

March 24, 2021

Dear Prof. Malabika Sarkar,

As members of the Scientific Board of the Trivedi Centre for Political Data (TCPD) at Ashoka University, we wish to express our concern regarding the circumstances which have led to the resignations of Professors Pratap Bhanu Mehta and Arvind Subramanian. In his resignation letter, Dr. Mehta noted that “it has become abundantly clear to me that my association with the University may be considered a political liability.” Dr. Subramanian has lamented, “That even Ashoka—with its private status and backing by private capital—can no longer provide a space for academic expression and freedom is ominously disturbing.” For us, as members of a Scientific Board of a centre that deals expressly with political data in service of research and analysis on political affairs, such language from eminent social scientists is extremely disquieting. Without academic freedom and unfettered scholarly autonomy, rigorous and high-quality social science is an impossible endeavor.

Two members of this Board have already resigned due to these disturbing events. Those of us who remain, do so not because we do not share their deep concerns regarding the University’s commitment to academic freedom. Rather, we wish to reaffirm our specific support for TCPD and its mission. What TCPD has achieved in a few years is nothing short of remarkable and the network of international scholarly connections that it has established testifies to the prestige it has now acquired. The best scholars in the social sciences and writers affiliated with globally renowned publications regularly cite the work of TCPD and make use of the valuable data that the Centre makes publicly available.

However, our service on the Scientific Board cannot be unconditional. Intellectual independence is a necessary condition for any liberal arts university to accomplish its mission. In order to continue our association with the TCPD and to remain committed to the Centre’s ongoing international projects, we require concrete assurances from Ashoka University regarding the Centre’s academic freedom.

1. Given that the university leadership has explicitly acknowledged “lapses in institutional processes,” we need to be informed as to what concrete steps the university is taking to identify those lapses and, more importantly, how they will be prevented in the future. As part of this process, we request a conversation between the Scientific Board and the Vice Chancellor as well as the Dean for Research.
2. We also demand that the University take tangible steps to guarantee the intellectual independence of TCPD, its students, affiliates, and scholars. TCPD and its affiliates must be insulated from any external or internal interference that might compromise the Centre’s integrity. TCPD must have complete freedom to collect data as it sees fit and

publish research and analysis on the basis of that data, irrespective of the conclusions this research draws. Furthermore, the administration of Ashoka University should have no unilateral authority to set the research objectives of the Centre, or question the analysis or findings presented in its publications. As the Scientific Board, we expect the University to engage with us directly if it has any concerns on academic or public writing produced by the Centre. Similarly, if any TCPD researchers face concerns about external influence from within or without the University that restrict these freedoms, they should have recourse to seeking advice or making a formal complaint to the Board without fear of institutional sanction.

Yours sincerely,

The members of the TCPD's Scientific Board:

Mukulika Banerjee, London School of Economics and Political Science  
Christophe Jaffrelot (Chair), SciencesPo and King's College London  
Francesca R. Jensenius, University of Oslo  
Susan Ostermann, University of Notre Dame  
S.Y. Quraishi, Former Chief Election Commissioner of India  
Aaditeshwar Seth, IIT Delhi  
Tariq Thachil, CASI and University of Pennsylvania  
Milan Vaishnav, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington DC