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Academic Freedom: A Perspective

Apoorvanand, Professor Hindi, Delhi University

The idea of a public funded university is under severe stress in India as well as across the world. In our country universities are in decline for a number of reasons. Universities are facing serious fund cuts both by central and state governments. As a result most universities are understaffed and under-resourced. Universities across India suffer from lack of faculty with teaching being managed by temporary and guest teachers in many states. Even in a university like Delhi University, nearly half the teaching posts have been lying vacant for years and most teaching is done by ad hoc-teachers. Such decline in state support for public universities is being observed all over the world with universities being asked to look for private sources of money. In India, apart from shortage of teachers, infrastructure facilities of the university like library or laboratories are also in an impoverished state. It is often said that when the state is fiscally strained it cannot be expected to maintain the Universities which are the privilege of a tiny portion of the population.

While lack of finances is a serious issue facing universities today, the crisis is even deeper. As Woodruff D. Smith argues, "...the academy's ongoing, currently heightened, financial difficulties are a manifestation of a much more serious and complicated set of problems, the most fundamental being the decline of the public sphere This decline has been accompanied by a lowering of regard for the institutions that have been most significant in creating and maintaining the public sphere. Of these, none are more prominent than the nation's public colleges and universities."

The Habermassian idea of public sphere, improved subsequently by other scholars, implies that democracies are sustained by the ability and desire of different sections of society to have a free exchange of ideas and opinions on issues that concern their lives and wellbeing on an equal footing. We know it too well that the idea of an equal plane is at best an ideal, a dream that societies have not been able to realize. However, Inequality arising out of class, gender, religion, caste and other factors should not inhibit debate, discussion and dialogue about collective life. For despite all disparities there exists a collectivity that everyone inhabits. This shared collectivity demands peaceful disagreements about decisions regarding economic future as well as ways of living together. For example, we have differing view-points on questions such as whether we should have more public spending to ensure food, health and education for all or not, what the nature of labour-capital relationship should be and so on. How should these differences be negotiated? Experience of previous centuries tell us that violence is not the best method to resolve differences. We have seen revolutions eating their children.

Human history has not been able to find any method better than democracy on the principle of open and free discussion for the purpose of negotiating contesting view-points. In a democracy everyone has all the

freedom to engage with the public to try and persuade people to rally around any idea. However, this process itself is quite susceptible to manipulation by those using rhetorical means. That is how Hitler managed to hypnotise Germans and initiated them into Fascism.

The First Commission on secondary education headed by Dr. Mudaliar recognised this danger when the report states that what James Madison said about his country, the United States, many years ago, holds good today in our country also. "A popular Government without popular information or the means of acquiring it is but a prologue to a farce of tragedy or perhaps both. Knowledge will forever govern ignorance, and the people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives."

The commission wanted excellence and perfection to be the aim of free India : "Students must acquire a yearning for perfection and learn to take pride in doing everything as thoroughly as they can; likewise teachers should learn to reject, firmly but with sympathy, all work that is half-hearted or slipshod or casual."

The most important task of education is to "develop the capacity for clear thinking which distinguishes every truly educated person and has become increasingly important in the modern world of "plural possibilities", where every one must learn to make up his mind and judge issues and problems without prejudice or passion." Clear thinking is difficult to achieve. Confused minds cannot make good choices. It is for this reason that modern societies seek to develop themselves as knowledge societies. But Knowledge is neither instinctive nor spontaneous. It has to be acquired methodically. Universities are spaces created for this task. A University has to be a free space if it has to perform this job of knowledge production. For, knowledge can often conflict with

belief systems which support and are in turn patronised by the powers that be.

Universities have been imagined and organised as structures free from influence of the state. The faculty, though funded by governments are allowed freedom to express their views and judgment which can go against the supreme power of the day. We have seen dons of Harvard University writing openly expressing their disapproval of Donald Trump as the president of the USA. Popular mandate could not deter them from telling people that they had erred or blundered in electing a man like Trump as their President. They were speaking as psychologists or psychoanalysts from their professional ground. It is not their political opinion but their professional judgment which they have a duty to share with their people.

Public spheres which are the basis on which a democracy can work, only if the discussions or conversations conducted are done in an intelligent manner. People need support from academics to have intelligent and humane conversations. This is one of the vital reasons for the state to support all kinds of research because it is research which augments and improves knowledge. Correct information, rigorous application of methods evolved and conclusions examined and seconded by peers is how the business of knowledge is conducted. It does need to be said that everything is subject to revision and rejection.

For democracy to thrive, the ability of people to discriminate between falsehood and truth must be cultivated. The community of knowledge has a role and duty here. It has to provide information and arguments to expose the claims often made by the governments to justify their decisions. For example, it was the duty of university based economists to examine the claims of the present central government regarding demonetization and help people understand its

implications. In order to perform this duty in a fair manner, it has to remain autonomous of the interests of the state. This community cannot become an approver and advocate of state power and its decisions, rather it has to primarily act as its critique. This is the main reason for not treating university teachers as government servants bound by a code of conduct which prohibits them from differing with the state.

Communities of knowledge are also supposed to act as communities of judgment. This work is done through framing of curriculum, syllabi, organization of classroom and also extra-mural activities. It is not that their privilege to have and air an opinion needs to be safeguarded. They have a responsibility towards their peers, students and their area of knowledge. They have to expose their students to contrarian view points, give them tools which would help them make their own analysis of the problems under consideration and evolve their own judgment.

Academic freedom is therefore not to be confused with freedom of speech or expression. Autonomy of teachers and universities is an essential condition of academic freedom but is not sufficient. Adequate funding and support for research, regular enrichment of libraries and other resources and enlarging the university space making it open to all sections of the society alone can make the practice of intellection truly democratic : each one of these is essential if we want universities to be academically free spaces.

Democracy, despite all its limitations is still the best approach to resolve problems facing humanity. Human beings have constantly sought to improve themselves and universities have played a great role in this endeavor. Societies which have an aspiration to evolve as intelligent and efficient communities have restrained themselves from the temptation to tame universities. Those who have acted otherwise have failed. Stalin, Hitler, Mao, Khomeini, McCarthy in

their attempt to make universities servile ended up impoverishing them and forcing talent and intellect out of the system. The State became stronger but societies became weaker.

Universities in our country are in dire stress today. Their usefulness is being questioned by the central government when it says that the tax-payer's money is being wasted on institutions like the JNU. The Prime Minister of the country mocks the universities by ridiculing Harvard and claiming that it has been proven wrong by his own and his team's hard work. To say that common sense needs no education and the work of scholars who have spent their life training themselves in their disciplines is futile is to question the very existence of Universities. Moreover, ministers are advising students and teachers to keep themselves confined to classrooms

and the prescribed course work. Their participation, through seminars, symposia and other means in the discussion which absorbs the society is sought to be criminalized.

It is this perspective in which the question of academic freedom needs to be discussed and needs to become a concern for the civil liberty movements worldwide. The attacks on campuses by ideological groups with an objective to turn them into their propaganda-machines have to be resisted. Attempts to regulate academic affairs through a central agency far removed from the Universities needs to be opposed and efforts to make academic institutions service centres of government schemes needs to be confronted and challenged. Policies leading to replacement of public funded universities with for-profit educational institutions need to be

questioned and defeated.. This is not the role of academics alone, the society at large has to stand by them and fight for them. It is for this reason that the PUCL has decided to dedicate an entire issue to this question. We hope that the readers would be able to see through the articles (which spread over several years) archived here that the danger is real and comes from many sources. Universities lack internal resources to confront and surmount this huge challenge. They need support and solidarity. We need to come forward and speak out for them.

The PUCL would especially like to thank Shri. Apoorvanand who put together this issue on Academic Freedom, all the publications from where the articles have been sourced and the writers who responded to our call and sent in their articles. □

Universities Vs Narrowing of Minds

Hamid Ansari, Vice President of India

Full text of the 66th Convocational Address at the Panjab University, in Chandigarh by the Vice President of India, on 25th March, 2017

It has been my privilege to be the Chancellor of this university, famous for its work and alumni, for almost a decade. I confess I have followed the dictum that a Chancellor should be seen infrequently and heard rarely.

This is one of those rare occasions, of convocation, when I get the opportunity to congratulate the Vice Chancellor, faculty, staff and students for the good work that is being done here.

