

PLEA IN SC TO SAVE ACADEMIC FREEDOM

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The Supreme Court has asked the government to respond to a plea by five teachers to protect “academic freedom” from raids and seizures of police and investigative agencies.

The past few years have seen raids on and seizures of electronic evidence from academics, researchers, lawyers and activists.

Now, a group of educationists have asked the court to frame guidelines so that the police treat the academic work and research, usually stored in computers they seize during raids, in a “civilised manner”.

A Bench led by Justice Sanjay Kishan Kaul issued notice to the Centre and sought a reply in four weeks.

Professors Ram Ramaswamy, Sujata Patel, M. Madhava Prasad, Mukul Kesavan and Deepak Malghan said academics lose their life’s work when police carry off their computers and hard drives after a raid. What may be stored in these devices would be their life’s work. At the hands of the police, their work run the risk of damage, loss, destruction or even distortion.

“Data that is stored digitally by academics may have been collected through extensive field work spanning decades or the results of scientific experiments or calculations similarly representing major effort. If these are tampered with or damaged, the loss to research in the sciences and social sciences is considerable and often irreplaceable. A lifetime’s work is life as much as livelihood. Patentable material may exist or work that runs the risk of being plagiarised. Work may also be stored in ‘clouds’, compelled exposure of which carries all of the aforesaid risks as much as the seizure of physical devices,” the petition, filed through advocates Nitya Ramakrishnan and S. Prasanna, said.

The “entirely unguided power” of investigative agencies to take control of devices that contain much, if not all, of a citizen’s personal and professional life, requires to be treated in a civilised way by means of directives from the Supreme Court, it said.

The petition also said some “recent news reports” suggested remote tampering with devices.

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