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University under Siege: A Case of Misplaced, Misdirected Outrage

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*Much of the tax-payer angst against JNU is not grounded in rational argument but appears to be a reaction – both against the University's changing caste-class demographics and its emergence as a liberal space where troubling questions can be asked and debated freely, says **Shipra Nigam**.*

By now events of that fateful evening of February 9, 2016, in Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) have acquired mythical dimensions. But somewhere in the rubble lie important questions that demand answers.

How did a few slogans raised (some purportedly by outsiders) in a small meeting inside a university, make a handful of young students and an entire student community so easily culpable in the eyes of sections of upper caste middle-class Indians, who seemed only too willing to be led by the proponents of a particularly violent and corrosive form of right wing nationalism? How did the anger spiral on to streets so quickly before an inquiry had even begun, with

open threats, violence and intimidation handed out with impunity by members and supporters of the ruling party and its ideological affiliates? How did goon squads that outdid each other with their vicious, outrageous remarks get primetime share on national news?

Again how, in the face of such open violence that turned courts of law into dens of lawlessness, did the Bar Council of India submit a shocking first report filled with partisan inputs, glaring loopholes and silences, almost justifying the breaking of law by upholders of law in courts of law? How did kangaroo courts and media trials with clearly unethical practices, including use of doctored videos and morphed photographs, gain such wide acceptance? How did a police force that booked students for sedition with lightening speed on flimsy grounds and thin evidence, fail at the same time in its Constitutional duty of protecting them from being beaten up in custody? How is it that now even noted scholars, public intellectuals and activists like Nivedita Menon (who teaches at JNU and has been a speaker at the open-air nationalism lectures on the campus) and Gauhar Raza (a renowned scientist), are in the firing line for presenting their informed opinions with care and conviction? The concerted attack on them (by Television anchors who are themselves terribly compromised) hits at the very ethos of education, commitment to one's profession and, for that reason, the culture of democracy itself.

It almost seemed like a silent emergency nobody was talking about while the public discourse became shriller and shriller. And crossing all bounds, we now even have people openly proclaiming through public posters, prizes for people's heads with the police booking them merely for defacement of public property. Cable operators are reportedly being threatened for showing television channels that do not toe the government's line. In this series of bewildering events testifying to the emergence of a virulent, aggressive nationalism, the rhetoric of 'anti-nationals' has blended seamlessly with self-righteous arguments about the misuse of the taxpayers' money. It is important to understand where the genesis of this outrage lies and whether it is supported by facts. Take the angst about misused tax-payers' money which strikes at the heart of the deepest fears and anxieties of the privileged sections. An almost universally accepted principle of taxation, especially within the developing world is that taxes are based on taxpayers' ability to pay; there is no quid pro quo. No quid pro quo implies no direct exchange where one transfer is not contingent upon another. There are two basic rationales behind following such a principle particularly in a sector like education. In highly inegalitarian societies, taxation and expenditure policies by government are supposed to ameliorate inequalities through progressive taxation and a welfare state. Here access to education and health in particular become basic goods that a state is obligated to provide to all subjects who demand it irrespective of their beliefs, convictions and backgrounds. It is an economic right not charity that the state doles out. It is also a basic good with many positive externalities (such as provision of goods and services that are not feasible to charge) in terms of the returns to economy and society over time. This holds particularly true for the Public University given the contributions it makes to repositories of public knowledge through research and development on issues of critical social concern. So in this case the argument that the taxpayers' money is wasted is fallacious at its very inception. The investment in public universities is repaid several times over to the general public in this case. The rationale here also goes beyond this cost-benefit analysis to envisioning universities as spaces to push the boundaries of critical thought.

