

Academic Freedom, Democratic Governance, And Institutional Excellence in Higher Education: An Interdisciplinary Study of Indian Universities and The Politics of Knowledge in A Global Context

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Received: 07 March 2026; **Accepted:** 05 April 2026; **Published:** 01 May 2026

Abstract: Higher education institutions occupy a uniquely strategic position in modern societies because they are expected simultaneously to produce knowledge, preserve intellectual autonomy, cultivate democratic citizenship, and contribute to national development. Yet these goals are not always mutually reinforcing. This article develops a theoretically integrated study of academic freedom, democratic governance, institutional excellence, curriculum politics, and the wider public role of universities, drawing strictly on the references provided. The study argues that universities are not neutral knowledge factories; they are historically situated institutions shaped by ideology, state power, social stratification, professional hierarchies, and competing visions of public purpose (Apple, 2004; Bourdieu, 1988; Kumar, 2005). In the Indian context, these tensions become especially significant because higher education stands at the intersection of democratic aspiration, governance crisis, ideological contestation, and policy reform (Béteille, 2010; Gupta, 2018; Jaffrelot, 2019; Yadav, 2018). At the same time, global discussions of academic freedom and world-class universities reveal that excellence without autonomy is intellectually fragile, while autonomy without institutional capacity risks symbolic rather than substantive freedom (Altbach, 2015; Altbach & Salmi, 2011; Pathania, 2016). The article further uses the literature on transboundary water governance as a comparative conceptual lens to illuminate how cooperation, conflict, sovereignty, and shared-resource management can help explain university governance in plural democratic systems (Giordano & Wolf, 2003; Jacobs, 2002; Kehl, 2017; Zeitoun & Mirumachi, 2008). Methodologically, the study employs a qualitative interpretive synthesis of the supplied references. The findings suggest that academic freedom, curricular pluralism, institutional legitimacy, and democratic vitality are mutually connected. Universities deteriorate when they become over-regulated, ideologically narrowed, or hierarchically closed, and they flourish when autonomy, accountability, intellectual diversity, and public purpose are balanced. The article concludes that the future of higher education in India and beyond depends on rebuilding universities as democratic institutions of critical inquiry rather than merely administrative instruments of state, market, or ideology.

Keywords: Academic freedom, higher education, democracy, university governance, curriculum politics, India, institutional autonomy.

Introduction: Universities stand at the center of modern intellectual life, but they also stand at the center of modern political struggle. They are expected to advance scientific research, cultivate reflective citizenship, transmit cultural traditions, generate

skilled labor, enable social mobility, and symbolize national progress. Yet the more central universities become to society, the more intensely their purpose is contested. Questions about academic freedom, curricular authority, institutional autonomy, social relevance, state regulation, and excellence are

therefore never merely technical matters of higher education administration. They are questions about democracy, knowledge, public reason, and the structure of power itself (Altbach, 2015; Apple, 2004; Bourdieu, 1988; Nussbaum, 2010).

This article is based strictly on the references provided, and those references collectively reveal an important insight: universities cannot be understood adequately through a single framework. Some of the cited works emphasize academic freedom and global higher education (Altbach, 2015; Altbach & Salmi, 2011). Others address ideology, curriculum, and the politics of knowledge production (Apple, 2004; Kumar, 2005, 2014). Others focus on the Indian democratic and governance context within which educational institutions operate (Béteille, 2010; Gupta, 2018; Jaffrelot, 2019; Rudolph & Rudolph, 2008; Yadav, 2018). Still others examine academic hierarchy, symbolic power, and the structure of the university as a field of social struggle (Bourdieu, 1988). In addition, an apparently separate set of references on transboundary water governance, water security, and river-basin management introduces themes of cooperation, sovereignty, shared resource administration, and conflict management that can be interpreted comparatively as conceptual resources for thinking about university governance in plural and divided societies (Giordano & Wolf, 2003; Jacobs, 2002; Kehl, 2017; Swain, 2008; Tortajada, 2008; Wolf et al., 1999; Zeitoun & Mirumachi, 2008). These references, when brought into conversation, make possible a more complex and more illuminating account of higher education than any narrow policy analysis could produce.

The central argument developed here is that universities are not simply educational organizations but contested democratic institutions. They are democratic not only because they may be publicly funded or embedded in constitutional societies, but because their internal logic depends on conditions closely related to democratic life: freedom of inquiry, plurality of viewpoints, institutional self-governance, critical debate, and the legitimacy of disagreement. When these conditions weaken, universities do not merely become less efficient; they become less academic in any substantive sense (Altbach, 2015; Pathania, 2016; Nussbaum, 2010). At the same time, universities also depend on governance structures, regulation, public accountability, and strategic coordination. The challenge, therefore, is not to choose between autonomy and governance, but to understand how they can coexist without destroying one another.

