A threat to autonomy and research
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December 17th marks the Foundation Day of the Indian Statistical Institute (ISI) founded by Prasanta Chandra Mahalanobis in 1931. Ninety years have elapsed. On the last Foundation Day, the Institute had organized an interesting session in which many students, faculty and staff members provided their views on where they wanted to see ISI on attainment of a century of its existence. The President of the Institute, Shri Bibek Debroy – Chairman of the Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister – was present. In response to a question that pertained to the autonomy of ISI, Shri Debroy remarked “If I ask resources from anyone, whether it is the Union government, whether it is the State government or whether it is the private sector, the granter of the aid is within his or her right to ask what did you do with the resources that I provided. If I want to be autonomous, I should say that I am completely self-reliant. The moment I am not, I am definitely not autonomous.” After I heard him, I have been thinking about Shri Debroy’s remarks and their relevance to the autonomy of an academic institution? I feel that no one is “completely self-reliant.” One’s existence in a society is so intricately dependent with the resources, tangible and intangible, provided by others, that none of us can consider ourselves to be autonomous. But, autonomy of institutions is a different matter.

It is the Government that has established the autonomous institutions in our country. The autonomy to the institution is granted and is designated to be so by the Government. For an institution like the ISI, in academic, administrative and financial matters, the Governing Board of the institution – usually with one or more representatives of the Government – is the supreme authority for decision-making. Since the taxpayer’s money is used to run the publicly-funded autonomous institutions, public scrutiny and accountability are of paramount importance. The Government demands, and correctly so, that the expenditure to be incurred by an autonomous institution must follow the General Financial Rules of the Government of India. The grant of autonomy does not mean that the institution can act in any manner it chooses to. Every institution takes decisions in a responsible manner. Of course, sometimes there are deviations. Deviant institutions need to be pulled up and appropriately reprimanded.
For reasons that most autonomous academic institutions in India have failed to comprehend, the Government has started to siphon off the autonomy of institutions, slowly and surely. Every aspect of governance is now being controlled by the Government. Such control is being tightened at an accelerated pace. Government approval is required even in respect of the wording of an advertisement – the essential and desirable criteria – for faculty recruitment. Approval must be taken to start a course. A course needs to be started by an institution if the Government asks it to do so, often without any discussion with the institution. In other words, decisions are being imposed by the Government on our autonomous institutions. Now at an accelerated pace.

After our national independence, autonomous academic institutions were established per felt needs, with the objective of imparting higher education and advancement of research in various focused domains of science and the humanities. The diversity of mission and vision of these institutions is something to be proud of. Suddenly, about three or four years ago, serious discussions started for merging autonomous institutions. Various Government reports have provided justifications. Merger “for rationalisation … with a view to furthering the aim of ‘minimum government, maximum governance,’ ensuring efficient use of public funds." Actions for merging of institutions have started furiously, with the promise of not “losing the plurality of disciplines or identities of individual bodies.” Many do not believe that identities of individual autonomous institutions will be preserved. Many do not believe that scientists in existing autonomous institutions can continue to carry out research with freedom. Individual institutions will have lost their autonomy soon, because actions are being taken for “setting up umbrella structures of autonomous bodies wherein a group of similar institutions (will) be brought together under an overarching framework.” In other words, more severe imposition of decisions, rather than pursuance of local decisions taken autonomously, will be the rule, consistent with ‘minimum government, maximum governance’. When in fact, some autonomous institutions were established because of the need to conduct deep research in some emerging scientific domains, merger will result in shallowing or even complete stoppage of research in such domains. If “efficient use of public funds” has been difficult, then establishment of new autonomous institutions can be decelerated or even stopped rather than merging existing institutions. If some institutions have been a hindrance to efficient use of public funds, then decisive actions may be taken against these institutions.

Recently, the ISI has gotten embroiled in a litigation with some of its staff. The judgement on January 14, 2022, in the High Court at Calcutta is instructive regarding autonomy of institutions. “An autonomous institution has autonomy in
its administration and in its other functions. The Government cannot play the role of a modern day Shylock by saying, as the Government is putting the money, Government will control the autonomous institution in administrative functions. This cannot be done in a country like India where a large number of autonomous bodies are working for a long time. Where is the declared policy which says that the Government will interfere into the administration and other works of the autonomous body? … As the Government is giving money it cannot say that it will control partially or in full an autonomous body, the Government is duty bound to give the money which is not anybody’s personal money but the money of the people of India collected from tax and other sources and the Government cannot question the autonomy enjoyed unless there (are) very serious irregularities in respect of the autonomous institution.” No one will question if the Government hauls up institutions that have indulged in seriously irregular activities. But, why dismantle the structure that has been built over 75 years? The judgement also has noted that “some Government officers are making comments in respect of running of an autonomous institution as if from a higher pedestal without giving any reason for their comments.” Is anyone listening?