Diversity, Democracy, and Dissent: A Study on Student Politics in JNU

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Qualitative and quantitative evidence collected over the last four years (2014–18) at the Jawaharlal Nehru University campus reaffirms the crucial contribution of the institution’s diverse and democratic base to Indian politics. The authors suggest that JNU promotes a diverse yet inclusive campus, gives space to radical voices not only from the organisational left movement but across the political spectrum, and finally upholds a tradition of dissent which is in line with protecting the rights of free speech and promoting the values of democracy.

The significance of the stream of political activism unfolding at the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) campus has arguably taken a new turn since the momentous protests that occurred in February 2016 after six JNU activists were charged with sedition for alleged “anti-national” slogans. The ways by which the state and administration continue their attempt to eradicate the long-standing political culture in JNU (Deeksha 2017; Mahaprashasta 2018; Pathak 2018) are symptomatic of a coordinated ambition to
Debates around JNU student politics seem to reveal and intensify a divide between two irreconcilable understandings of India. As we will see, most JNU activists insist on liberal, pluralistic, inclusive and secular values in academia and beyond. This article engages with the self-perceptions, as well as the ideological attributes and the sociological composition of such a political endeavour. By portraying the university and its politics as endangering the unity of the country, the narrative unfolded by the Hindu nationalist government and the administration it appointed (Indian Express 2017) expresses an opposite desire to replace fractured social imaginings by notions of discipline, homogeneity, hierarchy and order.

We intend to show the possibility of a continuum between self-perceived political radicalism and the liberal values of JNU student activists, thus contradicting the common understanding of radicalisation as concomitant with exclusive group identifications, political polarisation and anti-pluralistic leanings (Stekelenburg 2014). To substantiate our argument, we refer to a survey of 1,224 JNU students' political attitudes conducted by the first author. This sample of students comprises 15.2% of the total number of registered students. This is supported by a textual analysis of more than 70,000 documents from 1973 to 2015 which include organisational pamphlets, and relies on multiple interviews with former and current political activists and students. Finally, we bring in our own ethnographic and anecdotal exposure to academic and political life on the JNU campus, and our interviews and interactions with our peers.

A Bastion of Left Radicalism

Two years ago, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) ministers such as Rajnath Singh and Smriti Irani, along with vociferous commentators, held JNU Students’ Union (SU) President Kanhaiya Kumar responsible for a grave offence—that of being the active representative of JNU politics. From their assertions, it can be assumed that his wrongdoing consisted of being the spokesperson of a completely anti-establishment institution that relegates Hindu nationalism to an oppositional role. In the last four decades (1974–2008 and 2012–17), in annual elections of the students’ union, the Students’ Federation of India (SFI)—the student branch of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI[M])—has won the post of president 22 times. The All India Students’ Association (AISA), the student outfit of the Communist Party of India Marxist–Leninist (CPI [ML]) follows with 11 mandates, while candidates from independent socialist platforms have won eight times. Candidates representing parties that dominate the government at the centre have always lost the post of president, except in the 1991 and 2000 elections, the latter being won by the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarathi Parishad (ABVP), the student wing of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) (not the BJP, as is popularly thought).

JNU as a postgraduate-oriented institution with social science overtones is a pebble in the
shoe of the government, as it symbolises an intellectual left that never misses an opportunity to label the current Prime Minister and the government as fascist and oppressive. JNU is undoubtedly an embodiment of the critical youth, and it is not surprising that a strong number of students perceive themselves as politically radical (Figure 1).

Self-perceived student radicalism (see Appendix for our survey methodology) can be understood as a reflection of the dominant anti-establishment discourse in JNU articulated by left organisations and politicised professors. Based on textual analysis of a corpus of 70,000 pamphlets issued by political organisations throughout JNU’s history, Martelli (2016) pointed to the prevalence of a lexical field that employed a “radical vocabulary” in the written narratives produced in the JNU campus.

Radicalism in JNU is seen as a form of oppositional politics; and it does not come as a surprise to see that “against” is the single most used word in JNU pamphlets (recurring 55,298 times) when excluding words denoting places and people (Martelli 2016). Recurring themes and phrases like radical politics, radical transformations, radical movement, radical posturing or radical struggles saturate the political space of the campus and have a significant impact on student politicisation.