In the Indian context, this challenge is especially significant. India's democratic scale, social diversity,

colonial history, constitutional aspirations, and contemporary ideological conflicts make its universities highly revealing sites for studying the relation between higher education and democracy. Kumar's work on the political agenda of education and on the place of the social sciences in India shows that education has long been intertwined with wider projects of identity, state formation, and social imagination (Kumar, 2005, 2014). Béteille's reflections on universities at the crossroads suggest that Indian higher education faces not merely managerial strain but a civilizational question about what universities are for (Béteille, 2010). Pathania's discussion of academic freedom and the Indian university reinforces the concern that intellectual autonomy cannot be assumed as a natural institutional property; it is often contested, conditional, and vulnerable (Pathania, 2016). Meanwhile, broader political analyses of governance crisis, democratic practice, and ethnic democracy reveal that higher education must be located within the transformations of Indian democracy itself rather than treated as an isolated administrative sector (Gupta, 2018; Jaffrelot, 2019; Rudolph & Rudolph, 2008; Yadav, 2018).

The question of excellence further complicates this picture. In global policy discourse, universities are often judged by rankings, research productivity, international visibility, infrastructure, and competitiveness. Altbach and Salmi's work on world-class research universities demonstrates that excellence has become a defining aspiration of higher education systems around the world (Altbach & Salmi, 2011). Yet excellence is not a politically innocent ideal. It can stimulate investment and institutional ambition, but it can also narrow educational purpose by aligning universities too closely with global prestige metrics or technocratic performance cultures. If excellence is pursued without regard for academic freedom, democratic inclusion, or intellectual breadth, universities may gain measurable status while losing public depth. Nussbaum's defense of the humanities is especially relevant here, because it insists that democracy needs forms of education not reducible to economic utility or market competitiveness (Nussbaum, 2010). Her argument suggests that institutional excellence must be redefined beyond rank and output to include critical capacity, ethical imagination, and civic formation.

A related tension concerns curriculum. Apple's work on ideology and curriculum demonstrates that curricula are not neutral containers of knowledge. They are shaped by power, selection, legitimacy, and social struggle (Apple, 2004). Kumar similarly shows how colonialist and nationalist ideas structure educational purpose and content (Kumar, 2005). These insights are essential because contemporary debates about

universities often focus on governance, funding, and rankings while underestimating the political significance of what is taught, whose knowledge is legitimized, and how academic disciplines are valued. The social sciences and humanities occupy a particularly important place here. Kumar's concern with education and the social sciences in India, along with Nussbaum's defense of the humanities, suggests that democratic health depends on disciplines capable of self-reflection, critique, and historical understanding (Kumar, 2014; Nussbaum, 2010). If universities marginalize these disciplines, they may weaken precisely those capacities needed for democratic resilience.

Bourdieu's *Homo Academicus* adds another layer by showing that universities are also sites of symbolic struggle, professional reproduction, status hierarchy, and internal power competition (Bourdieu, 1988). This is crucial because discussions of academic freedom sometimes treat the university as if it were internally homogeneous, united against external interference. Bourdieu reminds us that universities themselves are structured by inequalities and struggles over legitimacy. Academic freedom, therefore, must be defended not only against the state or ideological actors outside the university, but also against internal hierarchies that silence marginal scholars, disciplines, or epistemic positions. This broader reading helps prevent romanticized accounts of academic institutions.

The policy environment matters as well. The National Education Policy 2020 and the University Grants Commission regulations and guidelines represent state efforts to structure and reform higher education in India (Government of India, 2020; University Grants Commission, 2020). Such policies can offer coordination, reform momentum, and expansion of institutional capacity. Yet they also raise enduring questions: when does regulation enable excellence, and when does it constrain autonomy? When does policy support intellectual growth, and when does it convert universities into implementation arms of political or bureaucratic agendas? These are not abstract concerns. They touch the core of whether universities can remain spaces of critical inquiry within increasingly centralized governance systems.

The inclusion of transboundary water governance literature may initially appear distant from questions of higher education. Yet these references become highly useful when read comparatively. The management of international river basins involves multiple actors, shared resources, competing sovereignties, asymmetries of power, and the need for institutional cooperation without total central control (Giordano &

Wolf, 2003; Jacobs, 2002; Wolf et al., 1999; Zeitoun & Mirumachi, 2008). Water interaction scholarship also challenges the simplistic opposition between conflict and cooperation, showing that governance often takes place within hybrid conditions where both coexist (Zeitoun & Mirumachi, 2008). This is a strikingly relevant framework for thinking about university systems. Higher education in large democracies is also a shared institutional terrain involving state agencies, universities, faculty, students, disciplines, public interests, and ideological forces. Governance is neither purely hierarchical nor purely autonomous. It is negotiated, conflictual, cooperative, and often asymmetrical. By reading the water governance literature as a conceptual analogue, this article deepens its account of institutional complexity.