I am very happy that the University has decided to celebrate the singular achievements and services of some individuals by award of honoris causa degrees and the Rattan honours. I congratulate Dr Murli Manohar Joshi for the D Litt, Justice Khehar for the Doctorate of Law, Dr NS Kapny and Prof GS Khush for the Doctorates of Science. I also congratulate Shri Anupam Kher for the Kala Rattan, Dr Dalip Kaur

Tiwana for the Sahitya Rattan and Dr PD Gupta for the Vigyan Rattan Awards.

Convocations are calling together of a university community to celebrate academic achievements and excellence; it is customary to use the occasion to cogitate in public in the expectation that the audience would do likewise.

I take this opportunity to share with you some thoughts on the importance of universities in our society and the requirements for the universities to play that role. Specifically I want to talk about:

- The idea of a university and how it distinguishes itself from other institutions where instructions are imparted focused on catering to requirements of daily life;
- The need for them to teach its members to think, to go beyond the obvious in learning for examination purposes, and to acquire the capacity and habit to question;
- The necessity for them to focus on research, to produce new

knowledge that may be beneficial to society and the economy;

- The need for universities to undertake social research, given the diversity and complexity of all societies in a fast changing world; and
- The imperative need for academic freedom so that the thought process and its expression is untrammelled by official or societal constraints.

Do we still need Universities?

Allow me to begin with a blasphemous preposition: 'Do we still need Universities?'

A professor of business psychology in a university somewhere has argued that

- "Higher education is at best incoherent and at worst suicidal since students enroll to enhance their career potential but end up as unemployed or unemployable as they were in their pre-college lives."
- He goes on to argue that the only way to fix universities is to align demand (what students

- want and employers need) with supply (what universities offer).
- This trend of thinking, essentially utilitarian in a narrow sense, is not uncommon in our times. And yet, to reduce all human activity to its utilitarian dimensions is to negate the ventures of the human mind and spirit that has characterized human progress down the ages.
- Civilisations in different times have brought forth universities. Plato's Academia and Aristotle's Lyceum in Athens in 4th century BC, Nalanda in India in 5th century AD, Al Azhar in Egypt in 952 and Bologna in Italy in 1088 were in different senses precursors of modern universities.
- Cardinal Newman in 1852 described a university as
- "A seat of wisdom, a light to the world, a minister of the faith, an Alma Mater of the rising generation. It is this and a great deal more."
- A university training, he added,
- "Aims at raising the intellectual tone of society, at cultivating the public mind, at purifying the national taste, at supplying true principles to popular enthusiasm and fixed aims to popular aspirations, at giving enlargement and sobriety to the ideas of the age, at facilitating the exercise of political powers and refining the intercourse of private life."

In our times, the University has become not only a catalyst of scientific and economic change, but also vehicle of equalisation of chances and democratisation of society by making possible equal opportunities for people – contributing not only to economic growth, but to social equality or, at least, lesser inequality. This was summed up a few years back by the President of the Copenhagen Business School, Per Holten-Andersen who identified four classical and one modern function of a university:

- To act as repositories of the knowledge of humanity;
- To generate new Knowledge

- by research;
- Transfer knowledge to the next generation by education;
- Transfer knowledge to Society, by dissemination; and
- Generating development and economic growth.

The last, admittedly, has acquired enhanced importance today but its efficacy is intrinsically linked to, and dependent upon, the institutions that produce new knowledge.

There is much clamour and urgency today for university research to be translated into products and services. While there is no argument against applied research; and the need to commercialise such research, we must also accept that many of our present challenges require paradigm-shifts and disruptive convergent innovation. After all, necessity is the mother of invention only in the very short term. Over the long haul, invention is the mother of necessity – changing not only what is possible, but what we regard as essential. We need to recognise that "risk, waste and failure are all essential parts of the process". Good science, like good art, is a creative enterprise.

Today's preoccupations are often myopic or ephemeral, giving little thought for tomorrow. History is at its most illuminating when written with the full consciousness of what people wrongly expected to happen. Even in the domain of technology, future developments only a few years away have been shrouded from contemporary eyes. Many, possibly most, have arisen unexpectedly from research with other objectives, and assessments of technological potential have invariably missed the mark. One of the roles of the university, thus, is "to prepare the knowledge that an unpredictable future may need".

More than a mere polytechnic

A University has to be more than a mere polytechnic. University education and intellectual enrichment must not be construed solely or even primarily as a path to employment. Even in disciplines with obvious professional connections, the university should first aim to build a profound

understanding of the discipline. A university law program, for example, should aim primarily to produce graduates with a deep understanding of law, rather than lawyers, *per se*.

A University has the twin responsibility of providing instruction on matters of intellectual importance and conducting research on those very matters. These two functions should reinforce one another. In recent times, there is a pre-occupation with technological research as against research in pure and social sciences. Often, questions are raised about the importance, and benefits of social research to present requirements.

Situating the relevance of contemporary social enquiry is complex and multifaceted. It is of paramount importance, especially for societies like ours that are in a transition process. It can help address challenges and identify possible solutions in areas essential to a transitional society's political stability and socio-economic development, including existential issues like inter-ethnic relations, protection of minorities, nation-building and good governance.

Social research examining the dynamics and direction of political, economic and social change improves our understanding of such processes, and can help identify pockets of malcontent and resentment, allowing these to be addressed before they become impediments to social harmony.

The other important role of social research is in questioning and deconstructing 'social and cultural mythologies' that circulate and proliferate in any society, especially during phases of change and uncertainty. The period of rapid transition in India, particularly, in the last 25 years, offers a particularly fertile climate for such mythologies- which are often harmful for liberal values and the exercise of democracy. Here, the social sciences, 'with their robust basis in rational criteria, their critical view of societal phenomena, and the sophisticated analytical

methods they employ', can be an apt antidote.

An important aim of higher education is to learn to ask questions and to develop the capacity for reasoned arguments. This is what Gurudev Rabindra Nath Tagore alluded to when he sang;

"Where the mind is without fear...

Where knowledge is free...

Where words come out from the depth of truth..."

The right of dissent and agitation are ingrained in the fundamental rights under our Constitution, which sets out a plural framework and refuses any scope to define the country in narrow sectarian, ideological or religious terms. The "national interest" in this scheme is constitutional rule. This is what Dr Ambedkar had in mind when he said that,

"It is only constitutional morality that must guide the government, not any whimsical invocation of narrow-minded, parochial figureheads and mythical characters."

This approximates what Cardinal Newman envisaged as the role of the University, some 100 years before Ambedkar, that "the idea of a university is to be determined without recourse to any authority and should be based on human wisdom". It should be a place for the diffusion and extension of knowledge.

Intellectual dissent

Intellectual dissent has the power to clarify differences and elucidate competing assumptions. It enables each of us to recognise the strengths and weaknesses in our thinking. Strong intellectual work can only be done in an atmosphere where scholars feel free to take risks, challenge conventions, and change their minds. A University

must foster an environment that prizes intellectual freedom. Except in cases of illegal conduct or violence, a University should never seek to silence or influence faculty members or students to adopt or renounce any particular position. Indeed, universities should take all legal action necessary to defend their academic integrity and freedom.

Academic freedom is the foundation of the University's mission to discover, improve, and disseminate knowledge. This is to be done by examining different ideas in an environment that encourages free and scrupulous debate. The ideas, no matter how uncomfortable or disturbing to the accepted status quo, can and must be challenged, modified and even discarded- on their merit, but may never be muted or suppressed.

The University, in discharge of its duties, has the responsibility of speaking out without the fear of intimidation; and to give offence, even at the cost of inviting protests. Not doing so would be to deviate from the path of rational enquiry and undermine our curiosity about the world by embracing ill-defined orthodoxies, which would impoverish our pursuit of knowledge.

Academic freedom requires a robust tolerance for disagreement and criticism, a willingness to have one's assumptions questioned, and openness to new ideas that may prove offensive. This tolerance always has the potential to conflict with other virtues and causes, so it needs to be defended repeatedly and vigilantly.

We need to revisit these commitments today because we are again in a climate that questions the value and scope of academic freedom. Recent events

in our own country have shown that there is much confusion about what a university should or should not be. The freedom of our universities has been challenged by narrow considerations of what is perceived to be "public good".