**Methodological Considerations**

Social movement scholars favouring the life cycle model of political socialisation argue that specific life stages lead to the adoption of certain attitudes: radicalism for young adults and conservatism for elders (Jennings and Niemi 2014). The argument is that cognitive schemes of youth (Johnston 2012) lead to the adoption of innovative strategies (therefore potentially radical) rather than routine strategies (Blanchard-Fields 2007). In general, fresh encounters (Mannheim 1928; Keniston 1968) and the accumulation of new experiences as peripheral participants (Lave and Wenger 1991) are presented as the transformative forces of individuals, leading them to develop new Weltanschauungen from authoritative persons and masterful elders.

In addition to being trivialised in the public discourse, the polysemous understandings of radicalism make the notion a “sloppy” and “stretched” concept in political science (Sartori 1991: 249). Moving away from loose understandings of the term radicalism, we understand it as the tendency of individuals to identify with the fringes of the political spectrum. By doing so, we separate radical identity building from social radicalisation, which is usually associated with a certain affinity to violent behaviour (Bhui et al 2014). We consider that there is no evidence of the durability of such commitment as reflected in the survey. Is radicalism a temporary disposition attached to the mainstream dominant campus culture?
Or does it instead entail a durable imprint on its students?

Interviews with former JNUSU office-bearers suggest that their time on campus was formative and had a durable impact on their professional life. Indeed, respondents mostly engaged with professions compatible with their former anti-establishment activism. Figure 2 shows that most former elected student leaders became academics and that very few of them went to the private sector or worked as civil servants.

Second, not all student organisations attach the same meaning to the word “radicalism,” even if it is highly used by the AISA, Democratic Students’ Union (DSU), Democratic Students’ Federation (DSF) and SFI. Semantic polyphony is attached to “struggle,” the second most signifying word used by JNU pamphleteers (35,582 occurrences). It is over-represented in discourses of left organisations such as the DSU (score 49), AISA (10), SFI (10) and DSF (7), but fights do not refer to same political ideologies. Figures 3a and 3b display the words most commonly associated with “struggle.” The DSU and AISA use a lexical field which makes references to Naxal armed struggles, other peasant upsurges, Palestinian and Sri Lankan civil conflicts. The SFI and DSF focus largely on campus demands and the improvement of student life. “Soft” and “hard” interpretations of radicalism and choice of issues in JNU (as reflected in the pamphlets) are the result of the opposition between the parliamentary left symbolised by the CPI(M) and the various shades of more Maoist-inspired movements such as the CPI(ML) (which was an underground party leading guerrilla actions in rural Bihar and present-day Jharkhand until the 1990s). This is further diversified by other left-identifying groups like the United Dalit Students’ Forum (UDSF), Bahujan Students’ Forum (BSF), and Birsa Ambedkar Phule Students' Association (BAPSA), who also use the vocabulary of struggle in the context of caste emancipation.

**Figure 3a: High Associations of Co-occurring Words to the Word “Struggle” by Organisation**
Democratic Students Union

meaningful reinstate intensify
uncompromising reduction martyr
midway mass self-determination resolutely
assertive integral long struggle
injustice phase feudalism imposition
sharpen legal weapon

toto Naxalbari sabotage
collective restore liberation Telangana uphold
Kashmiri organ patriarchy reclaim blend
decisive goodwill Eelam
onslaught democratisation uncompromisingly
stay delegitimise anti-Lyngdoh
undermine transformation
All India Students’ Association
Students’ Federation of India

Campus

onslaught, position, advance, valiant, salute, steadfast, extend, AISA-led, victorious, carry, pledge, sharp, betray, reduce, vigilant, struggle, achievement, office-bearer, Nestlé, double, JNUSUs, arduous, glorious, physically handicapped, fledge, rebuff, uncompromising
Democratic Students' Federation

Campus

achievement steadfast associate
require achieve enhancement
relentless participate JNUSUs
resolutely clinch mass
forge weaken emancipation
office-bearer expand advance
GSCASH rebuild position
arrears launch resolution
revitalise liberation conclusion
broad viva-voce meaningful

restore
United Dalit Students’ Forum

emancipation

understanding

blend
Figure 3b: Lexical Specificities of Student Organisations in JNU (Organised by Topic) (Click here to see the table.)
All India Students’ Association