The problem addressed here is therefore broader than whether universities are free or controlled. The deeper problem is how institutions of higher learning can sustain intellectual autonomy, democratic purpose, and public legitimacy under conditions of ideological conflict, bureaucratic regulation, global ranking pressures, and internal stratification. Existing debates often separate these issues: academic freedom is discussed as a rights question, institutional excellence as a performance question, curriculum as a pedagogical question, and governance as a policy question. The provided references suggest that this separation is misleading. These domains are interdependent. A university cannot be truly excellent if it lacks freedom. It cannot be intellectually free if governance structures undermine autonomy. It cannot contribute meaningfully to democracy if curriculum is ideologically narrowed. It cannot sustain legitimacy if it becomes detached from public purpose.

This article therefore seeks to fill a conceptual gap by integrating these domains into one analytical framework. Its first aim is to clarify the relationship between academic freedom and democratic life. Its second aim is to analyze how institutional excellence, curriculum politics, and internal academic hierarchy affect the public role of universities. Its third aim is to situate Indian higher education within wider debates about governance, ideology, and democracy. Its fourth aim is to use the transboundary governance literature as a comparative conceptual lens for understanding institutional coordination, conflict, and shared authority in higher education systems. Its fifth aim is to articulate a more substantive idea of the university as a democratic institution of knowledge rather than merely a policy sector or prestige mechanism.

The article argues that universities flourish when autonomy, accountability, plurality, and public purpose are held in productive balance. They decline when any

one of these dimensions overwhelms the others. Excessive bureaucratic regulation can suffocate intellectual life. Pure marketized excellence can hollow out democratic and humanistic purpose. Unchecked internal hierarchy can reproduce exclusion. Ideological homogenization can neutralize critique. The challenge is therefore not simply reform, but institutional reorientation. Universities must be defended as places where criticism is possible, disagreement is legitimate, and knowledge is not subordinated entirely to immediate political, economic, or cultural imperatives (Altbach, 2015; Apple, 2004; Bourdieu, 1988; Nussbaum, 2010; Pathania, 2016).

METHODOLOGY

This article adopts a qualitative interpretive review methodology based strictly on the references supplied by the user. No external sources, empirical datasets, internet materials, or additional scholarship have been introduced. The goal is not to produce a conventional systematic review limited to one narrow disciplinary topic, but to generate a theoretically integrated and publication-ready original research article through careful synthesis of a diverse but conceptually connected body of literature.

The reference set includes several distinct but overlapping domains: academic freedom and global higher education, institutional excellence, ideology and curriculum, Indian democracy and governance, academic structure and professional power, and transboundary water governance. Because these domains are not reducible to one empirical variable or one single policy question, an interpretive and integrative approach is most appropriate. This method allows the study to preserve the distinct contribution of each source while also building broader analytical connections among them.

The first stage of the methodology involved thematic classification of the sources. The literature was grouped into five major clusters. The first cluster focused on academic freedom, university autonomy, and global higher education excellence, including Altbach (2015), Altbach and Salmi (2011), and Pathania (2016). These works provide the conceptual basis for understanding freedom and excellence as institutional rather than merely individual properties. The second cluster addressed ideology, curriculum, and intellectual purpose, especially Apple (2004), Kumar (2005), Kumar (2014), and Nussbaum (2010). These texts make clear that higher education cannot be understood independently of questions about knowledge selection, civic formation, and the political meaning of education. The third cluster centered on academic institutions as social and hierarchical fields, particularly Bourdieu

(1988) and Béteille (2010), whose works highlight the tensions between intellectual ideals and institutional realities. The fourth cluster addressed Indian democratic and governance contexts through Gupta (2018), Jaffrelot (2019), Rudolph and Rudolph (2008), Yadav (2018), Government of India (2020), and University Grants Commission (2020). These sources were used to situate higher education within the larger environment of Indian democracy, policy, and political transformation. The fifth cluster focused on transboundary governance through Giordano and Wolf (2003), Jacobs (2002), Kehl (2017), Swain (2008), Tortajada (2008), Wolf et al. (1999), and Zeitoun and Mirumachi (2008). These references were treated as conceptually relevant to institutional coordination, conflict management, and governance across plural actors.

The second stage consisted of close conceptual reading. Each source was examined for its likely contribution to the broader question of how universities function as democratic and contested institutions. For example, Altbach (2015) was read as framing academic freedom not merely as a professional privilege but as a global institutional challenge. Apple (2004) was interpreted as demonstrating that curriculum is always linked to ideology and power. Kumar's writings were treated as key interventions into the political and social meaning of education in India (Kumar, 2005, 2014). Bourdieu (1988) was used to interpret the university as a social field marked by hierarchy and struggle. The policy documents were read not simply as administrative texts, but as expressions of state vision and regulatory ambition (Government of India, 2020; University Grants Commission, 2020). The water governance literature was read comparatively for its vocabulary of cooperation, conflict, asymmetry, shared authority, and institutional interaction (Giordano & Wolf, 2003; Zeitoun & Mirumachi, 2008).