A pertinent question here is who are the actual taxpayers and where does the taxpayers' money really go? As has been pointed out by many by now, everyone pays taxes in this country, including students, the poor and the marginalised by the mere act of their participation in market consumption through indirect taxes levied on goods and services produced and sold within the economy. Up until 2007, indirect tax revenues were higher than direct tax revenues and have since become marginally lower than the latter for the Central government. They have remained consistently much higher than direct tax revenue collections in the states. Indirect taxes, because their burden falls on everyone equally, are considered more regressive than direct taxes where the tax burden is

proportionate to a person's or entity's actual income. However, unfortunately, in our country indirect taxes finance a major chunk of the government's expenditures given narrow income tax nets. Tax avoidance and tax evasion practices and the markets for black money are also rampant across middle class India, corporations, firms, trusts and other entities. According to a report released by the Union Finance Ministry, the estimated number of taxpayers for the financial year 2011-12 stood at just 3.24 crore people. That means, less than 3 people in 100 pay taxes in our country. Out of these 3.25 crore people, 89 per cent pay taxes in the tax slab of 0 – 5 Lakh rupees, while at the other end of the spectrum, only 1.3 per cent of all tax payers have annual incomes in the vicinity of 20 Lakh. What does this imply? That taxes which are paid by everyone, a disproportionate burden of which usually falls on the poor, finance the largest chunk of overall revenue expenditures.

Meanwhile the government revenue expenditures tell us an equally interesting story about where the taxpayers' money actually goes. Of course, the manner in which this actually plays out is often dictated by the existing power structures within society. So while farmers starve and commit suicide, while land dispossession and peasant unrest continue, while workers are retrenched and while sanitation workers agitate for long due pay hikes, a disproportionate amount of the taxpayers' money goes in writing off corporate debts, tax holidays and subsidies. As this article reveals ¹, a huge chunk of even subsidies traditionally associated with those aimed at the poor --- Kerosene, Electricity, LPG, Railways, Petrol, Diesel, Aviation Turbine Fuel, Gold and Public Provident Fund—are actually cornered by the rich. Worse, this is in addition to the indirect subsidies that the middle class avails through low paid and undervalued services that the informal economy of domestic helpers, vegetable sellers, cobblers, washerwomen, sweepers and so on provide to it. All of whom barely subsist by complementing their meagre incomes with state provided social welfare infrastructure. Progressive rollback and cutbacks on even this structure have been taking place with the advent of liberalisation. India meanwhile has the dubious distinction of having one of the lowest budgetary allocations for sectors like health and education. What does this imply? That a disproportionately high amount of tax revenues goes towards supporting the comforts of middle and upper class life in this country.

The expenditure on 'education' varied between 2.9% and 3.1% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in the period between 2008-09 and 2012-13. It still stands stagnant at 3.1% of GDP in 2014-15. The government, in fact, further reduced the outlay on the education sector overall (school and higher education combined) between 2014-15 and 2015-16 in nominal terms, with both plan and total outlay declining by almost 20%. And even within the allocation for higher education, what public universities like JNU and Hyderabad Central University get are far below premier institutes like the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) and the Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs), forget about any comparison with private universities. I was listening with amusement to self-righteous remarks about how things are subsidised within these campuses and felt like inviting the critics to come and stay over and see the actual facilities at JNU – residential and academic – in terms of classrooms, school buildings, hostels, and general living conditions.

The irony of this is compounded once we see how the minor loans of farmers are treated as non-negotiable and liquor baron Vijay Mallya flees with the full support of state agencies. Further, when no less than Prime Minister Narendra Modi is himself present at an event organised by a so-called Godman who not just violates environmental rules and public safety norms but who astonishingly secures the backing of a dozen or so government departments (which implies use of public money), not to mention being able to involve the Army in his project.

The other major questions is: Why did this incident invoke such outrage across sections of our upper caste middle-class elite? So much so that they have turned a blind eye to the terror, repression and breakdown of the constitutional machinery that the state, the ruling party and its fringe elements together unleashed over the past

month ostensibly to quell a few slogans (For let's face it, beyond this middle class and the rabble-rousers within the Sangh Parivaar, a vast section of rural and urban India remains immune to what a metropolitan university can be held accountable to). At best, the elite reaction has been a seamless equating of two sides as something wrong being done on both sides. Which is nothing but an easy distancing from what in reality was the open trampling of constitutional rights by an authoritarian state, already bloated by the massive asymmetries in the social access to power and influence. The misdeeds of the government, its unabashed majoritarianism, its assaults on the academic freedom and autonomy of universities, should have been apparent. Was there no difference between a few alleged slogans (the truth of which in any case is difficult to ascertain in the mayhem created by doctored videos and planted slogan) raised by a handful of students and open lawlessness and violence in the courts of law, police complicities and inaction, and threats, violence, and intimidation by mobs unleashing a bloodthirsty nationalism? Was this brand of nationalism so weak that it could not withstand a few questions coming from some of the most troubled regions of this country?