Anti-establishment namely Hindu right and Israel

Anti-establishment namely capitalism and military
Students’ Federation of India –
All India Students’ Federation

Campus-issues

Anti-establishment namely imperialism and communalism
National Students' Union of India

Nationalism
- Gandhi
- India
- anti-national
- China
- Swaraj
- comrade
- lumpens
- ideology
- dream
- our vision
- we
- leftist
- Congress
- Mahatma
- Marx
- Gandhi
- Hind
- Chinese

Secularism
- Kalam
- tradition
- Khan
- secular
- bouquet
United Dalit Students’ Forum

Caste identity and reservation rights

Origins of caste and caste discrimination

Words contained in topics were chosen among those who have a high chance (99.9%, equivalent to a specificity score S'>3) to be over-represented in specific sub-corpuses of the various organisations.

Source: Pamphlet Repository for Changing Activism (PaRChA) Project
Various shades of students’ identification with left radicalism are explicit when looking at figures regarding religious beliefs. As students become politicised, many of them choose atheism (Figure 4). This official critique of one’s community in the form of religion, is a tangible sign of the rejection of categories of conformism. For instance, the questioning of Hinduism entails an estrangement from the values often attached to it: caste system and relegation of Muslims as second-class citizens. Atheism is also the expression of an attachment to a secular liberal outlook. Atheism is therefore a form of political labelling. It goes against the practice of India’s democracy, which relies mostly on religious identities to construct majorities (Khilnani 2012). Highest levels of “atheistic politicisation” can be found in the School of Social Sciences, known for hosting many left-inspired scholars.

Two Streams of Democratic Radicalism: Marxism and Nationalism

While the current diatribe against JNU students is that they foment anti-national thoughts and activities, the survey responses indicate that respondents who consider themselves radical are also affiliated to the Hindu nationalist ABVP and the Congress-allied nationalists of the National Students’ Union of India (NSUI). Most left political organisations have reaffirmed their commitment to constitutional process and the rule of law. Only one left organisation (DSU) can be charged with not adhering to this norm, but that does not make them seditious by default. Table 1 shows that the number of members claiming affiliation to the ABVP is higher than for the DSU. Thus, the suggestion that radical students of JNU are inherently anti-national is grounded in no evidence. Further, the number of students who claim no affiliation is significantly higher than any organisational affiliation, either left, centrist, or right organisations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Level of Radicalisation by Organisation and Affiliation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Radicalisation/Ideology</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marxist–Leninist Organisationᵇ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationalist Organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-affiliated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Radicalisation/Organisation</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DSU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABVP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AISA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AISF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SFI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DSF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NSUI</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ᵃTotal number of students in category; ᵇ Percentages indicate the share of “radicals” and “hard radicals” among various categories of politically affiliated students. Source: Attitude survey by Martelli (2014–15)
As we can see from Table 1, non-affiliated students also have strong political convictions, with more than 107 out of 611 students identifying as having radical political positions. This is where the political culture of JNU is highlighted even more. Engagement with politics for many students does not necessarily mean joining a campus organisation, let alone left organisations, as is the popular perceptions. The ability for students to participate in political events and movements on campus regardless of affiliation is what points towards a specific democratic culture that embodies JNU’s political space. Even though membership to a political organisation is not a prerequisite for occasional participation and development of a civic spirit, high involvement often involves having a political affiliation.

At the same time, we would like to stress that organisational pamphlets in JNU inherit the discursive tradition of their parent party. For instance, the CPI(ML) aims at carrying a revolutionary struggle led by the rural proletariat (Bhatia 2005; Louis 2002). This ambition is perfectly reflected in pamphlets of its student branch (AISA), which emphasises on “hated elites,” such as capitalists, industrialists and military apparatuses and describes them as the oppressors of the deprived sections of the Indian population. This lexical disposition of the AISA can be compared to a rival communist organisation such as the SFI which prefers stressing campus-specific issues (such as scholarship shortages or the lack of student accommodation).