The third stage involved thematic synthesis across the clusters. Several recurrent themes emerged. One was the tension between autonomy and governance. Another was the tension between excellence and public purpose. A third was the political nature of curriculum and knowledge selection. A fourth was the fragility of academic freedom in ideologically charged or heavily regulated systems. A fifth was the role of democratic context in shaping institutional legitimacy. A sixth was the insight that governance in complex systems is rarely a matter of simple command; it is often hybrid, negotiated, and conflict-laden. These themes were then treated as the core analytical building blocks of the article.

The fourth stage involved comparative conceptual

transfer. This was especially important for the transboundary water governance sources. These references do not directly concern universities, but they offer valuable analytical concepts. International river basins involve overlapping jurisdictions, contested sovereignty, shared dependence, asymmetrical power, and the need for institutional mechanisms that can sustain cooperation without erasing conflict (Jacobs, 2002; Kehl, 2017; Wolf et al., 1999; Zeitoun & Mirumachi, 2008). By transferring these concepts carefully rather than mechanically, the article interprets higher education governance in large democracies as an analogous terrain of shared institutional dependence, regulatory complexity, and negotiated authority. This is not a claim that river governance and universities are substantively identical. It is a claim that one body of literature provides a useful conceptual grammar for understanding another.

The methodological stance of the study is interpretivist rather than positivist. It assumes that universities are institutions shaped by meaning, power, and historical context, not just measurable outputs. Therefore, explanatory depth requires attention to how academic freedom is conceptualized, how curriculum is politicized, how governance is justified, and how excellence is imagined. A purely technical policy analysis would miss these dimensions. The references supplied themselves justify this approach because many are books or essays of theoretical and institutional reflection rather than narrowly quantitative studies.

This methodology also rests on the assumption that education and democracy are co-constitutive. That assumption is derived not from external theory but from repeated signals in the reference set. Nussbaum (2010) explicitly links education and democracy through the humanities. Kumar (2005, 2014) connects education to political and intellectual culture. Béteille (2010) highlights the crisis of the university as a public institution. Gupta (2018), Jaffrelot (2019), Rudolph and Rudolph (2008), and Yadav (2018) situate Indian public life within broader crises and transformations of governance and democracy. The methodological implication is that universities should be analyzed as political-institutional actors within democratic systems rather than only as academic organizations.

There are limitations to this methodology. First, the article depends on the titles and known thematic orientations of the provided sources rather than full empirical re-analysis of every text. Second, the transboundary governance analogy is conceptual rather than empirical. It enriches the interpretation but should not be mistaken for direct evidence about higher education policy. Third, because the source list

combines books, essays, institutional policy documents, and domain-specific governance studies, the evidence is heterogeneous. Yet this heterogeneity is also one of the study's strengths, because the problem under analysis is itself interdisciplinary and cannot be captured by one type of source alone.

The method is therefore best described as a qualitative interdisciplinary synthesis organized around conceptual integration. It aims to produce a coherent explanation of how academic freedom, curriculum politics, democratic governance, and institutional excellence interact within higher education systems, especially in India, while also showing how governance theories from another domain can clarify institutional complexity. This interpretive method supports the article's broader claim that the future of the university is inseparable from the future of democracy, public reason, and negotiated institutional coexistence.

RESULTS

The thematic synthesis of the provided references yields several major findings concerning academic freedom, university purpose, curriculum politics, democratic governance, institutional excellence, and the comparative value of transboundary governance concepts. These findings together support a multidimensional interpretation of higher education as a contested democratic institution rather than a neutral administrative sector.

A first finding is that academic freedom is not an optional ethical ideal added to university life after more practical concerns have been addressed; it is a constitutive condition of the university itself. Altbach (2015) presents academic freedom as a major global challenge in the twenty-first century, which suggests that intellectual autonomy is under strain even in formally developed higher education systems. Pathania (2016), focusing on the Indian university, reinforces that academic freedom must be analyzed as a concrete institutional issue rather than an abstract principle. The result emerging from the literature is that when freedom of inquiry, teaching, criticism, and disciplinary independence weakens, the university ceases to function as a genuinely academic institution even if its buildings, administrative structures, and degree systems remain intact.

A second finding is that institutional excellence and academic freedom are deeply connected, but not automatically aligned. Altbach and Salmi (2011) show that world-class research universities require substantial institutional capacity, talent concentration, governance effectiveness, and resources. However, the broader literature suggests that excellence cannot be reduced to infrastructure or prestige metrics alone. If

universities become highly organized but intellectually constrained, their excellence becomes brittle. The findings therefore imply that academic excellence without freedom is performative rather than substantive, while freedom without capacity may remain noble but institutionally fragile. The most durable excellence requires both.

A third finding is that curriculum is a site of ideological struggle, not merely a pedagogical sequence of topics. Apple (2004) makes clear that curriculum is inseparable from ideology and the politics of knowledge. Kumar (2005) further demonstrates that education in India has long been shaped by colonialist and nationalist ideas, while Kumar (2014) shows the contested place of the social sciences in Indian intellectual life. The result is that disputes over curriculum should not be treated as secondary cultural arguments unrelated to the structure of higher education. They are central to determining what kinds of citizens, professionals, and publics universities help create.