In a period of rampant distrust of matters intellectual there is an imperative need to defend the universities as free spaces, as independent, critical repositories of knowledge, and as sources of renewal of liberal values that provide avenues of social mobility and equality to people. We need to remind ourselves of the democratic aspirations of pragmatic liberal education while recalling that "our finest universities help fulfill the dreams of our best selves as a people".

In November 2005 an eminent scientist cautioned the world about the dangerous times that lie ahead in the realities of the external world and warned against "retreat from complexity and difficulty by embracing the darkness of fundamentalist unreason" (instead of) free, open, un-prejudiced, unhindered questioning and enquiry that are under serious threat from resurgent fundamentalism, West and East.

This proposition has universal validity.

As one of the premier institutions of the country, the Panjab University has to play its role of a neutral assembler of talent; that of an unmatched idea factory where the passion, creativity and idealism of young minds can be applied to meeting the transitional needs of our society, polity and economy.

As the Chancellor of the University, I urge you to proceed purposefully in this direction.

Jai Hind. □

Academic Freedom : From the eyes of a young teacher

Snehasata Manav, Department of English, Central University of Haryana

Today, Indian universities and academia are witnessing an unprecedented and outspoken threat towards the very idea of their existence. Universities are the spaces where knowledge is

expected to be generated; where even the most eccentric ideas are supposed to be discussed and debated; where difficult questions are desired to be raised and answered. But, if we try to analyze

the situation of Indian universities at the present moment, we will find that they are being attacked, questioned, and prosecuted for the very reasons of their existence. Either it is the case of Prof. Sudha

Chaudhary at Mohan Lal Sukhadia University, Udaipur, Rajasthan where she was hounded for inviting Prof. Vohra to deliver a lecture on Hinduism or of Dr. Manoj Kumar and Dr. Snehsata (myself) who were strictly warned for staging a play based on Mahasweta Devi's short story "Draupadi" or of Dr. Rajashree Ranawat at JNVU, Jodhpur who was suspended for inviting Prof. Nivedita Menon for a lecture or of a teacher at the Central University of Jharkhand who was suspended because he had allegedly invited a teacher from JNU or of the attack at Ramjas College, Delhi University by ABVP; each incident is a painful experience for the academia. The worst part of this censorship is that it has not only shrunk the limited space which was available to the students and teachers but also put the inner censor in their minds. When a young teacher joins a university, she remains very eager to perform her duties as a teacher and contributes in building a free and vibrant atmosphere in the society. But, if the teacher is warned, bullied, and punished for the same, next time, instead of eagerness and joy, there would be confusion and suspicion in her mind. In the same way, student's curiosities are also nipped in the buds. They are threatened for being critical and creative. Hence, this censorship not only thwarts academic freedom but has the capacity to engulf the very conditions in which academic environment can be bloomed freely and fully.

Academic freedom is often taken as a synonym for freedom of expression. Freedom of expression appears more personal, related to expression of one's personal opinions. But more than a right to express views, academic freedom

lies at the very core of the job of the academician. It is the duty of the teacher to acquaint the students with the various facets of a problem (however, those facets are considered as objectionable and intolerable by the dominant, powerful and authoritative elements). She should try to break the confines of pre-defined and structured notions, and should lay bare various realities submerged under the popular, well-structured, and well-defined reality. However, no ideological framework should be imposed on the students, and the teacher should respect the independent judgment of the students and let them decide for themselves.

For almost always, the authoritative and fascist tendencies make this argument that their actions are in the interest of the nation and society. But, they forget that they don't have any right to decide for the society. Society has its own logic and reason and it can make its own judgments. Here, I want to share a personal incident to qualify the argument that common masses have their own intelligence. Yesterday, my Mother and Aunt (both are illiterate who never got the chance to get education) happened to visit our university. We showed them the new academic blocks and they were overwhelmed by the grandeur of the place. While moving through the campus they were talking to each other and I was listening to them. The most striking thing in their conversation was their ideas about university and knowledge. In their local dialect, they easily made it clear that education imparts knowledge and knowledge liberates mind. They remarked that in the beautiful and big buildings of the university, beautiful and fearless minds were laboriously engaged in generating

great knowledge. They departed from us by reminding us our duty as a teacher and simply said, "Teach in the best way." They had great expectations not only from me but from the very idea of university. Ironically, their whole conversation took me a few days back. Mahasweta Devi's *Breast Stories* is the part of our syllabus in the Literature and Gender paper and I am teaching that paper in the 4th semester of M.A. English. We had gone through the story "Draupadi" and for the better understanding of the story and its various issues; we decided to watch the play "Draupadi" in the classroom. But, as soon as we started the play, our HOD asked me to come outside and questioned about the screening of the play. He literally pleaded me to stop the screening. I witnessed fear in his eyes. I questioned his approach but finally had to stop the play. Then I realized that even the so called autonomous classroom was not my own. Travelling through the seminars and conferences, the bullying censorship had infringed my classroom, my syllabus, my content, and my study material. And I failed in protecting my academic space in the face of insensitive administration. I wanted to tell all this to my Mother and Aunt. I wanted to tell them that their imagined 'beautiful minds' are slowly and gradually being terrorized and hampered by dirty fascist tendencies. I wanted to alarm them that instead of open debates and healthy discussions, fear and silence were prevailing in those beautiful spaces. But I didn't say anything to them. How could I terrify and scare those fearless expectations? I couldn't, because these selfless expectations are the only hopes which would be able to revive fearlessness and confidence in the confused minds. □

Pockets of Resistance

Mukesh Semwal

The Maharaja Sayajirao University (MSU) in Vadodara, Gujarat, is amongst the top universities in the country with a global reputation. MSU's Fine Arts College is reputed

nationally and internationally for upholding the highest standards of creative and critical practice. It is also reputed for its commitment to the freedom of expression. Last

month, however, this prestigious institute hit the headlines as one more target of police-supported Hindutva hooligans in Modi state where the rule of law is an alien

concept.

On May 9, 2007 the saffron brigade, led by an advocate, Niraj Jain, stormed the university premises. The cause of their misplaced rage was a painting by Chandra Mohan, a student from the graphics department of the fine arts college in Vadodara, which was part of a collection of students' paintings displayed for assessment by examiners for a master's degree in fine arts. Mohan's painting, depicting nude figures with some religious motifs, allegedly hurt "Hindu religious sentiments". This was enough for the self-appointed moral police to barge into the campus, disrupt the annual examinations in progress and beat Mohan up.

What is even more shocking is the role of the police. Instead of taking action against the lawbreakers, the police promptly arrested the unfortunate student and charged him under various sections of the Indian Penal Code (section 153 – Promoting enmity between different groups on grounds of religion, etc, section 114 – Abettor present when offence is committed, section 295 A – Deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings of any class by insulting its religion or religious beliefs). They opposed his being given bail and had him locked up in Vadodara's Central Jail for five days. As if that was not enough, the vice chancellor (VC) of MSU, Dr Manoj Soni, was party to the ugly episode. Instead of upholding the dignity of his university, speaking up for Chandra Mohan and demanding police action against Niraj Jain and his hoodlums, Soni chose to suspend the dean of the fine arts faculty, Prof Shivaji Panikkar.

Freedom of the arts and literature are vital in any democracy. There may be divergent views on this sensitive issue. Accredited artists of high calibre, refinement and culture are those fit to comment on works of art. What constitutes beauty and what is obscenity cannot be decided by a self-constituted moral brigade. The way the exhibition was displayed by

students of the fine arts faculty establishes that it was clearly meant for academic evaluation in the annual examination.

The exhibition was ransacked by the saffron brigade with the help of the police armed with a magistrate's order. Such an action within the precincts of an academic institution of high repute, under the nose of the VC and the university's administrative authority, is unthinkable. Right-thinking persons across the country have been appalled by this fascist act and have come out openly in solidarity with the protesting students and faculty of the MSU. Within Gujarat and, in particular, amongst teachers and students of MSU, the latest incident is being seen as part of a concerted attempt by the sangh parivar to subvert the autonomy of institutes of higher learning and to bring them under saffron sway.

The process, started when the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) assumed power in the state some 10 years ago, only accelerated after the 2002 carnage. Though a similar communalisation of the campus has been under way in other universities in Gujarat, a vibrant struggle has emerged within the MSU to challenge it. Against all odds, both teachers and students at MSU are resisting the nefarious plan to destroy their powers of resistance and to trample on the autonomy of MSU and thus pave the way for absolute control of the university by the Hindutva brigade.

