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JNU Arrest: Not Just a Crackdown, It's a War on Democracy

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Students, teachers, journalists, and activists across Indian cities demanded the release of Kanhaiya Kumar, President, Jawaharlal Nehru University Students Union, New Delhi, who was arrested in February 2016, on sedition charges. Photo: AP

*Is the current tension between the students of the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) and the Indian government unique? In this article, **Vasundhara Sirnate** argues that states across the world have always been nervous about student movements with good reason. Students possess great capacity for social mobilisation and progressive thought that often goes against the status quo. She draws comparisons between student movements in India and in the U.S., and suggests that in the final assessment students have often won. They are the one political lobby that has always been effective in articulating demands in developing societies. The crisis in JNU is driven by an anxious government that wants to suppress any counter-opinion and counter-ideology. By framing JNU as the bastion of left politics it has constructed the university space as an anti-statist space. The article draws out how at the University of California, Berkeley, a similar battle occurred between Ronald Reagan and the university students in the 1960s.*

“Democracy just cannot flourish amid fear. Liberty cannot bloom amid hate. Justice cannot take root amid rage... In the chill climate in which we live, we must go against the prevailing wind. We must dissent from the indifference. We must dissent from the apathy. We must dissent from the fear, the hatred and the mistrust. We must dissent from a nation that has buried its head in the sand, waiting in vain for the needs of its poor, its elderly, and its sick to disappear and just blow away.” - Thurgood Marshall

On October 1, 1964, a student called Jack Weinberg (member of an organisation called the Congress of Racial Equality or CORE), was sitting at a table at the University of California, Berkeley’s Sproul Plaza. New administration rules demanded that students desist from campus political activities and CORE was ‘flouting’ these new rules by setting up a table in the heart of the Berkeley campus. Weinberg refused to show his identity card to the campus police and was arrested. Spontaneously, however, students milled around the police car and refused to let the police officers take Weinberg away. At one point, it is reported, there were about 3,000 students, who surrounded the police car while Weinberg and his associate, Mario Savio, stood on top of the car and declaimed stirringly on free speech and the need to break the consensus on the Cold War, the Vietnam War, racial equality and rights. Weinberg and Savio along with Bettina Aptheker, Jackie Goldberg, Art Goldberg and Steve Weissman were leaders of what has gone down in history as Berkeley’s Free Speech Movement.

Within the next 24 hours, Berkeley’s reputation as a leading anti-state university was well established. A publicly funded institution, the argument went from conservatives, was producing students and members of society that did not buy into the national consensus about capitalism, big industry, racial rights, and women’s equality. That night of October 1, 1964, saw the state-sanctioned arrests of about 800 students, who were later released. Two years later, Ronald Reagan, who started his political campaign by talking about the need to “clean up the mess in Berkeley” ¹, was elected governor of California. He always maintained that professors at Berkeley had sided with dissident students and, hence, ought to be thrown out. Reagan had university president Clark Kerr removed and hit Berkeley where it would hurt the most – he cut funding to departments that were seen as promoting dissident thought (philosophy and sociology).

Reagan had to struggle with a couple of things. First, Berkeley was one of the finest research universities in the world even though it operated on a shoestring budget. Second, try as the state of California might, “dissident thought” would not go away. In 1969, following a regular student protest in Berkeley, Reagan sent in 2,200 members of the National Guard to facilitate crowd control, and this after tear gas was sprayed on the demonstrators from helicopters.

What the Reagan administration underestimated was the power of the students’ arguments. In the changing America of the 1960s, there was no place for discrimination and exploitation of anyone. This was a new, emerging consensus, which had gained much traction foremost on university campuses across the U.S. When the Vietnam War protests broke out in Berkeley, the students constituted a minority opinion that the war was bad and that the U.S. must pull out of Vietnam. A year or so later, their minority opinion turned into an ideological tsunami that swept away any other consensus about the war.

I write about these moments in Berkeley’s history to draw a parallel with the events at the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), which is under a similar state of siege today. It has also been a long time coming. JNU students are regularly referred to as “commies”, a term of insult borrowed from Americans, and most recently a sitting Chief Minister has referred to JNU’s protesting female students as being “worse than prostitutes” ². The President of JNU’s student body was arrested on February 12, 2016, and while being produced in court, he and members of the JNU faculty were attacked in the presence of passive police ³ in a courtroom. The arrest came after

sloganeering from a group of Kashmiri students that asked for the break of up India as a nation. The charge: sedition and an inability to control sections of the crowd that were shouting anti-India slogans.