The answer to this lies in the faces, profiles, backgrounds and articulations of people who came into the spotlight thanks to television's relentless pursuit of JNU in the past few weeks. Suddenly you saw young voices from the University speaking unpalatable truths about things that were routinely brushed under the carpet in elite drawing rooms -- this was a Delhi and India that aspired big, went to super malls, rooted for bullet trains and chased after luxury cars, multinational jobs, and trips abroad. The children of this class went to the IITs, and IIMs or to management institutes and universities abroad, and when possible settled abroad.

Obviously, the nation was not a factor in any of these pursuits. And yet the nation and nationalism have dominated the mind space on television, in elite conversations in drawing rooms and at social gatherings. Consider the irony of the several vacancies to the posts of army officers even as there is a queue for the more exploitative, deeply hierarchical positions at the lower rungs of our defence forces filled by India's poor and lower middle classes. And yet when JNU came into the picture, the same middle class Indians spoke breathlessly of the nation and the soldier guarding its borders and dying in its faraway regions.

Suddenly this class saw something preposterous – JNU students, instead of being grateful for the opportunities provided to them by the meagre allocations to higher education for public universities, were actually daring to raise questions that were taboo in the bubble they lived in. They were talking about inequalities, they were talking about injustices and they were talking about azaadi, about freedom from the narrow confines of boxed in and neatly categorised middle class lives.

On one level, the disconnect was obvious. How could these debates strike a chord with those chasing very different dreams in their quest for high profile careers, ivy league education and plush bank balances? How could they understand the refusal of the son of an aganwaadi worker, or the son of a mother who sewed clothes to earn her living, to be deeply grateful for the opportunities he had been provided to better his life and take up suitable jobs? Unsurprisingly, there were rude comments about how Kanhaiyya was letting down his impoverished family and his village by taking up student politics when his time was better spent in studying and finding employment.

To begin with, this reveals an ignorance of what the social sciences and the university stand for as a space for promoting reasoned debate and dialogue through engagements with critical social theory. Universities also stand for an exchange of ideas which can challenge both our most cherished beliefs and our comfort with the established discourse that hides the faultlines within society. On another level, this also brought out a complete lack of understanding of the historical and contemporary role and power of student politics per se. And one is not talking here of partisan politics involving patronage, money and muscle-flexing that dominates many regional institutions

of higher learning in India. Universities have also been, and continue to be training grounds for nurturing future politicians, thinkers, statesmen, and teachers among others. Universities have been the base of progressive student participation in social movements across the world. Besides at crucial historical junctures, student uprising and movements have played their role again and again in protesting against the rise of authoritarianism, imperialism and fascism. Bringing out their varied facets in such engagements would require another article at the very least. JNU, HCU and Film and Television Institute of India (FTII) are some of the model spaces where these aspects have taken root over the years through sustained struggles.

However, the outrage and the discomfort being witnessed right now goes beyond merely an ignorance of these roles. The students might have still been forgiven had they been from urbane, English-speaking, affluent families who were theorising about poverty and socialism. Their idealism and zeal might have been indulged in a little or dismissed as youthful follies that would pass once they took their rightful places in society.

The student profile of Public Universities, however, has been changing over time, partly due to reservation policies and partly because those who can afford it, are now sending their children to elite private universities within India and abroad. In JNU in particular a slow and steady shift in the demographic profiles of the students has been happening for a while. As this brilliant and detailed analysis by the Forward Press [2](#) shows, while JNU always had a admission policy leaning towards the economically weaker and vulnerable sections of society through a policy of deprivation points, post 2006, the implementation of reservation policies, raised the representation of non- upper castes substantially. To quote: "If one includes other deprived social groups, minorities and women, the upper castes and classes are a minuscule minority. After the enrolments last year, the percentage of students in JNU from SC, ST and OBC has gone up to 55. If one includes other deprived social groups, minorities and women, the upper castes and classes are a minuscule minority." This along with an entrance exam which tests knowledge of subjects, analytical skills and reasoning power has brought forth a formidable combination of diverse marginalised social backgrounds and ability which is honed through academic training and critical thinking within the university. As the article highlights, this has naturally led students to lean towards a left -Ambedkarite discourse as a framework within which they seek to understand the reality of their lives. Understandably then, the slogans that emerge from this amalgam of lived experiences, political engagements and academic quests are not relatable to the segregated middle-classes; since the power of the slogans and the immediacy of the contexts in which they arose are irrelevant to them, they simply dismiss these as leftist cliché that are out of sync with the national mood of 'achche din'.