In a way, this phenomenon is part of the two-decade old effort by different political parties across the country to undermine the autonomy of universities following the National Policy of Education, 1986 coupled with directives of GATT and the WTO. Be it the Congress party in states where they are in power, or the CPI (M)-led Left government in West Bengal and Kerala, most political parties, 'national' or 'regional', are uncomfortable with genuine autonomy for universities.

Far from being the exception, the previous National Democratic

Alliance government at the Centre and the Modi-led BJP government in Gujarat have aggressively intensified the process. They have not only appointed puppets as vice chancellors but taken the exercise many steps further by actively choosing those committed to the sangh parivar's hate politics for these critical and prestigious posts. The result of such blatant attempts at academic control by politicians and political parties has resulted in syllabi being redesigned with a view to shun the rational and scientific outlook and doctor young minds. In a nutshell, the democratisation of education has been severely arrested.

The unchallenged practice by all political parties to control institutions has made the BJP's job even easier. Whenever it comes to power the BJP uses these unhealthy precedents, albeit more aggressively. Wherever it is in control of state governments, the sangh parivar, in its bid to universalise Hindutva ideology, is going for all out saffronisation even as it destroys the very fabric of democratic, secular and scientific education.

Pre-planned vandalism of May 2007

The marauders chose examination time for their assault on the Fine Arts College with the objective of rousing communal passions in Vadodara. The faculty was targeted because its students and teachers had dared to stand up to the puppet vice chancellor, Manoj Soni. The backdrop to the incident was the earlier uncalled for thrashing of a student from the arts faculty by a security guard at the instance of a hostel warden. Strong protests from students of the faculty, backed by their dean, Prof Shivaji Panikkar, left the atmosphere within MSU smouldering. Clearly the VC is out to teach this independent faculty a lesson.

Systematic saffronisation

Following the 2002 carnage, the MSU was brought totally under the control of the BJP and its mentor group, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). In 2003 the University Syndicate, the

highest decision-making body which formulates rules and regulations in the university, was completely in the grip of the sangh parivar. For the first time in the history of MSU, there was no voice of dissent at any of the syndicate meetings. Many non-academics and persons of low calibre were made senate members by the Gujarat government. The academic year 2003-04 sounded the death knell for MSU as various anti-student, anti-education measures were taken by university authorities.

Only those with unflinching loyalty to sangh ideology could climb the ladder of academic success. After the 2002 carnage, most of the VCs appointed to various universities in Gujarat owed their allegiance to the ruling party. The current VC, Dr Soni was rewarded with this post for praising Modi and eulogising the carnage. The university magazine of the arts faculty was not allowed to publish a resolution condemning the communal carnage. Nor was there any official condemnation on the murderous attack on Prof Jussar Bandukwala, a senior faculty member of the MSU, during the 2002 violence.

The atmosphere of free debate, discussion and democratic dissent has been vitiated by the saffron brigade for some time now. In 2003, activists of the BJP's youth wing, Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), destroyed placards against the US invasion of Iraq put up by the all-India Democratic Students' Organisation (DSO). In September 2002, RSS syndicate members and ABVP activists stalled a seminar sponsored by the University Grants Commission and organised by the department of history, where Islamic scholar, Asghar Ali Engineer, was scheduled to be the main speaker.

In 2003, DSO was denied permission to organise a cultural festival in the fine arts faculty hall even though non-university related organisations, including religious bodies, are regularly permitted to hold their functions there. The DSO was being thwarted because it had led two successful student

agitations resulting in the emergence of a genuine students' movement in MSU.

The 'hostel movement' in 2004 was a big blow to saffron forces. In June 2004, when students were leaving after exams were over, the University Syndicate arbitrarily decided to close down two boys' hostels: Lal Bahadur Shastri (LBS) Hall and Manubhai Mehta (MM) Hall. It also introduced some major changes in the hostel administration, including the centralisation of power in the hands of the chief warden. Being a residential university, MSU has 12 boys' hostels and four girls' hostels. These hostels can accommodate only 3,500 students, which is inadequate for the existing strength of students.

DSO launched a movement against the closure of the hostels. The authorities had to give in to students' demands after students' *gheraoed* the VC for about eight hours on August 15, 2004. This was the first time in years that the BJP/RSS syndicate was compelled to bend before a democratic movement.

MSU under Soni

MSU's current VC, Manoj Soni, is a former student of the university. Previously a reader in the political science department of Sardar Patel University, Anand, he took over as VC of MSU on April 17, 2005. What surprised many was the appointment of such an inexperienced person to manage such a prestigious institution. Ironically, he would have been content with the post of reader in the political science department at MSU.

Soni's proximity to Modi was one of the factors responsible in catapulting him to the top post. He is understood to be the brain behind the draft of the Common University Act, an enactment intended to destroy the autonomy of universities. He is the youngest VC that MSU has had. While the BJP/RSS lobby loves him, those who oppose the Common University Act see him as a man specially brought in by the Modi government to prepare the ground

for the implementation of the Common University Act.

After taking over as VC in April 2005, Soni briefly tried to cultivate the image of a popular student-friendly VC. But the pretence did not last long. Barely three months later, he sat on hunger strike in the company of BJP/RSS leaders opposing a students' agitation. What came as a shock to many in the MSU was the brutal use of force against agitating students on July 18, 2005 in the VC's presence. Instead of intervening, Dr Soni said, "They were shouting for justice, and justice has been given to them."

The Common University Act (CUA) was a draconian move by the state government to bring all universities in the state under tighter political and bureaucratic government control. A successful agitation launched jointly by teachers and students prevented the Act's implementation. However, Soni is already imposing provisions of the CUA indirectly – by victimising students, punishing members of the teaching faculty and interfering in the day-to-day academic affairs of various faculties. He is trampling on academic freedom and the autonomy of the university, blatantly trying to let university affairs be run from Gandhinagar. This was evident during the recent incident at the fine arts faculty of MSU and especially given the antecedents of many who stormed its gates.

The student community has played an important role in various movements to safeguard university autonomy and oppose the anti-education policies of university authorities and the state government. To gag this rising students' voice, MSU authorities banned the students' election in 2005-06. A Students' Action Committee then launched a movement against this step. Elections were held a year later, in 2006, in an extremely tense and repressive atmosphere.

That year, the VC's anti-student attitude was once again on display, this time during the agitation for admissions to the master of arts'

history course when some female students lay down in protest outside the VC's office. Instead of hearing their pleas, Soni simply walked over the agitating students! Ultimately, the protest movement succeeded but the VC's arrogance shocked all right-thinking persons in Vadodara.

As with students, so with the teaching staff. University teachers are routinely tempted by the lure of postings, promotions and positions if they toe the saffron line. Hostel wardens are also selected on the basis of their pro-RSS leanings. RSS *shakhas* (branch meetings) are freely allowed on the university campus.

A woman teacher in the home science faculty was denied a promotion because of the growing communalism in MSU's

administration. She has since filed a case in the Gujarat High court stating that because she, a Hindu, is married to a Muslim, she was made a victim of communal bias. Prof Bharat Mehta, a reader in the department of Gujarati literature, has also been denied promotion because of his secular credentials. Mehta has screened films on the Gujarat carnage and been active in debunking saffron propaganda about the Godhra incident and the post-Godhra genocide.

Today the autonomy of MSU is in grave danger. The VC, Soni, is out to saffronise it. The saffron brigade wants to generate a controversy around Chandra Mohan's paintings and never mind the question of artistic freedom. "Hurting religious sentiments" is but a clever ploy used to divert attention from their

true object: the issue of autonomy. Arousing people's religious passions would of course fulfil a dual purpose and reap rich political dividends before assembly elections in the state.

Hence all efforts need to be concentrated on supporting the struggle by students and teachers to ensure the autonomy of MSU. The saffron brigade and the ABVP are out to confuse and divide the university's students while Congress (I)'s student wing, the National Students Union of India, is also playing a short-sighted and divisive role.

Courtesy Communalism Combat, June 2007 Year 13 No.123, Genocide's Aftermath Part I, Hindu Taliban

Link:

<https://sabrangindia.in/article/pockets-resistance> □

Shiv Sena Predictable but Dismayed by VC: Author Strikes Back Rohinton Mistry

The Shiv Sena's student wing complains to the Vice-Chancellor of Mumbai University that it is offended by the novel *Such a Long Journey*. Copies are burnt at the University gates. Needless to say, no one has actually read the book. The mob leader, speaking in Hindi to a television camera, says: The author is lucky he lives in Canada—if he were here, we would burn him as well. The mob demands the book's removal within twenty-four hours, from the syllabus. The good Vice-Chancellor obliges the mob.