A fourth finding is that the humanities and social sciences have a special democratic significance that exceeds narrow utility calculations. Nussbaum (2010) argues that democracy needs the humanities, which suggests that universities cannot be judged only by their contribution to employability, technological competitiveness, or market demand. Kumar's concern with the social sciences in India supports the same broad conclusion (Kumar, 2014). The finding here is that disciplines which cultivate historical understanding, critical reasoning, ethical reflection, and interpretive complexity are not marginal luxuries. They are core democratic resources. A higher education system that weakens them may still function administratively, but it risks becoming democratically thinner.

A fifth finding is that universities are internally structured by hierarchy, symbolic capital, and unequal authority. Bourdieu's *Homo Academicus* reveals that academic institutions are not merely communities of shared truth-seeking but also fields of competition, status, exclusion, and professional reproduction (Bourdieu, 1988). Béteille's reflections on universities at the crossroads are consistent with the idea that institutional problems are not only external or governmental; they are also internal and structural (Béteille, 2010). The result is that defending academic freedom requires attention to intra-university relations as well as state pressure. Universities may reproduce conformity not only through regulation but through professional closure, hierarchy, and gatekeeping.

A sixth finding is that the Indian university system must be understood within the broader crisis and complexity

of Indian democracy and governance. Gupta (2018) describes a growing crisis of governance, Rudolph and Rudolph (2008) provide a long perspective on Indian democracy, Yadav (2018) discusses democratic politics in contemporary India, and Jaffrelot (2019) analyzes the rise of ethnic democracy under Hindu nationalism. These sources collectively indicate that higher education institutions in India do not operate in a politically neutral environment. They are shaped by democratic aspirations, state capacity issues, ideological contestation, and changing notions of national identity. The result is that debates about university autonomy or academic freedom in India are simultaneously debates about the democratic character of the polity.

A seventh finding is that state regulation in higher education is both necessary and potentially constraining. The National Education Policy 2020 and the University Grants Commission regulations demonstrate that the state seeks to shape the structure, direction, and standards of higher education (Government of India, 2020; University Grants Commission, 2020). The literature does not justify the simplistic conclusion that all state involvement is harmful. Large educational systems require coordination, quality assurance, resource allocation, and policy direction. However, when regulation becomes too centralized, too prescriptive, or too ideologically charged, it risks diminishing institutional autonomy and critical space. The result is that the challenge lies not in eliminating regulation but in designing governance arrangements that support rather than suffocate academic life.

A eighth finding is that universities in democratic societies carry public responsibilities that cannot be collapsed into either state service or market service. Nussbaum (2010) and Altbach (2015) strongly imply that universities must sustain critical thought and public reflection. Kumar (2005, 2014) and Béteille (2010) similarly suggest that higher education has a wider social meaning. The finding is that universities lose legitimacy when they are reduced to credentialing factories, nationalist cultural instruments, or ranking-driven performance machines. Their democratic legitimacy depends on maintaining some distance from immediate political and economic instrumentalization.

A ninth finding is that higher education governance in large and diverse systems resembles shared-resource governance more than simple top-down administration. This finding emerges from the comparative use of the transboundary water literature. Giordano and Wolf (2003), Jacobs (2002), Tortajada (2008), and Wolf et al. (1999) demonstrate that governance across international river basins requires

cooperation among actors with overlapping interests, unequal power, and partial sovereignty. Kehl (2017) shows that even in conflict-ridden contexts, cooperation remains possible, while Zeitoun and Mirumachi (2008) emphasize that conflict and cooperation often coexist rather than exclude one another. Applied conceptually to higher education, the result is that universities, regulators, faculty, and publics interact in a governance environment that is negotiated rather than fully centralized. Attempts to impose rigid command structures in such systems are likely to generate tension, resistance, or institutional distortion.

A tenth finding is that asymmetry matters greatly in governance. In transboundary water systems, upstream and downstream actors often possess unequal power and leverage, which shapes the terms of interaction (Swain, 2008; Kehl, 2017). By analogy, higher education systems are also marked by asymmetries: elite versus peripheral institutions, central regulators versus universities, administrative authorities versus faculty, dominant disciplines versus marginalized ones. The result is that formal cooperation may mask unequal power relations. This matters for academic freedom because rules that appear uniform may affect institutions and actors unevenly depending on their resources and status.

An eleventh finding is that cooperation and conflict are not opposites in institutional life; they are often simultaneous conditions. Zeitoun and Mirumachi (2008) explicitly reconsider the relation between conflict and cooperation in transboundary water interaction. This conceptual insight is extremely valuable for understanding universities. Higher education systems often contain continuous conflict over curriculum, autonomy, funding, appointments, and identity, yet these same systems continue to operate through forms of cooperation. The result is that institutional health does not require the absence of conflict. It requires structures capable of managing conflict without annihilating cooperation. This is a particularly democratic insight.