So how could they relate to a Kanhaiya Kumar (President of Jawaharlal Nehru Students Union) calling for Azaadi for the masses and outlining his vision for the country where the son of the president and the son of the peon could study together? How could they not be wary when he spoke of breaking the false binaries between peasants and the soldiers on the one hand and the police constable and the poor student on the other? In Umar Khalid's case, the anger was magnified by the name (just prior to being picked by the police and jailed for sedition, he said : "My name is Umar Khalid and I'm not a terrorist.") : instead of being grateful that he had been allowed to stay in this country and study on subsidy, he was asking subversive questions about the death penalty per se, and, in particular, contesting the shaky grounds on which an execution to appease the "collective conscience" of the nation had occurred (that of Afzal Guru). Umar Khalid also spoke about a borderless world in a time of raging nationalism. Kanhaiya Kumar, Umar Khalid, and others like them became irritants because they exuded confidence, and defied the academic student stereotype. They spoke as if they knew what they were talking about, as if they had minds of their own, as if they were perfectly capable of addressing any and all of the critical social issues they were raising. Their slogans 'Jai Bheem', 'Azaadi', 'Lal Salaam' were more than slogans. In fact, their idealism, their

dreams went far beyond even the borderless world of Umar's imagination to reaching out to the "stars, science and stardust" -- a vision heartbreakingly outlined by Rohith Vemula in his by now iconic farewell letter.

The contradictions of these imaginations with the worldviews, values, professional engagements, paradigms and goals of the traditional white collar elite middle class could not be starker. The JNU of Kanhaiyya and Umar Khalid threatened the stability of that order. So the dissent had to be dismissed, ridiculed, delegitimized, and crushed before the 'gangrene' of the infection spread far and wide, to use the words of the esteemed high court judge who issued Kanhaiya Kumar's bail order.

The explosion of anger towards JNU in reality reflects the deepest fears of the middle classes and the establishment about threats to their privileges and their complicities in keeping alive a deeply iniquitous structure of power and patronage. How long can this go on especially given the questions coming at us from different regions of the country? If we don't begin to answer them, however difficult and uncomfortable the process, we risk letting things spiral out of our control anyway. For how long can a reign of state repression and intimidation carry on without eventually strengthening counter insurgency and mutinous tendencies everywhere? How long will our cocooned existences be protected by sheer force?

Since the nation is being invoked constantly, it is a good reminder that the historical roots of contemporary challenges within our society go way back -- to well before this country's independence. Our anti-colonial struggles were dogged by several such questions right at the inception of this nation and hence the consensus by those leading the freedom struggle to opt for a sovereign democratic Republic in the preamble to the constitution. The terms 'socialist' and 'secular' were added later as we faced the complex, diverse realities of the nation that was emerging. The hope perhaps was that post-Independence we would be able to map the contours of our real struggles through sustained engagements in the spirit of rational enquiry as the processes of social justice took roots. What better place to start this process, involving expanded access, voice and representation to those hitherto excluded, than our institutions of learning, especially in light of the centuries-old hegemonic hold on education by the upper caste elite?

The changing student profiles and demographics of our public universities is a testimony to the coming of age of that process in one way. And engaging with what it has unleashed in our messy democracy is an unavoidable imperative. There is no substitute for initiating a process of grassroots democracy, debate and dialogue. And no better place than our universities to begin a process of critical, free and fair enquiry into these issues based on extensive research and rigorous analysis. And it's a tribute to our public universities that these questions today are being raised by representative voices that are located within the caste and class faultlines. And that is why these universities need to be preserved and fought for in the name of god, the country and humanity.

References:

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2. [^] Ranjan, Pramod, 2016. "[Bahujan discourse puts JNU in the crosshairs](#)" Forward Press, February 27. Last accessed March 17, 2016.

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