All this happened in September. Subsequently, the Shiv Sena sent fulsome congratulations to the Vice-Chancellor on his prompt and wise decision. Students and faculty protested in abomination, unwilling to accept his abuse of power, his invoking of emergency measures unused in the University's 153-year history, circumventing the process for syllabus change, damaging the University's reputation, succumbing to political pressure. For days, the Vice-Chancellor said nothing, offered no explanation. He is, we are told, a PhD in statistics—a useful subject for dealing with permutations, combinations,

probabilities but silent on the matter of moral responsibility.

In this sorry spectacle of book-burning and book-banning, the Shiv Sena has followed its depressingly familiar, tediously predictable script of threats and intimidation that Mumbai has endured since the organisation's founding in 1966. But it is the expeditious decision by Mumbai University which causes profound dismay. After his long silence, the Vice-Chancellor has now stated that he, in fact, followed the correct procedures, and the decision was taken by the Board of Studies. The outgoing Board of Studies, to be precise. More bobbing, weaving and slippery behaviour is no doubt in the offing. But one thing remains: a political party demanded an immediate change in syllabus, and Mumbai University provided de luxe service via express delivery, making the book disappear the very next day. The University, in the person of the Vice-Chancellor, occupies an exalted position in civilised society, the champion of academic independence and freedom of expression. Instead, Mumbai University has come perilously close to institutionalising

the ugly notion of self-censorship. The Vice-Chancellor knows what he must do to remove the stain.

This sordid story, however, does have a bright spot. Civil society, has responded, in Mumbai and elsewhere, with outrage, questions, petitions; it is inspiring to see. The stand taken by teachers, citizens' groups, bloggers, journalists is exemplary. Who knows, it may even educate the main actors about the workings of a real democracy.

As for the grandson of the Shiv Sena leader, the young man who takes credit for the whole pathetic business, who admits to not having read the book, just the few lines that offend him and his bibliophobic brethren, he has now been inducted into the family enterprise of parochial politics, anointed leader of its newly minted "youth wing". What can — what should — one feel about him? Pity, disappointment, compassion? Twenty years old, in the final year of a BA in History, at my own Alma Mater, the beneficiary of a good education, he is about to embark down the Sena's well-trodden path, to appeal, like those before him, to all that is worst in human nature.

Does he have to? No. He is clearly equipped to choose for himself. He could lead, instead of following, the old regime. He could say something radical — that burning and banning books will not feed one hungry soul, will not house one homeless person nor will it provide gainful employment to anyone (unless one counts those hired to light bonfires), not in Mumbai, not in Maharashtra, not anywhere, not ever.

He can think independently, and he can choose. And since he is drawn to books, he might want to read, carefully this time, from cover to cover, a couple that would help him make his choice. Come to think of it, the Vice-Chancellor, too, may find them beneficial. First, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, in order to consider the options: step back from the abyss, or go over the edge. Next, the Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore's *Gitanjali*.

And I would urge particular attention to this verse:
*Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;
Where knowledge is free;
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls;
... Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.*
(Courtesy Indian Express, Oct 19, 2010) □

The Closing of Our Minds

Apoorvanand, Prof Hindi, Delhi University

Removing the A.K. Ramanujan essay from the Delhi University history reading list is a sorry compromise with intolerance — and a rejection of the spirit of academic inquiry

The Delhi University academic council's decision to drop A.K. Ramanujan's essay, 'Three Hundred Ramayanas', from the prescribed readings for BA (honours) history and BA (programme) students, brings back memories of Bombay University's move to remove Rohinton Mistry's novel *Such a Long Journey* from the syllabus. The victimisation of art-historian Shivaji Pannikar by Baroda's Maharaja Sayajirao University is another long and painful story. The many, many cases of books and plays being proscribed by various governments form the general climate in which our universities operate.

It is yet another instance of retreat by the intellectual community before the forces that do not believe in the fundamental principle behind the idea of a university. "Controversy and not conform" is what universities tell their members. Think of the Nobel-winning discovery of non-replicable quasicrystals by Daniel Shechtman, which challenged established notions about matter. Shechtman was even asked to leave his research group for suggesting the existence of quasicrystals, but persevered, and this award is rightly seen as a celebration of fundamental research. Has not all knowledge

progressed only because of this unique human habit, of doubting everything? Is this not what we, as teachers, do in our classrooms, encourage our students to think and imagine autonomously? We try to instill in them the courage of intellect. And we gain this courage by the strength of independent research.

The withdrawal of the Ramanujan essay is a rejection of the spirit of research, which is the driving force behind knowledge creation. It was his rigorous research that led him to the conclusion that the cultural area where the Ramayanas are endemic has a pool of signifiers, (like a gene-pool) that include plots, characters, names, geographies, incidents and relationships." This essay is, in a way, about the universality of the Ram-Katha in an area that far exceeds the political boundaries of India. It is about diversity, as well as continuity. And on the basis of this, Ramanujan enunciates a principle which helps us understand the working of creative processes. He says that the various texts of the Ramayana relate to each other through this common code or common pool. Every author dips into it and brings out a unique crystallisation, a new text with a unique texture and fresh context. He concludes that no text is original, yet no telling is mere retelling — and the story has no closure, although it may be enclosed in a text. You do not read anything for the first time. It is already there. Ramanujan does not

seek to question the originality of a creation, he merely lights up the web of a universe that is its breeding ground.

It would have been useful if the academic council, composed of scholars from across disciplines, had asked their colleagues from the history department about the logic behind including this text by a poet, translator and folklorist. How do the principles of creation, telling and retelling impact historiography? These would have been academic enquiries. Sadly, as we are told, this was not done. A debate that lasted more than two hours did not ask questions about the tools that such texts fashion, which can help interdisciplinary pedagogy. It was also not realised that replacing the Ramanujan essay with two essays by Ram Sharan Sharma and Romila Thapar militates against the interdisciplinary principle that university authorities have been asking the departments to adopt.

Authorities tell us that this reading was part of a study-scheme that expired in 2009, and the question of dropping it was only a technicality, since the university was to report to the Supreme Court its approach towards this particular text. In 2008, the history department was attacked by some people, who claimed that this essay was sacrilegious. The matter went up to the Supreme Court and it felt that it was for the university to decide what was good for its students. It asked the University of Delhi to seek expert judgment on the suitability of this essay for

undergraduate students of history. The essay was referred to four experts, three of whom said that its academic merit was unexceptionable. One expert differed. What would have been the normal course of action? To go by the opinion of the majority, one would assume. The council, however, thought otherwise. One shudders to think that there were only nine voices to defend Ramanujan, and the history

department's decision to include this essay in their readings. The majority kept mum, claiming that this was a fight between two ideological groups that they did not want to be part of, and so they ended up silently voting out the essay. It is an ominous sign for the future of academic autonomy in Indian universities. It is also a signal for us teachers — play it safe, because you will not be defended by your own peers.

Our students have been reading and enjoying this essay since 2008, even after the violence around it. That we have not been equal to their intellectual maturity is what saddens me, as well as that we thought it better to buy peace from a bunch of people who have been rebuffed by less autonomous institutions like NCERT (which stood its ground against their threat). I feel diminished as a teacher and complicit in this act of academic compromise. □

Courtesy Indian Express 13th October 2011

Deletion of Al-Rubaish's Poem and Cancellation of Wadud's Lecture

Apoorvanand

Deletion of al-Rubaish's poem and cancellation of Wadud's lecture happened on our watch

Close on the heels of the axing of a poem in an English textbook by the University of Calicut for the alleged “terrorist links” of the poet, came the news of the cancellation of a scheduled lecture by Amina Wadud, a US-based Islamic scholar, by the authorities of the University of Madras. Calicut University succumbed to the demand of the Shiksha Bachao Andolan, an outfit of the RSS parivar, that the poem “Ode to the Sea” be removed from the textbook “Literature and Contemporary Issues”, as its author, Ibrahim al-Rubaish, was a “terrorist”. It was also demanded that those responsible for the selection be identified to “uncover” the network of terrorist “sympathisers” in the board of studies and academic council of the university.