A twelfth finding is that the idea of the “world-class university” can become normatively thin unless grounded in democratic and intellectual values. Altbach and Salmi (2011) reveal the global attractiveness of excellence agendas, but when read alongside Apple (2004), Nussbaum (2010), and Bourdieu (1988), the literature suggests that excellence is never simply technical. It is shaped by decisions about what counts as valuable knowledge, which fields receive prestige, and whose work is visible. The result is that universities may become globally competitive while narrowing their internal diversity or public

mission. Excellence must therefore be critically interpreted, not merely celebrated.

A thirteenth finding is that academic freedom is linked to national democratic quality, but not reducible to it. Democracies may still witness severe restrictions, pressures, or exclusions within universities, especially under ideological polarization or majoritarian nationalism (Altbach, 2015; Pathania, 2016; Jaffrelot, 2019). Conversely, policy reform language may invoke autonomy and innovation while intensifying administrative control (Government of India, 2020; University Grants Commission, 2020). The result is that academic freedom must be defended through institutional design and professional norms, not assumed to follow automatically from general democratic identity.

A fourteenth finding is that the university remains one of the few institutions capable of mediating between knowledge, democracy, and public reason, but only if it protects plurality. The combined force of Nussbaum (2010), Altbach (2015), Kumar (2014), and Béteille (2010) suggests that higher education matters not just for skill production but for the maintenance of an open public sphere. The result is that universities are uniquely valuable because they can host disagreement without requiring immediate political resolution. That role becomes especially important in polarized societies.

Taken together, these findings indicate that higher education systems are best understood as shared democratic-intellectual infrastructures. They require coordination but cannot thrive under excessive centralization. They require standards but cannot thrive under ideological narrowing. They require excellence but cannot sustain legitimacy if excellence is severed from freedom, plurality, and public purpose. The university emerges from the reviewed literature not as a settled institution but as an arena of permanent negotiation among autonomy, governance, social power, and democratic responsibility (Altbach, 2015; Apple, 2004; Bourdieu, 1988; Government of India, 2020; Nussbaum, 2010; Zeitoun & Mirumachi, 2008).

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study allow for a broader interpretation of the university as one of the most revealing institutions through which to understand the condition of democracy itself. Higher education is often treated as a specialized sector requiring policy expertise, funding models, regulatory reform, and administrative modernization. While those dimensions are real, the supplied literature suggests that such a sectoral view is too narrow. Universities are political in

a deeper sense. They are institutions where societies decide what knowledge matters, who may speak authoritatively, what kind of citizens should be formed, how critique is tolerated, and how much freedom can be granted to organized intelligence. These are not peripheral questions. They are constitutional questions in the broadest democratic sense (Altbach, 2015; Apple, 2004; Kumar, 2005; Nussbaum, 2010).

The first major implication of the study is that academic freedom should be understood as a structural condition of truth-seeking rather than an individual privilege of professors. Discussions of academic freedom sometimes become personalized, focusing on whether this or that scholar may speak. While such cases matter, the literature points toward a broader conception. Altbach (2015) treats academic freedom as a global institutional challenge, while Pathania (2016) shows its importance within the Indian university. The deeper issue is whether institutions permit the sustained production of inconvenient knowledge, dissenting interpretation, and critical pedagogy. Without these conditions, research may continue and degrees may still be awarded, but the university's claim to intellectual authority becomes weakened because that authority depends on openness to contestation.

This leads to a second implication: universities are democratic not merely because they exist within democracies but because they model and sustain democratic habits of mind. Nussbaum (2010) argues that democracy needs the humanities, and this is not simply a disciplinary defense. It is a claim about the forms of judgment that democratic life requires: imagination, self-criticism, historical understanding, and the ability to see beyond immediate identity or utility. Kumar's concern with the social sciences in India similarly points to the role of reflective disciplines in democratic self-understanding (Kumar, 2014). If universities become spaces where only instrumental, technocratic, or politically filtered knowledge is valued, then a society may lose one of its principal institutions for cultivating democratic intelligence.

The third implication concerns excellence. Global higher education discourse has made the idea of the world-class university extraordinarily influential. Altbach and Salmi (2011) rightly show that research intensity, strong leadership, talent concentration, and resource support are crucial for institutional development. Yet excellence is not an ideologically innocent category. It encodes assumptions about what counts as valuable output, whose work is globally visible, and which institutional forms are worth imitating. If excellence is detached from academic freedom, curricular plurality, and public responsibility, it becomes a prestige technology rather than an

educational ideal. A university may become world-class in rankings and still be weak in democratic purpose. This is why the concept of excellence must be broadened. True institutional excellence includes not only research productivity, but also intellectual openness, disciplinary diversity, and the capacity to serve society without surrendering independent judgment.

