

The Dimag Is a Public Good, It's Worth Protecting

Editorial Analysis | Takshasheela School of Civil Services Based on an article in The Indian Express | [Puja Kakati, Faculty](#)

The Core Argument

The article's central claim is disarmingly simple: a society needs independent minds in exactly the way it needs clean air, functioning institutions, and an independent judiciary. All four are public goods — resources that benefit everyone but that no one, left to their own incentives, is naturally inclined to protect. The article is, at its heart, a reflection on anti-intellectualism, independent thinking, expertise, democracy, and the health of public institutions, using the Hindi word "dimag" — mind or intellect — to stand in for a specific set of capacities: critical thinking, questioning authority, intellectual curiosity, research, dissent, imagination, the willingness to revise existing ideas, evidence-based reasoning, and a tolerance for ambiguity.

The article's opening move is to identify a paradox: societies can celebrate educational credentials while simultaneously growing uncomfortable with the independent thought that education is supposed to cultivate. Education and independent thinking are not the same thing, and a person can hold prestigious qualifications while still lacking the intellectual freedom to question prevailing assumptions.

What Anti-Intellectualism Actually Means

Anti-intellectualism refers to distrust, hostility, or indifference toward intellectuals, experts, scholarship, and reasoned inquiry. It shows up in recognisable patterns: expertise gets dismissed as elitism, evidence is rejected in favour of assertion, questioning is read as disloyalty, complex problems are flattened into simplistic solutions, confidence is mistaken for truth, and dissent is treated as obstruction rather than as a contribution.

The article draws on historian Richard Hofstadter's account of anti-intellectualism, but extends it by connecting today's distrust of expertise to broader, older patterns of social and historical inequality — rather than treating it as a purely modern, purely digital phenomenon.

Why Society Distrusts Intellectuals

The article traces this distrust to structural roots rather than to mere ignorance or bad faith. In deeply stratified societies, intellectual elites can be perceived — often correctly

— as beneficiaries of caste hierarchies, class privilege, linguistic advantage, institutional access, and elite educational networks. Seen this way, criticism of intellectuals is not always irrational anti-intellectualism; it can also emerge from legitimate grievances against elite gatekeeping. This is an important qualification, because it prevents the article's argument from becoming a simple defence of experts against a supposedly unreasonable public.

India's Paradox: Respect for Degrees, Not Necessarily for Intellect

This is one of the article's strongest arguments. India places enormous social and economic value on IIT ranks, medical seats, government examinations, professional qualifications, and degrees and certificates generally. But the underlying purpose of education is not merely credential acquisition — it is the cultivation of the capacities the article groups under "dimag."

For many Indian families, however, educational success represents something more immediate and more urgent than intellectual development: upward social mobility, economic security, an escape from poverty, higher social status, better marriage prospects, and intergenerational advancement. Given these stakes, it is entirely rational for students to adapt themselves to what examination systems actually reward, rather than to what intellectual growth would ideally require.

Competitive Examinations and the Ambiguity Problem

This leads to what the article calls the ambiguity problem. Most competitive examinations reward speed, memory, elimination techniques, performance under pressure, and factual retention. Genuine intellectual work, by contrast, typically demands the ability to weigh competing evidence, tolerate uncertainty, revise one's own position, ask questions rather than only answer them, and sit with complexity rather than resolve it prematurely. The skills that get a student through an exam and the skills that make someone a genuinely independent thinker are related, but they are not the same, and an education system built entirely around the former can inadvertently crowd out the latter.

From Confidence to Truth: A Dangerous Transformation

The article flags a particularly consequential social tendency: confidence is not the same thing as truth, and it is not the same thing as reason. In the digital age, people are constantly exposed to short-form content, viral claims, emotional narratives, algorithmic amplification, misinformation, and their own confirmation bias. In that environment, the person who speaks with the greatest certainty often appears more credible than the person who honestly says, "the evidence is inconclusive" — even though genuine intellectual inquiry frequently requires exactly that kind of acknowledged uncertainty. This creates a systematic bias against careful, hedged, evidence-based reasoning, and in favour of confident assertion.

Intellectual Freedom and Democracy

The article's final move is to connect all of this back to democratic governance. Democracy is not simply elections, a parliament, and a government — it also depends on a working mechanism for correcting its own errors. That mechanism requires free expression, dissent, debate, independent media, academic freedom, institutional autonomy, an informed citizenry, and evidence-based policymaking.

Crucially, the article insists that dissent is not inherently anti-national; constructive dissent functions as a feedback mechanism that keeps democratic governance honest and correctable. This is why institutions that protect what the article calls "the public good of thinking" matter so much — universities, research institutions, courts, legislatures, independent media, professional bodies, civil society, think tanks, and scientific institutions. Their shared function is to create spaces where claims can be made, questioned, investigated, debated, and revised. That cycle — make, question, investigate, debate, revise — is, in the article's framing, the key to evidence-based governance itself.

Practice Questions

Prelims MCQ

Consider the following statements with reference to the article "The dimag is a public good, it's worth protecting":

1. The article argues that possession of prestigious educational qualifications is, by itself, sufficient evidence of independent thinking.
2. According to the article, criticism of intellectuals can sometimes stem from legitimate grievances against elite gatekeeping rather than from anti-intellectualism alone.
3. The article draws on Richard Hofstadter's concept of anti-intellectualism while linking it to broader historical and social inequalities.
4. The article treats confident assertion and evidence-based truth as equivalent grounds for credibility.

Which of the statements given above are correct?

(a) 1 and 4 only (b) 2 and 3 only (c) 1, 2 and 3 only (d) 2, 3 and 4 only

Answer: (b) 2 and 3 only. Statement 1 is incorrect because the article explicitly distinguishes education/degrees from independent thinking. Statement 4 is incorrect because the article warns against mistaking confidence for truth, not equating them.

Mains Question

"A healthy democracy requires not just elections and institutions of governance, but institutions that protect the public good of thinking." Discuss this statement with reference to anti-intellectualism and the relationship between education, independent thought, and democratic accountability in India. (GS-2/GS-4, 250 words)