Students have always been a group that has a degree of protection from the state. In 1974, the Nav Nirman (Reconstruction) Movement consisting almost entirely of Indian students was launched in Gujarat. The agenda of the movement was to rid the country of political corruption and it specifically targeted corrupt politicians like Gujarat Chief Minister, Chimanbhai Patel, who was forced to resign under popular pressure. The movement was immensely popular and quickly inspired the Jayaprakash Narayan movement for a 'total revolution' in Bihar and Eastern Uttar Pradesh, which counted many students amongst its leaders. Both movements influenced popular mobilisation in much of Northern India. Indira Gandhi cited these popular movements as a major cause of her decision to impose a national Emergency. Having been charged by the Allahabad High Court for political corruption, Indira Gandhi imposed the Emergency in 1975, which led to state-repression of many such movements and the imprisonment of movement leaders and opposition politicians. Students retreated into their campuses having been disciplined by the state. They did not play a role in the ouster of the government in 1977, which occurred through the normal course of electoral politics.

In 1985, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi oversaw the signing of the Assam Accord between representatives of the Government of India and leaders of the six-year long Assam Agitation, which had turned India's northeastern State of Assam into a political hotspot. It was not the Accord itself that captured attention, but the fact that one of the signatories of the Accord was a student group called the All Assam Students Union (AASU). After signing the Accord, the leader of the AASU, P.K. Mahanta, became the youngest ever Chief Minister of Assam and the AASU transformed into a political party called the Asom Gana Parishad.

In 1990, the V.P. Singh government proposed the implementation of the Mandal Commission report, which suggested a 27 per cent reservation quota for Other Backward Classes (OBC) in government jobs, raising the overall quota from 22.5 percent to 49.5 percent. Students from across the country launched a formidable agitation against this move. The protests were often violent and some student leaders even tried to immolate themselves. Their efforts amounted to naught, as the government went ahead with the policy. However, V.P. Singh's unpopularity with the masses brought down his government in a few months. In 2006, Arjun Singh launched another campaign to increase seats for OBCs in educational institutions. This was also met with protests from students from many educational institutions.

In many other parts of the world, students have played an important role in making or breaking governments and regimes. In Germany between 1920 and 1930, students were supportive of National Socialism. In 1911 Chinese students that were supportive of modernisation, engaged in the Xinhai Revolution that overthrew the Manchu dynasty. In 1918, Argentinean students began the University Reform Movement that spread to other areas of South America. In 1988, Myanmar's Prime Minister stepped down under pressure from mobilising students and in the same decade Japan's PM Kishii resigned under pressure from student groups. Iranian students played a crucial role in the revolution that installed Ayatollah Khomeini to power in 1979. Similarly, in Bangladesh, students have headed pro-democracy movements at several moments in history.

Essentially, students have formed an integral part of political movements, revolutions, rebellions and anti-colonial movements in many parts of the world. However, popular perception of university students and their involvement in politics revolves around the stereotype of 'blind, causeless rebellion' ⁴.

In recent years, many scholars working on China, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Korea, and India have tried to make sense of student political agitation. From these various case studies a new picture emerges. Students seem

to be reacting to a certain set of factors – state, politics, parties, social ills, society and even the universities. Student protest or agitation is seen in isolated cases as a function of state policies with respect to economic reforms, employment and university legislation and funding, amongst others. Students have the capacity to be politically strident and strangely very effective in ushering in political change or making political demands in much of the developing world.

I delve into some comparative world history to explain current events at JNU. JNU is hardly the first or the last collection of students on a campus that has or will protest against the state. This has happened across the world, over time in several disparate regions. Therefore, to understand the crackdown on JNU we also need to understand what makes a state so nervous when it comes to student populations.

The current government in India is subverting academic freedom and free speech of students and faculty of JNU. This is deliberate. It is deliberate because constructing JNU as a space for anti-national thinkers is important to the right-wing. It is important because then the state can allow itself to be seen as a state challenged and under threat, then step in and “contain” such anti-national thinkers and send a signal to a wider public that the state is not only legitimate, but is also perfectly capable of rooting out such thought.

I recall here that Berkeley won against Reagan in the final assessment, as surely as the JNU students are likely to win against the current regime. This is because, what we have seen over the last 10 days in JNU are peaceful, academic and thoughtful protests. Professors of JNU are conducting teach-ins on the idea of nationalism, so that a public that confuses nationalism with patriotism can become more informed. They are lecturing to the state through an open classroom, which incorporates the entire country. This is an important moment of manoeuvre because it revisits the non-violent anti-colonial nationalism on which the idea of India was conceptualised.

The two concepts – nationalism and patriotism- are not to be confused. Nationalisms can be of varied kinds and nationalism as a concept is understood and defined as a community produced by different political and historical variables over time. Patriotism is an individual feeling of affection for a country. Sadly, in India patriotism is being increasingly demonstrated in the public domain by witch-hunts against those that are seen as anti-national. These include those who may not stand up when the national anthem is played, are from religious minorities, are from lower-castes, eat beef, or shout anti-India slogans.