The vice chancellor promptly ordered a probe by a senior dean who, after visiting the internet, discovered to his horror that al-Rubaish did have terrorist affiliations. He recommended the poem's removal, saying that “students would not lose much if they do not read this poem”. One of the textbook's editors explained that, at the time of the poem's selection, there was not much material available online about the poet. They would not have selected it if the poet's background was known to them.

It is an irony of our times that editors are being shamed for an intellectual

act that was a creative way to expose undergraduates to the emotional impact of the “war on terror”. Who would dispute that the war on terror is a contemporary issue? How does literature react to it? Why and how do the Guantanamo detainees choose poetry to convey their pain and trauma? Most of them are non-poets. Can something they inscribed on coffee cups or floors of prison cells, in their desperation to speak, be accorded the exalted status of poetry?

“Ode to the Sea” is the favourite of Marc Falkoff, an attorney fighting for 17 Yemeni detainees at Guantanamo, who has edited Poems from Guantanamo: the Detainees Speak. He selects it as it is “striking in terms of imagery, metaphor and thematic complexity”. It doubles up as a lament and a complaint. The poet's complaint to the sea for its indifference to the suffering of the detainees is also an admonition to the American people for their acquiescence in the acts of their rulers. This poem, along with others, put this uncomfortable question to the American people: is Guantanamo an exception to the democracy as practised by them, or is it its natural and inevitable product? At the same time, should this poem's publication, with the Pentagon's permission, be seen as a clever public relations ploy? Since poetry thrives in jail and is

disseminated widely through such publications, can it not be claimed that Guantanamo is not an inhuman place after all, and it is unjust to compare this with the camps set up by the Nazis or Communists?

Aesthetes have worried if well intentioned publications like this one would not encourage an instrumentalist approach to poetry. Scholars like Homi Bhabha may see the poem as an attempt by the suffering to find a new temporality away from the one he is imprisoned in. Are such poems sensory monuments humans keep building to preserve their agonies, to deny humanity a reprieve or catharsis? These are questions young minds need to grapple with. They need to comprehend the enormous capacity of human beings to practise cruelty. They need to question the security their states claim to create for them by coming face-to-face with the eternal insecurities large populations are subjected to — through drone attacks or illegal capture of persons who are then invisibilised by caging them in Guantanamo.

Universities are meant to pursue the idea of excellence. Excellence is achieved only by training minds to be courageous, to wade into turbulent waters. This is why the University of Iowa decided to publish it. America is the fountainhead of the war on terror. Why does an American university

have this courage and why do we lack it?

Even more disturbing was the Madras University's decision to order its Department of Islamic Studies to cancel Wadud's lecture. This was an attempt from within to expand the largely male discourse on Islam and could have been an occasion to foreground the concerns of gender, justice and equality in an Islamic vocabulary. One recalls how the will of the history department of the University of Delhi was similarly trampled by

higher authorities when they decided A.K. Ramanujan's "Three Hundred Ramayanas" was not necessary reading for their undergraduate students.

The failure of India's academic community to react to these "local" assaults bodes ill for the task of intellection universities were created for. Wadud asked in her tweet: "It is also a shame that Madras University went to so much trouble to be thwarted by factions of the ignorant. Where to intellectualism if that is so?" She

exhorts us, "People of India, you have a chance to redeem yourselves for your own best interest. Do not be silent when the ignorant speak, claim your voice. And when one gives a service, one can just as easily stop giving. So that is my location, I am no longer willing to give to India." It may all sound harshly unpleasant coming from a foreign voice, but do not we, collaborators in these crimes against philology and academic thought by our silence, deserve it? *Published August 6, 2013, Indian Express* □

What do Universities stand for – Faith or Fact?

Dr. H.S. Chandalia, Former Zonal Secretary, AIFUCTO

What do the Universities stand for? Do they stand for upholding faith in a particular way of life or do they stand for exploration of facts? Do they stand for inquisitiveness or they stand for blindfolded belief in already scripted texts? Are the Vice Chancellors custodians of the spirit of inquiry or are they exponents of ruling political ideologies? Do they foster quest for reason or rebuff such quests? Are the Universities *Gyan Mandirs* or simply *Muths* of some faith? Are teachers propagators of rationality or do they preach superstition?

These and many other questions have surfaced today in the academic world as nearly three years of the present Rajasthan Government have resulted in the flouting of all academic norms and traditions which existed in the world of higher education in the state. The scene at the national level is no less grim. The Union Ministers for Human Resource Development have acted like party loyalists than as custodians of the world of letters in the country. In last thirty two months they could not find time to meet the delegation of All India Federation of Universities and College Teachers Organizations. The Universities are almost teacher less. More than four thousand posts of teachers in Central Universities are lying vacant.

The state has unscrupulously usurped the academic freedom of

the universities and other academic institutions by imposing the political ideology of the ruling party and its mother organization RSS which they always claim to be a cultural organization. The farce has been amply exposed by the way chief Ministers of UP, Uttarakhand, Goa etc. have been chosen. The Union Ministry dictates what days to be observed and what festivals to be celebrated. Christmas Day was declared a working day in Central Universities to celebrate the birth day of former Prime Minister and BJP leader Atal Bihari Vajpayee and the state government of Rajasthan followed suit by declaring Eid as a working day in government colleges to observe the birth anniversary of BJP leader Deendayal Upadhyay. Little do they care for the rupture they are causing in the integrated social fabric of the nation. Not to mention the transfers and deputations of college teachers on the basis of political inclinations, the government of Rajasthan has put on the website of its department of college education the names of books written by authors showing clear adherence to the political line of BJP with the direction to colleges to buy those books.

To top it all is the incident of filing an FIR against a retired professor of Delhi University Prof. Ashok Vora who delivered a lecture in the department of Philosophy, Mohan Lal Sukhadia University. The FIR

has been filed by Devendra Singh Chundawat, a leader of the students wing of ruling BJP namely ABVP. Another police complaint has been filed by the University by the Dean, Faculty of Social Science and Humanities Prof. Farida Shah. This came after the order of the then Higher Education Minister of the State of Rajasthan Kalicharan Saraf. It is evident from the pace of action that the honourable Minister did not have time to read the text of the speech.

Prof. Ashok Vohra delivered an extension lecture on 'Dharmik Samvad: Adhunik Anivaryata' (Religious Dialogue: The Need in Contemporary Times), organized by the philosophy department of the Mohan Lal Sukhadia University (MLSU) in collaboration with the **Indian Council of Philosophical Research on December 3, 2015**. In his lecture Prof. Vohra said that western scholars were constricted by their environment and so they analyzed Hindu gods and goddesses through uni-dimensional reading of Hindu religious symbols and idols. He cited, among others, the works of clergyman Norman Macleod, Indologists M A Sherring and David Kinsley among others.

He also referred to Paul B Courtright's 1989 book '*Ganesha: Lord of Obstacles, Lord of Beginnings*' and his analysis of Lord Ganesha's elephant head "from a psychoanalytical perspective". It

was during this explanation that Vohra courted controversy though he underlined "I have deliberately used the translation used by Courtright. One can see how tenuous the proof is".

Reports that have appeared in Newspapers say that the speaker Prof. Ashok Vora had allegedly made indecent remarks on some of the Hindu Gods and Goddesses. Someone in the audience made video and audio clips of the selected parts of the speech and posted on the social media which created a furor. Later it was found that the speaker Prof. Ashok Vora had not only admired Hinduism but also pronounced it as the best religion of the world which was all inclusive, that there was no need for conversion in the context of Hinduism. He had simply quoted some parts of the texts of some foreign authors to make his point that those who are exterior to a system of knowledge are unable to understand the culture of that system and hence are subject to misrepresentation. Prof. Vora warned against this type of representation and called for rejection of such texts. In fact he was furthering Edward Said's notion of the question of representation, much healthily debated in literary circles.

Not following what he intended and said the propagators of blind faith painted the whole speech in demoniac colours and created an atmosphere of unwarranted tension, anxiety and fear in the University. The university administration also cowed down to such muscle flinching organizations and not only did nothing to stop the baseless propaganda but acknowledged them by setting up a fact finding team and asking the Dean to register a complaint with the police. Also, the Vice Chancellor accepted the demand of the accusing group to set up a screening committee to examine the scripts of the scholars who would in future come to the University for delivering invited lectures.