**A Model of Democratic Politicisation**

Veterans of JNU politics, such as CPI(M) chief Sitaram Yechury, compared the arrest of the JNUSU president to the arrests made during the Emergency period (*Indian Express* 2016). This was echoed again in the entry of police on campus in 1999 when 14 students were arrested after gheraoing the vice chancellor. At the time, three JNU office-bearers were detained in Tihar jail (Krishnan 2004). The arrest of Kanhaiya Kumar indicates that as an institution “conducive to social change” (*Times of India* 1969), JNU’s political endeavours and its anti-establishment left politics are under threat from the state.

This arrest is not the first obstacle to the institutional functioning of JNU and its politics. In 1981, the university was closed for 42 days after agitations related to the expulsion of a single student. The occupation of the administrative buildings in 1975 (Chenoy 1975) and the expulsion of the pro-Indira vice chancellor from campus by students in 1977 led to the sine die suspension of classes and an attempt to vacate student hostels. In October 2008, the Supreme Court decided to suspend JNU student elections after the refusal of major student organisations to implement mandatory Lyngdoh recommendations. The recommendations were perceived in contradiction with the “more democratic” principles of the student-crafted JNU constitution. This conflict lasted until March 2012, when elections were finally restored in compliance with the Lyngdoh regulations.

These exceptional events cannot obliterate the long-standing democratic culture of JNU politics, which has been declared as perhaps “the most peaceful campus in the country”
The electoral committee for JNUSU elections, which is composed of students, monitors the good conduct of elections. The presidential debate is the most attended event of the academic year and political organisations compete against each other on the basis of argumentation and rhetoric, and by utilising the activists’ political and social networks (Martelli 2015). Unlike Delhi University Students’ Union (DUSU) elections, JNU’s elections rarely rely on muscle or money politics; expenses for a political campaign consist mainly of the costs of poster printing and glue. Ironically, the same Lyngdoh Committee recommendation (MHRD 2006), which served as the basis for the 2008–12 ban on elections, considered the JNU model of politics as the epitome of student democracy.

**JNU Participation: Democracy of Castes and Communities**

Politics in JNU takes the form of discursive radicalism that progressively integrates broader sections of the JNU community in its precincts. On the basis of the survey used for this article (see Appendix), Martelli and Ari (2018) have shown that for each semester of study in JNU, an individual is 2.1% less likely to be a non-participant in JNU politics. Average daily participation in political activities organised on campus is low (only 5.4%), but the trend is very important to underline: the more one studies in JNU, the higher are their chances of participating in campus politics (Table 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years spent in JNU</th>
<th>Fresher</th>
<th>1 year</th>
<th>2 years</th>
<th>3 years</th>
<th>4 years</th>
<th>5 years</th>
<th>6 years</th>
<th>7+ years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students not participating in JNU politicsᵃ</td>
<td>48.0% (153)</td>
<td>35.7% (92)</td>
<td>27.0% (30)</td>
<td>26.4% (14)</td>
<td>31.6% (12)</td>
<td>16.7% (3)</td>
<td>7.7% (1)</td>
<td>6.7% (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average participationᵇ</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td>0.41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ᵃ Percentages indicate the share of students not participating in JNU politics according to years of study at JNU. Total percentage of JNU students not participating in JNU politics = 37.1% (306). ᵇ Degree of political participation in JNU: 0=No participation 1=Daily participation. Average participation for JNU students = 0.23.

Source: Martelli (2014–15)

This causality upsets the common assumption that more time spent in a campus leads to depoliticisation due to prioritising academic performance, thesis writing, and preparation for public service examinations. Contrary to many other Indian universities, JNU creates a quantifiable sense of civic commitment towards collective matters. This sense of belonging to a democratic community is evident when looking at the turnout of students protesting against Kumar’s imprisonment—some activists claim that 3,000 students and professors formed the human chain on 14 February 2016 (Dennis 2016). To add to this, it can be said that participation in JNU politics is not exclusive to dominant groups and represents all minority communities.
Table 3: JNUSU Elections: Candidates, Students Affiliated with Organisations, and Overall Student Population by Social Background

