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Premium

# From protests and suspensions to Noam Chomsky: The decline of South Asian University

The latest incident – a controversy over a reference to an interview with Noam Chomsky – shows how afraid the university is of teachers and students saying anything, even if they are simply quoting others.

Written by [Jayati Ghosh](#)

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 NewsGuard

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The University was formally established in Delhi in 2010 as a project of SAARC, to initiate and advance towards the twin goals of regional integration and academic excellence. (File photo)

The latest controversy in the South Asian University, over an interview with a philosopher mentioned in a student's research proposal that resulted in severe backlash and eventual resignation of an eminent foreign professor, would appear to be ludicrous if it were not so tragic. It culminates several years of decline in a university that began with much loftier ideals.

The University was formally established in Delhi in 2010 as a project of SAARC, to initiate and advance towards the twin goals of regional integration and academic excellence. Fourteen years later, mired in controversies and exhibiting the worst forms of attempted control over basic academic freedom, it has come to exemplify the failure of both under the current Indian ruling dispensation.

The original idea was for SAARC member countries to pool their resources to create a university that would become a centre of excellence, providing world-class facilities and professional faculty to attract students and researchers from every country in the region. The core objectives of the University, according to its own

vision statement, are “building a culture of understanding and regional consciousness; nurturing a new class of liberal, bright and quality leadership and building the capacity of the region in science, technology and other disciplines considered vital for improving the quality of life of the people”.

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Unfortunately, over the last decade, the antipathy of the Indian government towards academic autonomy and potentially critical thinking has affected the functioning of what should have been a regional university completely independent of any political interference from any one member government. This is troubling on many accounts, but also because legally speaking the university should be outside the control of the Indian government.

Indeed, in January this year the Delhi High Court ruled that since the South Asian University is an international organisation, it is not under its jurisdiction. Yet all the evidence points to attempts to control of the functioning of SAU by forces similar to those that have attacked the autonomy of other universities in India.

Especially in recent years, the university has been in the news for all the wrong reasons: unjustified suspensions of students and faculty, unlawful expulsions of students that even provoked major censure from courts in India, egregious demands made upon students, and attempts to stifle any protests, no matter how genuine and justified, while refusing to make required changes.

Some of the problems have come about because of chronic and increasingly drastic underfunding, which led to significantly worsening conditions for the students, many of whom were dependent upon scholarships that were pitifully small relative to costs and then eventually even denied to many. Stipends for students were cut drastically in September 2022, rendering many unable to continue their studies. A protest by students against this was suppressed, with several suspensions and even expulsions — and then faculty members who had come out in support of the students with reasoned and careful arguments were intimidated, humiliated and suspended.

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Then, in 2023, the university decided to require all incoming students to sign a declaration promising that they will “neither join in any agitation/strike for the purpose of forcing the authorities of the University to resolve any problem”, nor will they “participate in any activity which has a tendency to disturb the peace and tranquillity of academic environment of the SAU campus/or its hostel premises”, and even to declare that they are “not suffering from any serious/contagious ailment and/or any psychiatric/psychological disorder”. This extraordinary requirement would certainly be illegal in most countries with minimal laws relating to individual liberty and privacy. It has been roundly condemned within India as both inhumane and undemocratic, and no doubt it is also perceived as such by civil society in the other countries in the region, from which it is supposed to attract students.

The latest incident shows how afraid the university is of teachers and students saying anything, even if they are simply quoting others. A doctoral research proposal on Kashmir’s ethnography and politics was submitted to the university in November last year. Among various other citations, it included a personal interview with the renowned philosopher of linguistics, Noam Chomsky, who is possibly the most celebrated and respected intellectual of our times. In that interview, Chomsky argued that Prime Minister Modi is from a “radical Hindutva tradition” which is attempting to “dismantle Indian secular democracy” and “impose Hindu technocracy”.

The university administration found this reference to be so unacceptable that a show-cause notice was issued to the PhD scholar concerned and a disciplinary

inquiry was instituted against his supervisor, an eminent academic from Sri Lanka, Professor Sasanka Perera, who was one of the founding faculty of the university and had also served as Dean of Social Sciences and Vice-President. The student body apologised and took down the offending material, and Professor Perera has resigned from the University.

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This is significant not only for the overreaction of the University authorities, but also for the extent of fear and self-censorship that it reflects. It also removes the last vestiges of academic freedom in SAU and simultaneously indicates the attitude of the powers-that-be towards any genuine regional cooperation on equal terms. This supposedly international institution is blatantly showing the degree of its subordination to the current central government in India, and presumably its fear of possible reprisals even for referring to criticisms of it made by other international experts.

To anyone who has been witnessing the aggressive approach of the Modi government towards any form of independent thinking or criticism of its policies and actions coming from universities, this may come as no surprise. But remember, this institution is supposed to be a regional university in which all SAARC member countries have a stake. The Sri Lankan Ambassador to India originally protested at this treatment, but then quickly reversed her position, apparently concerned that this incident “could negatively impact bilateral relations between India and Sri Lanka”.

The losses are obvious in terms of the decline of academic quality and potential for learning within the country, and less of the soft power and trust within the region that will be ever more important in today’s complex geopolitics.



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India August 22, 2024 05:47 IST

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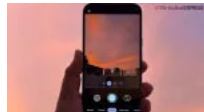
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