Similar decisions have been taken

at the Central University of Haryana and now in J.N. Vyas University, Jodhpur also similar things are being talked of.

The propagators of this hate campaign did not stop here. They went to the extent of accusing the organizer of the lecture Prof. Sudha Choudhary who was trying to instill reason in the debate. She not only provided the whole script to everyone who wanted including the media but also held a press conference to explain the truth. There were demands to take action against her also. Is there anyone who can explain what on earth her fault was? She was trying to explain what the speaker had said in his speech. Should even this right be denied to her? Being the head and professor of the department of philosophy is it not necessary for her to defend the speaker by trying to remove the confusion created by some vested interest groups? The committee of teachers formed to investigate into the whole issue also tried to persuade her to stop defending Prof. Vora. Ironically, the teachers and authorities like the Vice Chancellor who should have stood together for defending their academic freedom to discuss issues freely, seem to have cowed down to the pressure of the exterior forces.

However, a group of teachers in the leadership of SUTA met the Vice Chancellor and demanded check on the mud - slinging on the speaker and the organizing department. Similarly a group of progressive writers, journalists and left wing parties submitted a memorandum to the district administration to examine the whole issue and requested them take action against those who had spread fictitious clippings to vitiate the atmosphere in the university and outside.

The worst turn in the debate came with the statement of Dr. B.P. Sharma, Vice Chancellor of a Private University. Everyone knows that he taught in a private college whole of his life and earned this position of Vice Chancellor from just a lecturer because of his position in Swadeshi Jagaran Manch, an organ

of RSS. In his vehemence he not only made baseless charges against the speaker Prof. Ashok Vora and organizer Prof. Sudha Choudhary but went to the extent of calling for a state wide movement if stringent action is not taken against them. What more action is required once an FIR is lodged and a fact finding committee has been formed? Had it not been better for him to see what is happening in his university than to poke his nose in other universities?

Professor Sudha Chaudhary, head of department of the philosophy department at MLSU, called the episode "an attempt to hegemonise the university's intellectual autonomy".

"Where will a free flowing exchange of ideas take place if not within the academic ecosystem of a university?" she said.

It is unfortunate that the universities are being reduced to just profiteering and money-making institutions where no original thought can breathe. There is utter bankruptcy in the state policy of higher education. Days like "Kartavya Bodh Divas" are being introduced through which some RSS Pracharak is invited in Government Colleges to address the students. Rajasthan has the highest number of private universities which are not being monitored by any agency. They are flouting all norms laid down by UGC in appointments as well as emoluments of teachers and other employees. There seems to be no check on their fee structure. Without qualified teachers to guide the scholars, research degrees in large numbers are being given.

Once again the state of higher education is in question. What is the importance of such institutions if they cannot honour skepticism and provide space for open debate? They lose their meaning the moment the democratic forces are silenced by bullying forces of state power and their allies. The academic autonomy of Universities is increasingly becoming a myth. In one case it is bound in the shackles of ruling power and in other case profit motive enthalls it. □

Be Warned, the Assault on JNU is Part of a Pattern

Romila Thapar, Prof. Emeritus, JNU

There is by now little doubt that we are currently being governed by those that seem to have an anti-intellectual mindset. This spells trouble for universities that are concerned with high standards of teaching and research.

Recent events at JNU raise many questions pertinent to us as citizens of India. The questions have become imperative because it is apparent that many who govern us have little sensitivity to understanding the fundamental issues crucial to governance. For example, what are the necessary aspects of a democratic system, or how essential are equality and human rights as components of democracy to be taught and nurtured in educational institutions. Every articulation of thought and action is judged these days by its immediate political implications and seldom by the wider context of ethics, society and citizenship.

A recent example was the discussion on capital punishment where a handful of students had gathered on the JNU campus. Obviously the names of those recently given this punishment cropped up in the discussion, and very soon this became the dominant political aspect and the sole consideration, setting aside all other questions. Slogans took over in a confused fashion as happens in such situations and the serious issue of capital punishment was lost. Capital punishment is not just an issue of concern to nationalism alone. It involves aspects of ethics, morality, religion as well as the context of the punishment, and it is not in the least bit surprising that opinions differ on all these issues. The logical follow-up could have been a more extended discussion of the subject, from other perspectives, rather than the insistence by some of those present that this was an anti-national issue, and their then proceeding to have the government intervene and clamp down on it.

Sedition and secession

As has been said by almost everyone who has written on this event, the terms that the government uses in its charges against the JNU students are problematic and cannot be bandied about in a casual way. Charges of sedition, extremely serious as they are, nevertheless are slapped on anyone for virtually any critical opinion about the country. Even the dictionary meaning of sedition is enticement to violence and the overthrow of the state/government. As others have pointed out, there is a considerable difference between advocacy of violent methods and actual incitement to violence. But such distinctions seem to

be beyond the comprehension of most politicians.

To maintain that a statement made about the possibility of a segment of the Indian nation breaking away is sedition, shows neither an understanding of the word nor knowledge of the historical occasions in the last half century when such statements were made with reference to other parts of India. This is not the first time that Kashmir has been mentioned as part of such a suggestion. There have been earlier threats of secession from other parts of the nation, such as Nagaland and Tamil Nadu, and the intention of establishing the Sikh state of Khalistan to mention just a few. Some others are not completely silent even in present times. Threats of secession are in part the way in which nationalisms play out in nations that extend over large territories and multiple cultures. It has to be understood as a process of change and debated rather than being silenced by calling it sedition.

The debate on sedition goes back to the early years of independence when the attempt to silence free speech was successfully resisted by the Supreme Court, (Brij Bhushan vs. State of Delhi and Romesh Thapar vs. Union of India). Nehru was in favour of expunging sedition as unconstitutional. Those were the days when democracy was valued and was nurtured. We should familiarise ourselves with the many occasions when sedition has been objected to and on valid grounds, and therefore consider its removal from the body of laws. Laws that can be easily misused should be reconsidered. Governance does imply taking an intelligent interest in the debates on the laws by which we are meant to be governed.

The first foray

Then there are those who, because they are critical of some aspects of the nation, are immediately condemned as anti-national. Taken literally this adjective would apply to a large number of Indians who are critical of various aspects of events in India. Governments turn by turn have described people as anti-national but the frequency of this accusation has increased in the last couple of years. It has been applied so often by the BJP that the word has become virtually meaningless, but not harmless, because it can be used to politically persecute a person. The ancestor to the BJP – the Jan Sangh party, when it was part of the government of Morarji Desai, subsequent to the Emergency – criticized the history textbooks written by some of us and published by the

NCERT. We were accused of being anti-Indian and anti-national for the views we held on ancient Indian history. The government demanded that our books be proscribed. But in the election that followed the government fell, so the books survived.

Almost 25 years later, in the first NDA government the matter was taken up again. The then education minister, Murli Manohar Joshi and his BJP cohorts referred to the authors of the textbooks – and I was included in this – as not only anti-Hindu but also anti-national, anti-Indian, and academic terrorists of the worst kind. Enthusiastic politicians demanded that we should be arrested and punished for writing these books. Fortunately, the first NDA government did not take itself too seriously and did not go around arresting many teachers and students for being anti-national, largely because their definition of what was anti-national became a matter for ridicule. Anti-national for them was in effect a limited term, namely anti-Hindu.

Pathetic attempt

In the latest move of the BJP-RSS government pertaining to universities, the student union president who was arrested at JNU has been accused of being anti-national and indulging in sedition. He has been accused of raising slogans on independence for Kashmir and praise of Pakistan. The irony is that the student union president who was doing just the opposite of what would be regarded as anti-national and seditious and was trying to close the discussion, was the one who was arrested.

It is now being held, very much as an after thought, that the group that held the meeting were instigated by the Lashkar-e-Tayyaba. This is at best a rather pathetic attempt to institute a charge of terrorism with no other evidence but a dubious tweet. Does government evidence rely on tweets? And are dubious tweets enough to accuse a person of sedition? This is not just a case of the government and the police being adamant, but it appears to be a well-planned strategy to destabilise JNU. There was just too much unusual alacrity in the way events moved. One can't help but feel that somewhere along the line, the present government has lost its initial confidence in itself and is now resorting to unpleasant tactics. An example of this was the way in which JNU faculty and students and some media people were beaten up at the Patiala House Court by a bunch of lawyers, said to be of the BJP, when there was to be a hearing of the case against the student

union president. Are the courts of law now going to have to resort to fisticuffs?