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community background</th>
<th>Candidates (2012–14)</th>
<th>Affiliated Studentsᵇ</th>
<th>JNU Studentsᶜ</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General Category</td>
<td>34.1% (75)</td>
<td>35.3% (97)</td>
<td>37.4% (428)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Backward Classes</td>
<td>30.0% (66)</td>
<td>28.0% (77)</td>
<td>27.6% (316)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scheduled Castes</td>
<td>10.5% (23)</td>
<td>12.7% (35)</td>
<td>10.9% (125)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scheduled Tribes</td>
<td>3.6% (8)</td>
<td>6.2% (17)</td>
<td>6.2% (71)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>17.7% (39)</td>
<td>14.2% (39)</td>
<td>9.9% (113)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North East states</td>
<td>4.1% (9)</td>
<td>3.6% (10)</td>
<td>8.1% (93)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Martelli (2014–15)

During the data collection on JNUSU candidates it was not possible to establish the admission category of contestants from Muslim and north-eastern communities. Consequently, these two categories were calculated separately in this table. * Includes central panel and councillor posts, years 2012 (two elections, March and September), 2013, 2014. ** Candidates contesting several times (maximum 2) counted once, except when contesting for another organisation. Students affiliated with student organisations. * General JNU student population (Source: Survey by Jean-Thomas Martelli in the academic year 2014–15).

This outlines a specificity of JNU activism that contrasts with other communal examples of Indian student politics. Jeffrey (2010) pointed out that student activism in his field site in Uttar Pradesh was dominated by educated Jats. Martelli’s fieldwork in Lucknow shows evidence of caste polarisation (Martelli 2017). The Samajwadi Chatra Sabha (student wing of the socialist party then in power in Uttar Pradesh) was overtly composed of Yadavs, while a small cohort of young chamars (North Indian denomination for an untouchable caste group) were emerging naye netas (new politicians) from Dalit organisations such as the Backward and Minority Communities Employees Federation (BAMCEF) and the Bahujan Samaj Students’ Forum. In JNU, Scheduled Caste (SC) groups like the UDSF, BAPSA, and BAMCEF constantly accused communist-led organisations of having an outrageously upper caste-led national leadership.

[In] AISA, they use Dalits as a vote bank ... using Ambedkar to co-opt
us ... Ambedkar is a tool to appropriate, patronise Dalits. SFI ... same story, CPI(M) [their parent party] is controlled by upper caste educated in JNU, Prakash Karat and his wife, and Sitharam Yechuri, they never considered an SC-ST woman ... and they see leadership as livelihood. Brahmins are the leaders, despite different opinions.

Ethnographic evidence from our fieldwork shows that sections of the North Indian Muslim population also accuse Marxist organisations of creating “Muslim posts” (for instance, the seat of Joint Secretary of the union was occupied by a Muslim student in 2012, 2013, and 2014) in order to secure their vote. Some also accuse AISA of instrumentalising issues like the Afzal Guru case or the admittance of madrasa-educated students in the first year of the bachelor’s programme. While the debate over patronisation of minority communities by communist-based organisations at the national level may be a valid one (Kumar 2006), figures show that JNU is an exception in terms of community representation (Table 3).

Campus organisations have an ambition to represent the minority communities and therefore file candidates from different categories of the population (Table 3). While all parties without exception defend the promotion of lower sections of the Indian population, debates about discrimination can be found in various political campaigns (for instance a surge in 2007 and 2008 after the implementation of OBC reservations in higher education, and since 2010 for removing administrative obstacles and biases at the entrance exams). Our interviews indicate that through advocacy for a more socially inclusive campus, political organisations groom activists from Dalit and Muslim communities. Politically affiliated students in JNU reflect the diversity of the campus, and it appears that the various communities are well represented among activists as well as within the students’ unions.

By no means do we want to claim here that JNU is a mirror of the Indian society. Rather, we suggest that processes of politicisation do not rely on traditional communal schemes but transcend conventional Indian social stratifications. Our hypothesis is this: if JNU politics is successful in recruiting students from eclectic backgrounds, it is because of the plurality of student organisations on campus. These organisations represent a large spectrum of Indian political parties with each organisation having its own regional composition. The AISA, being an outfit of the CPI(ML), which has its cultural and historical roots (as an underground Maoist organisations) in Bihar (Jaoul 2011), relies mostly on cadres originating from the wider Hindi belt (while only 53% of the JNU student population comes from this region, 74% of the students affiliated to AISA are from there). After an organisational split in 2012, the student wing of the CPI(M) relied on a few leaders from Kerala to restructure their unit. As a result, one out of two activists from the SFI is from the southern states of India.