A fourth implication is that curriculum is one of the most politically consequential sites in higher education. Apple (2004) and Kumar (2005) make it impossible to view curriculum as a neutral arrangement of knowledge. Every curriculum makes decisions about inclusion and exclusion, legitimacy and marginality, memory and forgetting. In democratic societies, these decisions must remain contestable. When curriculum becomes rigidly aligned with state ideology, partisan nationalism, or narrow utilitarianism, the university's critical function is compromised. This does not mean curriculum should be politically empty; that is impossible. It means curriculum should remain open to critique, revision, plurality, and disciplinary integrity.

A fifth implication follows from Bourdieu's work: universities are internally political even when external interference is absent. This insight is especially important because defenders of academic freedom sometimes imagine that autonomy from the state would automatically produce intellectual justice. Bourdieu (1988) shows that the university is structured by capital, hierarchy, exclusion, and competition. Some disciplines possess more prestige than others. Some scholars wield gatekeeping power. Some forms of knowledge are more easily institutionalized than others. Thus, the struggle for a democratic university must address internal inequalities as well as external control. Academic freedom should not be reduced to freedom for already powerful actors to reproduce their dominance unchecked.

The sixth implication concerns the Indian case specifically. The references on Indian democracy and governance indicate that universities cannot be analyzed separately from the broader political condition of the republic. Gupta (2018) describes democratic discontent through crisis of governance. Jaffrelot (2019) interprets contemporary India through the rise of ethnic democracy. Rudolph and Rudolph (2008) and Yadav (2018) emphasize the complexity and dynamism of democratic politics in India. Within such a context, higher education becomes a terrain on which competing visions of nationhood, citizenship, legitimacy, and knowledge are worked out. Academic freedom in India, therefore, is not only a professional issue. It is part of a larger struggle over the meaning of democracy, secularism, pluralism, and national

identity.

A seventh implication is that policy reform must be evaluated not only by declared intent but by institutional effect. The National Education Policy 2020 and University Grants Commission regulations can be read as attempts to modernize, standardize, coordinate, and improve higher education (Government of India, 2020; University Grants Commission, 2020). Yet the literature reviewed here warns against a simple reformist optimism. Universities may be transformed by policies that promise flexibility, interdisciplinarity, and excellence while simultaneously concentrating authority or narrowing interpretive space. The relevant question is therefore not whether reform is happening, but what kind of institutional subject the reform produces. Does it create more autonomous, capable, intellectually diverse universities, or more compliant, regulated, and administratively intensified ones?

An eighth implication arises from the comparative use of transboundary water governance. At first glance, river basins and universities may seem incomparable. Yet the conceptual transfer is revealing. Water governance scholars show that shared systems rarely function well through pure unilateral control, especially where multiple stakeholders, unequal power, and long-term interdependence are involved (Giordano & Wolf, 2003; Jacobs, 2002; Tortajada, 2008; Wolf et al., 1999). Higher education in a large democracy resembles such a shared system. Universities, regulators, governments, faculty, students, disciplines, and publics all possess stakes that cannot be reduced to one sovereign authority. Governance in such systems requires negotiation, trust-building, procedural fairness, and mechanisms for sustained interaction.

This comparison becomes even more illuminating when viewed through Zeitoun and Mirumachi's argument that conflict and cooperation coexist (Zeitoun & Mirumachi, 2008). Universities are not healthy because conflict disappears. On the contrary, universities should host conflict: between disciplines, ideas, methods, traditions, and interpretations. The problem arises when conflict becomes destructive because institutions no longer provide legitimate procedures for coexistence. Academic freedom is one such procedure. Collegial governance is another. Clear but limited regulation is another. The health of the university depends not on harmony, but on the capacity to manage conflict productively.

A ninth implication concerns asymmetry. In water governance, upstream power matters. In higher education, asymmetry also matters, though in different form. Elite institutions often possess more autonomy in

practice than peripheral ones. Dominant disciplines often shape what counts as merit. Central authorities may affect weaker institutions more severely than stronger ones. This means that formal rules of autonomy or regulation can produce unequal consequences across the academic field. Bourdieu's analysis helps explain these internal asymmetries, while the transboundary literature clarifies how unequal actors negotiate shared systems (Bourdieu, 1988; Kehl, 2017; Swain, 2008). A democratic higher education system must therefore attend to distributive questions of power and voice, not only to formal principles.

A tenth implication is that universities should be understood as public institutions of negotiated independence. This phrase is important because total independence from society or state is neither possible nor desirable. Universities receive public recognition, legal standing, funding, and legitimacy from broader society. They cannot and should not become self-enclosed intellectual republics answerable to no one. Yet if their dependence becomes too direct, immediate, or ideological, they lose the space necessary for criticism and long-term inquiry. What universities require is negotiated independence: enough autonomy to pursue truth without immediate coercion, enough accountability to retain legitimacy, and enough internal plurality to prevent autonomy from becoming oligarchic. The literature strongly supports this balanced interpretation (Altbach, 2015; Béteille, 2010; Government of India, 2020; Pathania, 2016).

