



Blood on the Campus

JNU symbolised democracy and freedom. It was an *adda* of ideas, not an *akhada*. Violence in varsities can be combatted only if civil society fights majoritarianism and mob mentality



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QUESTIONS UNMASKED
JNU students get together to raise their voice against violence on the campus and the Citizenship Act

In a clichéd sense, the New Year is a sign of hope, a time for rituals of optimism, where one makes wish lists for the future. This New Year, maybe because it is seen as an “Angrez” concept by the regime, was a dampener marked by violence and confusion. The effusive smell of stability and confidence the regime exuded has suddenly evaporated. Some events captured the hypocrisy and hollowness of

the present set-up.

The violent events in JNU were sad. JNU has now become a moment of history and a metaphor. Attempts to undermine the University have acquired a systematic quality. It almost seems as if the University is being treated as a little Pakistan. Last week, armed men, masked to disguise their identities, walked into hostels and injured over 30 students. What is amazing is the supine

attitude of the University administration. The V-C should have resigned in any university which has a sense of moral responsibility and leadership. Worse, the regime acts as if the University deserved it, treating it like an internal security problem rather than a violation of freedom. The sense of shock that this last act of vandalism created was brought out poignantly by two small events. As the vandalism continued, a young child living in the campus rings up his grandmother and complains that “*goondas* are breaking people’s heads”.

In fact, JNU must be seen through the eyes of children who live on the campus and who see it as paradise. As a faculty member once told me, forget isms, JNU is a paradise for children: sane, plural, affordable and cosmopolitan. The BJP destroyed that sense of innocence, the availability of playfulness that JNU provided for decades.

SOLIDARITY WITH THE STUDENTS

Actor Deepika Padukone with injured JNUSU president Aishe Ghosh



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Another professor, a brilliant historian, told me that the violence of recent times has destroyed the wonderful everydayness of academic life in the University. He said that it was not ideology he was worried about, but the attempts to undermine the very idea and norms of the University as an institution. He mentioned that the administration seemed indifferent and unapologetic and the security staff conniving or purposeless. The regime, he said, thrives on the vulnerability of the University as an open institution. He was distraught that reason and dialogue had no place in the administration’s agenda. It seemed to see riots and vandalism, even *goondagardi*, as a continuation of majoritarianism by other means.

Another distinguished professor

analysed the crisis of the University around two events. He said that the regime felt the University had become an island of dissent in the midst of a conformist city. He invoked the fact that a year earlier, distinguished scientists had called on the then president, Pranab Mukherjee, to ask him to stop the emasculation of research in the University. They were complaining about the manner in which PhD fellowships were diminishing. Science, they pointed out, is a plural and playful enterprise. To reduce it to a big science like Chandrayaan destroys future projects and other hypotheses. He added that the attempt to change the fee structure of the University was a second source of angst. It would change the social composition of the University. In fact, “JNU”, he said, “would no longer be JNU.” Other academics added that the centre does not see education, higher education, as a public good. The Kasturirangan report, flaunted by the regime, would not be complete without an ethnographic analysis of the JNU of the last few years. The regime sees education as skills. It has an instrumental sense of education, which is why it does not value the power and creativity of dissent in a university. The academic argued that dissent in an intellectual system is normal except to a regime that thrives on dogma.

A senior sociologist who has written classic essays on the liberal ideas of the University, smiled sadly and said: “The BJP suffers from university envy.” The university, he said, was an *adda* of ideas, a celebration of difference. “Dissent,” he said, “was part of the official function of the university, a consequence of the dynamics of knowledge. Sadly, dissent is diffused as a violation of patriotism as the uniformity of the nation state tries to overwhelm the innate plurality of a university.”

Secondly, JNU, he said, embodied the ideals and ideas of the Nehruvian era. He claimed that if it was renamed after Deen Dayal Upadhyay or Vajpayee, half the violence would cease. JNU ▶



embodied in a real sense the secularism, socialism and cosmopolitanism of the Nehru era. It was affordable, accessible and a theatre where ideas were on perpetual display. The BJP can create an *akhada*, but it has no sense of academic life. JNU, thus, becomes a perpetual target of the regime and a giant virus which creates the epidemics of political stability. My senior colleague said sadly: “I must modify my statement. The BJP suffers from university envy and JNU envy. JNU is twice cursed in that sense.”

What was a piece of history has now become a metaphor in a wider sense. JNU has become a microcosm of democracy and other universities see it as embodying this ideal. For a few years, the regime was riding pretty till it tumbled on the citizenship issue. The citizenship debate needs a separate analysis but what it did was to show that the university, and JNU in particular, was the seedling of a future alternative. Already, as an idea factory, the BJP seems outdated, spouting an archaic nationalism and a second-rate model of development. JNU, Aligarh, Jamia and Hyderabad as universities are reminders that the BJP’s manifestos are based on

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outdated syllabi. In a whimsical sense, JNU is a reminder that the regime needs to recognise and go back to the university. It will give many a politician a chance to actually get a genuine degree, learn something of the crisis, of concepts that are intellectually engaging the university. Regimes which run on outdated syllabi can be disastrous, as John Maynard Keynes once pointed out.

There is a final point one must grasp. The violence done to JNU is not recent. The University has been subject to propaganda, political and intellectual attacks, administrative discharges, financial delays, symbolic humiliation and now the sheer brutality of the physical inside hostels. Such violence is appalling, and the University is too fragile an institution to fight it alone. Civil society has to enter the picture the way it has, showing not only the power of the academic but the creativity

of citizenship. The protests in Chennai, Bengaluru, Aligarh and Hyderabad have shown that the regime delegitimised itself by restricting citizenship and corroding freedom.

JNU became a symbol of citizenship, democracy and freedom worldwide. The violence of the regime is backfiring, but these are dangerous times. Only a civil society-backed university can survive institutionally. The challenge before JNU is no longer a challenge to JNU. It is a challenge to the creativity of democracy to work its way beyond majoritarianism and mob mentality and the inanity of academic bureaucracies. In a moment of dinginess, of sheer brutality, democracy has decided to invent itself again, starting with its favourite institution, the university. Maybe a warning of a Happy New Year must begin ironically. Otherwise we forget the price we pay for retaining freedom. ■

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