It is important to note that nationalisms are often in contestation with each other. So Kashmiri nationalism is constructed as being anti-India as India is seen as an occupying force by many people in the Kashmir Valley. Similarly, Indian nationalism was an anti-colonial nationalism built on the premise that the colonising power had to leave. This provided the ideological cement needed to bring about a community consensus in India (*albeit* imperfect and the Partition of the country was allowed).

What most people miss about Indian nationalism is that it did not gain traction overnight and also, that anti-colonial nationalism did not universally translate into a nation-state called India. Vallabhai Patel actively worked to acquire princely States, some of which had to be offered concessions and bought off with privy purses, and were allowed to maintain their royal titles. The state-nation called India, was manufactured over time, it was not born overnight. It is a state-nation because it is based on negotiated sovereignty between the state and individuals in culturally, linguistically and religiously distinct communities. Where the negotiations failed (Sikkim, Goa, Kashmir, Hyderabad), territory was acquired forcibly.

The right-wing in India is unable to grasp this notion of negotiated sovereignty where sovereignty of the centre does not exist merely through the exercise of coercion, but exists because the people of a territory allow it to. Over time,

the history of such negotiations is not much remembered. However, the northeast and Kashmir remind us that the negotiations are still on going. In the colonial past, British political agents literally on horseback often maintained sovereignty in the North East Frontier Province and the North West Frontier Province. The state, represented by this political agent, struck deals with tribal populations. The later states, which emerged in both countries, did not understand the importance of such negotiated deals tending towards sovereignty.

The current regime in India has empowered normal citizens to be the public keepers of patriotism. What we are seeing in JNU is an active demonstration of a long-suppressed anxiety that the Hindu right-wing has maintained since the early 1900s about the idea of India. For them, an Ambedkarite India was problematic precisely because it stressed on equality. However, how does one maintain a Hindu nation if everyone is going to be equal? Who will an upper-caste Hindu oppress to maintain his upper-casteness? How will the economy guarantee cheap labour if caste ceases to exist?

These are important questions because a Hindu nation and the notion of equality cannot go hand in hand. This is because the idea of a Hindu nation is strongly undergirded by the idea of caste and the othering of religious minorities from the national project. Caste has over time, refused to go away, even though the best of the right-wing will argue that Hinduism and equality are compatible. If this were so, we would not be having movements to allow women to enter Hindu temples and inter-caste marriages would be normal and not something to raise an eyebrow at. This is still not the case in India.

I have segued into this discussion because this idea of equality is one of the key pillars of a JNU education, even though it is not perfect. JNU has policies in place that allow for caste, community and religion mixing. In a JNU dormitory, two people from the same community are seldom given a room together. Students are encouraged to stay on campus and participate in cultural events from across the country – from Nagaland night to events of the Bengali association or the Tamil association. Dalit students in JNU have their own platform, as do left wing students and the regular Congress and Bharatiya Janata Party supporting students that constitute the National Student's Union of India and the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad.

The last time JNU was raided was during the Emergency years, when the Indira Gandhi government assumed executive powers and sanctioned the raids. The Emergency also saw the incarceration of several prominent right-wing and left wing leaders. It is indeed ironic that today the same right wing that has witnessed the rise of a time-bound semi-autocratic state under Indira Gandhi, is resorting to similar tactics to suppress opinion.

A JNU education does not produce a citizen with a formulaic and culturally rigid understanding of society. It produces a citizen that has the ability to affect social change even while working for a multinational corporation or the bureaucracy. Also, every year a large percentage of students of JNU succeed in the Union Public Service Commission examinations and build careers in serving the country as tax collectors, district collectors, police officers and diplomats.

In spite of its country-serving alumni, JNU is considered anti-national because it teaches its students that there are things in human nature, which must never be unleashed. I talk here of prejudice – the formation of an opinion without the facts of a situation being clear. Prejudice, it seems, has always been a formal institution in India. It is a parchment institution, formalised in a text called the Manusmriti, enforced through society's keepers of tradition and practised as ritual. There is really no other way to describe it. Caste in India is a perfect system of prejudice.

The existence of this prejudice was something that many, who were involved in the freedom movement and the framing of India's constitution, were aware of. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, M.K. Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Lal Bahadur

Shastri, all admitted that caste was a problem. Each had a different type of commitment to the annihilation of caste, but perhaps no one was more dedicated to this project than Dr. Ambedkar. His rebellion was complete when he converted to Buddhism and out of the Hindu fold, arguing correctly that under Hinduism there was no dignity or respect for a Dalit.

The Indian constitution was meant to be not only a set of laws, rules and regulations, but also had a far greater purpose. The constitution was supposed to reform Indian society, drag it away from prejudice and the everyday practice of it and push it, kicking and screaming, into a new world, where, it was hoped, "liberty for all" were no longer words on a piece of paper.

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