An eleventh implication concerns democracy itself. The state of universities may serve as an index of democratic depth. When universities remain intellectually open, socially contested, and institutionally autonomous, democracy retains one of its most important reflective organs. When universities become disciplined into conformity, democratic societies lose not only academic vitality but part of their self-corrective capacity. Nussbaum's argument about the humanities, Kumar's analysis of education, and Altbach's concerns about academic freedom all point to this conclusion (Altbach, 2015; Kumar, 2005; Nussbaum, 2010). A democracy without strong universities may still vote, legislate, and administer, but it becomes weaker in reflection, criticism, and self-renewal.

A twelfth implication is that higher education debates must recover normative language. Much contemporary policy discourse is managerial. It asks how to improve quality, efficiency, ranking, innovation, or employability. Those questions matter, but the references supplied insist on broader concerns:

freedom, democracy, ideology, public purpose, and the meaning of excellence. If those normative terms disappear, universities risk being governed as logistical systems rather than intellectual communities. The result may be efficient administration without educational depth. This is precisely the kind of narrowing that several of the provided works resist (Altbach & Salmi, 2011; Apple, 2004; Nussbaum, 2010).

There are limitations to this study. Because it is built strictly from the provided references, it cannot incorporate the full range of empirical studies on Indian higher education, university autonomy, or global governance models. The transboundary water governance analogy is interpretive and conceptual rather than empirically direct. Some policy references are broad and do not provide detailed institutional outcomes. However, these limitations do not negate the value of the study. On the contrary, they highlight that the present article is a theoretically driven synthesis intended to illuminate structural relationships rather than measure them statistically.

Future research could move in several directions. Comparative studies could examine how different democratic systems balance university autonomy and regulation in practice. Empirical work could investigate how academic freedom varies across institutions within India, especially under different regulatory and political conditions. More detailed research is also needed on how policy reforms affect the humanities and social sciences, not only technical and professional sectors. Finally, governance scholars could develop the analogy between shared-resource governance and higher education more explicitly, especially regarding negotiation, asymmetry, and multilevel cooperation.

The deepest conclusion emerging from this discussion is that universities are one of the last institutional spaces where societies may learn to live with disagreement without immediate annihilation of the other side. That makes them intellectually valuable, but it also makes them politically vulnerable. States may wish to govern them tightly. Markets may wish to instrumentalize them. Internal elites may wish to monopolize them. Ideological movements may wish to discipline them. Yet the university's value lies precisely in resisting total capture by any one of these forces. It belongs neither wholly to the state nor wholly to the market nor wholly to its internal hierarchy. It belongs, at its best, to the public life of knowledge.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that the university must be understood as a democratic, intellectual, and contested institution whose future depends on the relationship among academic freedom, institutional

governance, curricular plurality, and public purpose. Drawing strictly on the supplied references, the study shows that higher education cannot be reduced to a technical system of training or performance. It is a domain in which societies negotiate the authority of knowledge, the legitimacy of criticism, the meaning of excellence, and the educational foundations of democracy (Altbach, 2015; Apple, 2004; Nussbaum, 2010).

The literature reviewed demonstrates that academic freedom is a necessary institutional condition for meaningful higher education, not an optional privilege. At the same time, it reveals that academic freedom alone is insufficient if universities remain internally hierarchical, socially exclusive, or detached from broader democratic purposes (Bourdieu, 1988; Béteille, 2010). The idea of excellence must therefore be reconstructed. True university excellence cannot be limited to rank, visibility, or output. It must include intellectual openness, disciplinary breadth, and the ability to sustain critical inquiry under public pressure (Altbach & Salmi, 2011; Pathania, 2016).

In the Indian context, these issues acquire special urgency because higher education exists within a democratic environment marked by governance tensions, ideological contestation, policy reform, and changing conceptions of national identity (Gupta, 2018; Jaffrelot, 2019; Yadav, 2018). The National Education Policy 2020 and University Grants Commission frameworks illustrate the state's ongoing attempt to shape universities, but the broader literature suggests that reform must be judged by whether it expands or contracts intellectual autonomy and democratic purpose (Government of India, 2020; University Grants Commission, 2020).

The comparative use of transboundary water governance literature adds a further insight: universities, like shared river basins, are governed within conditions of interdependence, asymmetry, conflict, and cooperation. This means that higher education governance should not be imagined as pure command or pure autonomy. It is a negotiated order that requires institutional mechanisms capable of preserving shared purpose amid divergent interests (Giordano & Wolf, 2003; Jacobs, 2002; Zeitoun & Mirumachi, 2008). That insight helps explain why simplistic solutions so often fail.

The central conclusion of this study is that universities flourish when freedom, governance, excellence, and democratic responsibility are held in dynamic balance. They decline when freedom is sacrificed to control, when excellence is severed from public purpose, when curriculum is ideologically narrowed, or when

institutional hierarchy suppresses plurality. The future of higher education in India and beyond therefore depends not merely on reforming universities as organizations, but on renewing them as public institutions of critical reason. A democratic society that weakens its universities ultimately weakens one of the primary places where it can still examine itself honestly.

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