Further, there are organisations which are not affiliated to political parties but gain student
sympathies on larger political positions of labour rights, Dalit and tribal rights, LGBT rights and gender justice. These include organisations like Dhanak (queer rights) and BAPSA (Dalit and tribal rights) that identify with alternative political labels such as Ambedkarism or Queerness (Figure 5). These non-affiliated organisations become important for students who may not want to be attached to ideological positions of a single political organisation.

Last but not least, participation in campus politics is more or less even across academic schools (Table 4). This confirms the inclusive nature of JNU. However, the chances of increasing participation through seniority are far lower for students registered in one of the “combined schools”—the 10 small centres (mostly sciences) scattered in the margins of the main academic area of the campus (Figure 6). “Our next year priority is to get a ground in these schools,” a student leader said in the 2015 electoral debrief. “We are not visiting them often enough, posters are not pasted and parchas [pamphlets] not distributed … so it is difficult to involve them in our struggles.”

Interviews and surveys indicate that lower levels of political socialisation of the combined school students partly explain why they show lesser participation in political activities on campus. Also, as Table 4 suggests, exacting levels of participation necessitate a form of political professionalisation that involves being supported by an organisational structure.

| Table 4: Level of Participation in Political Events on Campus Distributed by School/Affiliation |
|---------------------------------|----------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|--------|
| Schools                        | Level of Participation | No          | Rare/Low    | Occasional  | Regular    | Always/Daily |
| School of Social Sciences      | 32.5% (114)  | 35% (123)   | 12.8% (45)  | 8.0% (28)   | 11.7% (41) |
| School of International Studies | 35.6% (48)   | 29.6% (40)  | 9.6% (13)   | 14.1% (19)  | 11.1% (15) |
| School of Languages            | 32.4% (97)   | 32.8% (98)  | 13% (39)    | 11.7% (35)  | 10% (30)   |
| Combined Schools               | 50% (82)     | 31.7% (52)  | 6.7% (11)   | 7.3% (12)   | 4.3% (7)   |
| Total                          | 35.9% (341)  | 33% (313)   | 11.4% (108) | 9.9% (94)   | 9.8% (93)  |
| Politically affiliated         | 6.3% (14)    | 27.4% (61)  | 16.6% (37)  | 17.5% (39)  | 32.3% (72) |
| Politically not affiliated      | 45.8% (356)  | 34.3% (267) | 9% (70)     | 7.8% (61)   | 3.1% (24)  |

Source: Martelli (2014–15)
Main teaching area: School of Social Sciences (Number of students: 2,127 [28.6%]), School of International Studies (1,348 [18.1%]), School of Languages, Literature and Culture Studies (2,588 [34.8%]). Total students in main schools: 6,063 (81.6%). Hatched buildings are the planned/built extensions of the main schools as of 2014. Combined schools per location area: 1*, School of Environmental Sciences (173 [2.3%]), School of Life Science (259 [3.5%]), 2*, Centre for Law and Governance (107 [1.4%]), Centre for Sanskrit Studies (153 [2.1%]), 3* Centre for Molecular Medicine (32 [0.4%]), School of Biotechnology and Special Centre for Nanoscience (76 [1.0%]), School of Physical Sciences (134 [1.8%]), 4* School of Arts and Aesthetics (184 [3.3%]), School of Computer and System Science (247 [3.3%]). Total students in combined schools: 1,365 (18.4%). Sources: JNU Students Union Voter list 2012-13 and Map data 2016 Google.

Empowering Few Women

As with other political arenas in India, public involvement in the JNU campus remains a male-dominated activity (Menon 2009; Beaman et al 2012). Overall, women are far less
likely to participate in political events on campus (Figure 7). This is an important finding, because JNU is often perceived as a leading institution in terms of gender equality and inclusiveness. In a city riddled by the fear of gendered violence, JNU offers unparalleled levels of freedom for women and most agree that “a girl walks in the night fearless in this campus.”

