

## University and the Nation

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If nationalist sentiments are the only and final prerogative to belong to an academic community, then it must also be reiterated, a university has no business to share these sentiments. The founding figures of JNU knew it and it is upon the entire community of students, teachers and concerned citizens to safeguard the university against such jingoistic versions of nationalism.

*(It is my conviction that my countrymen will gain truly their India by fighting against that education which teaches them that a country is greater than the ideals of humanity.*

-- Rabindranath Tagore, Nationalism in India, 1917

Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) has been a left bastion since its inception, and largely because of it, the campus has been home to critical ideas, questioning the dominant ideologies of power, be it caste, class, gender or mainstream nationalism. It has not been simply ideas that have roamed free in JNU, but the lives of students themselves, in the way they could talk, eat, love, discuss, argue, and quarrel, within a larger atmosphere of tolerance.

### Defining Universality

If you want to call a place a university, you grant that place its freedom to question everything in the world. Otherwise there is no need to have them, or call them universities. When Tagore started *Visva-Bharati*, he related it with universality and that is how a university is ideally understood all over the world: A place where students can inculcate the right to challenge bigoted views and attitudes, something they may not learn from other social spaces like the family.

A university in fact, is *not* supposed to be an extension of any "parivar" (family), or the mirror image of the community you belong to. A university is, by definition and ethos, a community *at variance* with your sentimental ties in the world. A university is a place where you meet the other, the antagonist, the challenger, and learn to deal with your political and

other differences. To accept and respect those differences, even as you try to bridge or reject them, are the choices at hand. A university is a place where students learn to resist all that is forced upon them, all that does not taste like liberty. A university is a place where a future is born, and it is called future precisely because it refuses to resemble the past. Resistance is the universal responsibility of university education. Only resistance is truly universal. A university is a place where you put forward your best political argument for a cause and measure it against the arguments of others. It is, by extension, no place where you can try scuttling ideas by appealing to primal and regressive instincts like murder.

The idea of bloodshed in the name of any political sentiment is ethically disallowed in a university premise, even as students have a right to speak for people whose lives have met with unjust violence. That is why, in the recent incident in JNU, allegedly blood-thirsty slogans against the political demands of Kashmiris, as much as violence-mongering against India by some Kashmiri youths *are equally unacceptable*. Not because it is a crime, but because masculinist modes and language of protest are a critical issue. The language of protest has to be tempered so that it does not resemble a rampant form of jingoism. There is a political (and ethical) necessity in not borrowing the singular language (and logic) of hate. The good name of resistance needs to be upheld.

## **Standing up to Power**

JNU is a place where people who belong to powerful sections of society learn to side with those who belong to deprived, aggrieved and powerless sections of the nation. This critical training is part of JNU's (left) politics and what students cherish the most. This is what makes JNU students add their voice to the need for positive discrimination through reservation, for Dalit emancipation, more rights for workers, for tribals, and for people in the North-east and Kashmir, where people live (and die) under the boots of terrible colonial laws. All this makes JNU special, and if this right is snatched away by state force and repression, it will be a nightmare for the future of education in this country. The government has to let the university breathe its critical air or take pride in its demise. But JNU's place among the intellectual community in the world would not allow this easily.

JNU has a promising history of standing up, across governments, against all forms of state coercion. Students of this university raised their voice against the Congress' regime during the Emergency, the anti-Sikh riots, and more recently, against its attempts to push the neo-liberal agenda by coercion. They marched to Bihar Bhawan, braving police retaliation, when a member of the legislative assembly (MLA) belonging to the Laloo Prasad government in Bihar was allegedly found to be behind the killing of an ex-JNU President. They attacked the anti-poor machinations of the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPM) government in Nandigram. They protested the 2002 pogrom in Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-governed Gujarat. JNU's prestige in the world comes from recognising and taking up causes involving all victims of our sordid political history. JNU does not exist to articulate what the country's cosy, upper caste elites think and desire.

## **Fighting Crude Nationalism**

If students of JNU deserve the status of criminals for raising their protesting and dissenting voices against all forms of power and its excesses, then a list should be prepared of all those who have been part of this illustrious tradition since its inception. You cannot put the history of a university behind bars. You cannot criminalise a university's ethos. You can only face it intellectually, and argue back, soberly, with the arguments at your disposal. Having sentiments critical of nationalism (and articulating them publicly) is *not a legal crime*. As Tagore articulated way back in 1917, it is rather a *desirable sentiment*. To question the nation and those who claim to be nationalists in the name of fostering exclusionary ideas and pride, is the ethical duty of university students.

A BJP spokesperson said on a news channel, his "blood was boiling" hearing some of the slogans in the controversial march that took place on 9 February in JNU. Condemning the slogans and making a political point about them is one thing. Sending the police to intimidate the student community as a whole without good reason and procedure, is quite another. What about television news anchors shouting on top of their voices against JNU students, making legal accusations and sitting on judgement against them by crudely abandoning whatever is left of their journalistic responsibilities? Perhaps they too would say, their "blood was boiling." Is the boiling blood of the nation henceforth going to determine its courses of action?

And what about those people who were disgusted watching television newsrooms being transformed into trial rooms, with anchors behaving like ruffians? If nationalist sentiments are the only (and final) prerogative, then it must also be reiterated, a university has no business to share these sentiments. For it is precisely the university's business to distance itself from all that goes in the name of crude, populist nationalism. That is also what the man, who gave India's "national" anthem and also one of its first, global universities, categorically laid down as the university's distinguishing feature. There has to be a worldwide condemnation of any move to stifle the voice of a university in any country by using the bogey of "anti-nationalism" against it. India is a democracy unlike China, where students were gunned down in Tiananmen Square for protesting against the policies of the government.

The JNU Students Union President must be released to begin a reconciliatory gesture between the state and the university. A democratic state cannot gobble up the limited space accorded to the critical voices of a university. JNU's intellectual calibre cannot be throttled by making its students live and articulate their voices in fear. It is the mind without fear and the head held high that the "national" poet wished his countrymen to bear. It is the promise of JNU to bear it.