condition can be determined even if it is certified by the EC (Executive Council) of the University unless and until it is approved by the state bureaucracy (say, Secretariat or Raj Bhawan). The power of University's EC has been curbed to a large extent. Universities' apex bodies are now increasingly deprived of their basic right to decide on basic aspects like promotion, increment and appointments. Even sending grant (for salary) to universities hinges on state government's mercy. This explains the reasons as to why teachers are often not sure of receiving their salaries on 30<sup>th</sup>/ 31<sup>st</sup> of every month. Similarly, the decision concerning whether to offer and when to offer the pay commission benefits to teachers depends upon the discretion of the government. This is a systematic design not to empower but to enslave universities. Biometric attendance should not be construed as a mere intrusion; it is a colossal invasion of academic freedom. One still wonders, is it possible to have institutions of excellence without academic freedom?
- Three, often, there is a tendency to devalue and trivialize the profession called teaching; this is more so in case of university teaching. The modern State tends to resort to a crass 'ad hocism syndrome' for university academics: that is, the tendency to manage the show anyhow and by anybody. This explains as to why one witnesses the practice of engaging Guest Faculty/ Contract Faculty/ Adhoc Faculty in centres of higher excellence for running the show instead of seriously contemplating appointment of regular faculty for running universities. The economics of this practice is evident: to minimize expenditure in the domain of academics by paying meager amount to Guest/ Contractual/ Adhoc teachers (by not appointing permanent teachers and by deliberately delaying the recruitment drive in some way or the other). Ironically, one seldom comes across similar practice in other domains of work. For instance, we have not heard yet about engagement of Guest Judges/ Justices, Guest Cabinet Secretary, Guest IAS, Guest Doctor, Guest Police Commissioner etc in other sites of work. The moot question remains, if other domains of work (i.e., medicine, military, navy, air force, engineering, bureaucracy, judiciary etc) are not managed by Guest personnel, why is this strange practice adopted for the teaching profession alone? Is it because that this profession is bereft of rigor, complexity, seriousness and significance? Or, is it because this profession is insignificant and can be managed by any Tom, Dick and Harry. This is symptomatic of the extent to which this profession is looked down

upon by the state machinery. Further, this is indicative of State's approach to university in particular and higher education in general. To put in line with Nair (2002), this explains as to why a number of the university departments lack research orientation.

### The Inherent Paradox

Viewing from another angle, the so-called surveillance (of biometric attendance) does not speak the language of equality. It is selective, partisan and biased against the university community. One is often tempted to ask, are bureaucrats (i.e., IAS/IPS/ Allied Officers/ Civil Servants) judges, doctors, police and personnel of other domains asked to undergo similar surveillance in the State? Besides, it must be realized, a university is not a factory, nor is it a corporate house. It is a social institution with a cultural and human ethos. It cannot be measured in terms of its budget allocation, or taxes spent on it. It creates and recreates a "social stock of knowledge (Sharma 2016). The idea of biometrics is antithetical to the spirit of enquiry, research and freedom which a university represents. These techniques of surveillance, as Foucault (1975) says, represent state's techniques of surveillance, subordination and control.

University teachers are known for their outstanding erudition, innovation, innovative tools, research and extension and monumental contribution to the store house of knowledge. It is humiliating and demeaning for the teachers to record their attendance in the biometric system. The biometric system is a systematic academic policing which attempts to keep a check on the faculty members as far as their presence in the campus is concerned. There is no need of such a system in a University where the faculty members already have multiple responsibilities like teaching, research and administration. Even otherwise, one can ensure a person's physical presence in the campus, but teaching and research need ethics and aptitude which no system on earth can impose on anyone. It comes from within. It is aptly commented (Pathak 2019), it is increasing suspected that teachers earn salary without doing anything. They can deliver their best only when they are brought under surveillance. One still fails to realize whether this surveillance comes as a celebration of mediocrity or whether it comes as a conspiracy against emancipator and life-affirming education.

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