

Thou shalt not

Government has done well to underline IIM's autonomy. So why a conduct code for faculty? It should go

By: **Editorial** |

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Proposed code of conduct for faculty at the Indian Institute of Management, Calcutta, reflects a prickliness to criticism and protest that has become a depressing feature of institutes of higher learning. If it comes into effect, the code will bar faculty members from any criticism of the institute or government, from joining protests that hurt “public order”, from signing petitions as a collective, put in place restrictions in speaking to the press — and bind them to a promise of “no politics”. It would also make it difficult for faculty members to organise, as they recently did, against the alleged high-handedness of the IIM-Calcutta director, which eventually resulted in her exit.

Faculty members have, rightfully, pointed out that this is an attempt to sneak in directives similar to the Central Civil Services (Conduct) Rules, the code that binds government servants and bureaucrats, into an academic institution. This is a fundamental error. A 2013 Supreme Court judgment had upheld the distinction between government employees and college teachers. Teachers, unlike mandarins tasked with implementing government orders, should not be burdened by a demand of obedience. They are involved in the creation and dissemination of knowledge, which entails contestations and debate, dissent and critical thinking that cannot be concerned about the sensitivities of those in power. In 2018, teachers had pushed back against a similar directive from the University Grants Commission to impose CCS rules on universities, arguing that it amounted to a gag order and encroachment on their autonomy.

Autonomy, of course, has been the distinctive feature of the IIM success story, one that the institution has fiercely guarded over the years. With the enactment of the IIM Act in 2017, the independence of the institutions was cast in law. Nevertheless, several recent instances have found the government and the IIMs on the opposing side, from the refusal of the IIM-Ahmedabad to accede to a Ministry of Education directive to “review” a PhD thesis that described the [BJP](#) as “a pro-Hindu upper-caste party” to the government’s attempts to empower itself to carry out an inquiry against the board of governors of the IIMs if they “violate” the IIM Act. The code is in line with attempts to encroach on the rights and freedoms of IIM-Calcutta.

But, as this government’s New Education Policy has acknowledged, freedom to speak and disagree is a minimum condition of academic excellence, the feedback loop that keeps learning from turning into dead habit. The IIM-Calcutta faculty have done well to set an example by opposing the restrictive code. The board must heed their objections and withdraw it.