The Gender Sensitisation Committee against Sexual Harassment (GSCASH), a result of the Vishaka Guidelines, has become a symbol of the progressive ethos of JNU. Several women stand for elections, are elected to university positions and student organisations (including one for LGBT rights) and communicate extensively on gender issues. The discourse on women’s emancipation is heard on an everyday basis (especially during election campaigns), and many men perceive themselves as feminists, therefore avoiding exaggerated displays of masculinity as seen in other university campuses in Delhi. The display of an empowering discourse on women’s rights does not necessarily mean a complete overhaul of practices in terms of gender equity in politics. However, the visibility of women in public spaces, public forums, political movements, and political positions on the campus is comparatively higher than most other educational spaces in which women’s involvement is minimal (Jeffrey 2010).

**Politics as a Popular Activity**

Continuous exchanges between activists and students over time are essential to drive new recruitments. However, elite sections of the JNU population are clearly less affected by this politicisation. This is indicated in the survey results where the social status of affiliated and non-affiliated students is somehow different. The Indian “elite middle class and up” (Sridharan 2004: 411–12) is less attracted to JNU politics than other sections of the student population. We define this class as the one having access to a high income, set at Rs 1,40,000 per annum by Sridharan (2004). Students with a guardian earning more than Rs 12,000 per month, are less interested in being part of affiliated politics (Table 5). In the survey, students whose medium of instruction was English (prior to joining JNU) are 10 points behind with regards to political affiliation. Moreover, looking at the occupational composition of the upper-middle class corroborates our claim. Sons and daughters of administrators, engineers, doctors, lawyers (see the “High Qualification” category in Table 5) brought up in Delhi are less likely to be involved in campus politics as compared to those coming from the peasant class. The income levels of parents of both affiliated and non-affiliated students is way above that of the average Indian household.

This indicates that with lack of access to income, non-English medium education, or with “low-qualification” guardianship, comes a higher propensity to participate in organisational politics. This can be understood in two ways. First, a large number of students come from
family and regions with high participation in grass-root politics as is the case of a large number of SFI and ABVP activists. Second, this indicates an inclusivity of political mobilisation that goes beyond the domination of English-speaking, middle- and upper-class determined politics. Most candidates during the JNUSU elections avoid delivering speeches in English, choosing Hindi or both. While there is a large number of affiliated students from the Hindi heartland, our samples indicate a substantial number of students from the southern states and the north-eastern states as active within affiliated and non-affiliated politics on campus.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 5: Social Background of Affiliated and Non-affiliated Students</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social Background</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>English medium</td>
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<tr>
<td>High qualification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peasantry (farmer)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Income &gt; Rs12,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Urban and Semi-urban</td>
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<tr>
<td>Northern states</td>
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<tr>
<td>Delhi</td>
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<td>Southern states</td>
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<td>North East states</td>
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</table>

Source: Martelli (2014–15)

Conclusions
From a macro perspective, this article is concerned with the de facto continuum between democratic leanings and self-perceived political radicalism at JNU. The coordinated attempt
by an increasingly Hindu nationalist state to normalise and mute potential alternative voices from politicised campuses is an obvious obstacle to the emergence of new generations of citizens upholding a pluralistic understanding of Indian political society.

From a campus perspective we show that JNU politics encompasses and attracts in its fold students from various class, caste, and regional backgrounds. Consequently, JNU campus activism can be understood only if one locates the different phases of personal adjustments and gradual adaptations in the inclusive culture shaped by peers, mentors, professors, and senior organisational strategists.

To conclude, this article confirms that the university fosters and shelters an active minority of voices who perceive themselves as radicals. Contrary to most mainstream commentaries, this article provides solid evidence that JNU’s critical discourse (radical or not) is firmly compatible with a liberal and secular India which should revel in the diverse voices on university campuses.

End Notes:

[1] This has been won sometimes when in coalition with the Communist Party of India’s student wing All India Students Federation (AISF).

[2] Other visible political organisations in JNU are: Democratic Students’ Federation, associated with Left Collective; Democratic Students Union, supporter of the Communist Party of India Maoist (CPI (Maoist)); All India Students Federation, student branch of Communist Party of India (CPI); and National Students’ Union of India, student branch of the Indian National Congress.

[3] For the academic year 2013–14, 4,846 students were doing research, 2,245 were pursuing postgraduate studies (MA/MSc/MCA), 861 were pursuing undergraduate studies and 109 part-time undergraduate-level studies. (JNU 2014: 321)

[4] The study exploits the resources of the “Pamphlet Repository for Changing Activism” (PaRChA), a digital platform of more than 70,000 documents created by Martelli as part of his doctoral project. The project is accessible here: https://www.flickr.com/photos/parchaproject/. Sign in: parchaproject.guest@yahoo.com; Password: guest2015.

[5] We have mentioned here the words that are most likely to occur along with “against” in the PaRChA corpus.

[6] This number is an indicator of the likelihood of over-representation of words in specific parts of the corpus. A score equal or superior to 3 means that there is 99.9% chance that the target word is used more frequently in the selected part of the corpus (in our case it corresponds to the text issued by a specific student organisation).
[7] The textual analysis was performed with the help of a computer-assisted tool: http://textometrie.ens-lyon.fr/?lang=en. Words contained in each section are those having a high chance (equivalent to a specificity score S>2) to be over-represented in specific sub-corporuses of the various organisations.


[9] Personal Interview with S Dayal, MPhil student, Dalit activist at JNU and at the All India Backward and Minority Communities Employees Federation, 2 February 2015. The names of all interviewees have been changed to ensure anonymity.

[10] Personal interview with A Prasad, assistant professor at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, former senior JNU SFI activist, 23 April 2015.

[11] This meta-region comprises of the states of Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, and Jharkhand. We also included Punjab, Gujarat, and Odisha but excluded Kashmir, Delhi NCR, West Bengal and the North East states.

[12] Personal interview with R Singh, PhD student, AISA office bearer and former JNUSU presidential candidate, 14 May 2014


[14] The India Human Development Survey (2005) considers that urban-based households belong to the top 10% of the population (that is 10% richest) when they earn more than Rs 1,52,000 annually.

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**Appendix**

Our approach to JNU radicalism is based on a survey carried out at JNU during the first semester of the academic year 2014–15. The survey was conducted over six weeks and all of the respondents are JNU students. The questionnaire was in English and consisted of 15 structured and close-ended questions and two open-ended questions. Although the medium of education at JNU is English, we adopted simple language in order to ensure that the wording comprehension was not an issue. We restricted the questionnaire to be short (single [double-sided] sheet of paper) in order to encourage participation. We briefed our respondents and emphasised that all responses were strictly anonymous. The questionnaire was filled by the respondent and placed in an opaque ballot box.

We delivered the questionnaire to all the on-campus student residences (hostel rooms). In addition, throughout six weeks during the first semester of the academic year 2014–15, we made five visits to four types of locations in JNU: (i) all of the university libraries, (ii) all of the 15 university buildings where teaching takes place, (iii) all of the school canteens, (iv) main squares/forecourts and on-campus tea stalls. We randomly assigned a time slot (in terms of the day of the week and time, considering only the teaching hours) for a visit to each location. In addition, we randomly assigned a more specific locality if the location was a large building such as a main library or a teaching centre. For example, we visited the teaching building A and delivered questionnaires on Tuesday 10 am in the classrooms located in the third floor.

The survey questions can be seen below.
Question on the political spectrum.
On the political spectrum I consider myself:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Extreme Left</th>
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<th>Extreme Right</th>
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<td>□</td>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
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We consider answers 5 and 6 as the centre of the political spectrum. Accordingly, answers 4 and 7 are considered relative centrist; 3 and 8 are centre-Left/Right; 2 and 9 are radicals; 1 and 10 are maximum radicals.

Respondent self-placement on the political spectrum

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Non-centre category</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5, 6</td>
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<td>4, 7</td>
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<tr>
<td>3, 8</td>
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<tr>
<td>2, 9</td>
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<tr>
<td>1, 10</td>
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</table>

Higher values on the non-centre variable indicates further away self-placement from the centre.

Apart from the survey, we also conducted interviews with 59 former and current students and faculty, both affiliated and non-affiliated. The parallel PaRChA project to collect pamphlets also benefited from this exercise. Both authors were present at multiple political events organised on campus and conducted formal and informal interviews with attendees to collect multiple viewpoints. This was also an ethnographic exercise at a time both authors were researchers and students at the university.