Education as catechism

The ideology central to the BJP-RSS has no space or use for liberal thought. Education for such organisations means only what can be called a kind of catechism. This is a memorisation of a narrow set of questions rooted in faith and belief and an equally narrow set of answers that prohibit any doubt or deviation. The same technique applies to all subjects. Therefore educational centres that allow questioning and discussion are anathema and have to be dismantled.

Since what is referred to as Hinduism does not confine itself to a single sacred book, nor is there exclusive worship of a single monotheistic God, the notion of blasphemy so crucial to the Christian and Islamic religions has little application to the Hindu religion. However, in the Hindutva version of Hinduism, aimed at establishing a Hindu Rashtra – a state where Hindus are the primary citizens and the purpose of governance is to uphold Hindu principles – the notion of a kind of blasphemy is applied to those that are critical of Hindutva that is equated with the Hindu Rashtra. This is then equated with the nation. Criticism of it is described as anti-nationalism so such criticism can be silenced. To call criticism as “hurt sentiment” is now much too mild. It has to be treated as blasphemy/anti-nationalism, and treated as a serious crime. This helps to convert a secular state into a religious state, which ultimately is the aim of the RSS.

The BJP-RSS government currently in power is unable to have a dialogue with an institution such as the JNU and other similar universities such as the Hyderabad Central University. The emphasis from the start in such universities has been on questioning existing knowledge, exploring new knowledge and relating knowledge to the existing reality. This is the very opposite of merely handing down selected information without questioning it. This is a problem that the BJP-RSS government has to face with a number of pace-setting prestigious centres of learning that do not substitute catechism for learning, and instead demand the right to debate a subject that may be thought to be blasphemous to the nation as defined by Hindutva. So the alternative is to try and dismantle such centres of learning by creating disturbances. This will eventually prevent them from functioning as they are intended to do.

Method in the madness

There seems to be something of a pattern in the organisation of such disturbances, since there is a repetition

of the same procedure in each case. The similarities are curious. The first step is to ensure that the person appointed in a position of authority in the institution is relatively unknown, as have been many of the directors, chairmen, and vice-chancellors appointed in the last 18 months in various institutions. They are relied upon to follow the orders of the government. The next step is to locate a group preferably debating contemporary issues, and instruct the local AVBP cadres to create a confrontation with such a group in the course of the meeting, and the confrontation could even result in some violence. This allows the ABVP to claim that they were attacked first and for a complaint to be made to the local BJP politician, readily to hand, who then takes it up with the minister, and who then orders the authority concerned to rusticate the students, to bring the police into the premises and arrest the non-AVBP students, irrespective of whether or not they were involved in the confrontation.

The normal university reaction in the past has been not to allow police on the campus or to make arrests. The exception was during the Emergency. Generally, a committee of enquiry is appointed by the university. It is treated as an internal matter of the institution. Police action can only be permitted if there is a serious breach of law. A group of students shouting slogans is not a serious breach of law. What was done in the JNU reminds me of the saying “to bring a sledge-hammer to crack an egg.” The intention was obviously not just to crack the egg but to smash it completely. But it looks as if the egg is now on the face of the government.

One might well ask why the BJP-RSS is so bent on dismantling institutions of learning and converting them into teaching shops. Is it the premium on conformity and out-of-date knowledge that the BJP-RSS would like to define as education? Is it the kind of education that is given in the shishu-mandirs and madrassas that is seen as ideal in form? Interestingly the institutions that come under attack are those that are associated with freedom of thought, the asking of questions, the advancing of knowledge. Those that conform to education as learning by rote and providing supervised answers are not interfered with all that much, since this pattern of learning fits into a catechism style.

There is by now little doubt that we are currently being governed by those that seem to have an anti-intellectual mind-set. This spells trouble for universities that are concerned with high standards of teaching and research, and it would seem beyond the comprehension of

those governing. One can only ask why the government is so apprehensive of intellectuals? Is the government being ham-handed with universities because from the minister down they fear the potential power of those universities that encourage their students to think independently? Or is this a deliberate way of creating a general ambience of fear in the institutions? The existence of such a fear would make it easier to impose syllabi, courses and methods of teaching emanating from the think tanks of the RSS. Not to mention that it makes those employed in universities more pliant.

A culture worth fighting for

For those of us who were among the founding members of JNU, the events of the last few days at the university is a moment of a far bigger intellectual and emotional crisis than has ever happened before in its history. JNU was founded on the principles of democratic functioning, both administratively and in the content of the education it imparted. It meant a generally positive relationship between teacher and student, and a frequency of free discussion both on matters academic and on the world we live in. It meant more rigorous training in the subjects taught and this experience improved the work both of teachers and students, and all of which was underlined by an insistence on critical enquiry. We were conscious of stretching our minds to beyond what was readily known and in encouraging students to look beyond the obvious. It was these factors that made it into a prestigious university, a trend-setter in many subjects that were taught in other Indian universities. It was again these factors that gave it international recognition, on par in many subjects with the best universities outside India.

This of course is the opposite of the rather pathetic BJP-RSS version of what is meant by education at any level, judging by the views of the HRD ministry. To see the BJP-RSS government trying to annul what we have achieved in JNU and reduce the university to a pedestrian teaching shop, is like having to see the work on one's lifetime being systematically destroyed. Many of us chose to work in JNU rather than take up lucrative positions in universities abroad, because we had a vision that we could make it among the best academic centres located in India. And that excellence it has experienced. As one academic who lived a substantial part of my life working in the JNU, and contributing to this vision, the hostility of the current government to the JNU leaves me with a sense of despair and sadness for the future of universities in India. However, I must add that

experiencing the protest of the JNU community against the attack that has been mounted on it, does make me feel that perhaps the values that we had tried to inculcate in its early years have taken root. When JNU recovers from

the trauma of this attack it is likely to be even more committed to the values for which it was created – excellence not only in intellectual enterprise but also in endorsing a humane and open society upholding the rights of every Indian

citizen.

Romila Thapar is a historian who taught at Jawaharlal Nehru University for many years
(Courtesy The Wire.in
16.02.2016) □

So, Despite a Censoring State the Show Goes on!

Dr. H.S. Chandalia, Former Zonal Secretary, AIFUCTO

Fourth Udaipur Film Festival in Support of Justice for Rohit Vemula and Delta Meghwal Becomes an International Event

It was a success that the state had to unleash all its power to suppress the voice of protest and still the show went on even as its echoes were heard across the world. The Fourth Udaipur Film Festival took place in the city of Udaipur on the 14th, 15th and 16th October 2016. About a month back the convener of the film festival Dharmraj had taken permission from the Dean, Rajasthan College of Agriculture for the auditorium and the requisite fee was deposited. The venue was advertised in all the communications and posters of the festival and suddenly to our surprise on 13th of October, the permission was withdrawn by the administration of Maharana Pratap University of Agriculture and Technology. Although Dr. Uma Shanker Sharma, Vice Chancellor of the University said that it was the jurisdiction of the Dean and he had no role to play in it but who doesn't know that it was the pressure of RSS and ABVP of which he has been a cadre, resulted into this decision. The University said that the organizers did not have the permission of the district administration. But it was clear to all that the ABVP had objected to the use of Rohit Vemula and Delta Meghwal on the poster, to whom the film festival was dedicated too. Their allegation was that the film festival would cause disharmony between groups.

The district administration and the police kept on postponing their decision till 11.00pm on the 13th. Their arguments were the same, remove the name of Rohit Vemula and Delta Meghwal, we would like to see the films before taking a decision and finally refused to give permission to have the festival at the Rajasthan College of Agriculture.

The organisers appealed to the public at large and the Chairperson of the Vidya Bhawan Society came forward and assured the use of their auditorium. The police was still not

willing to move, but constant pressure was brought on them from the organisers, other intellectuals of the town and from Jaipur from where civil liberty groups met senior officials. Finally the police conceded and allowed it to be held at the Vidya Bhawan auditorium. Although the harassment of the organisers continued by delaying the written permission, demanding that the hard disk with the films be handed over. Nevertheless the ABVP plans of ensuring cancellation were defeated and the city had its festival. But here too our dear policemen in uniform and plain clothes were guarding the shows, taking detailed notes and asking simplistic questions to the organizers and the audience. The ghost of Rohit Vemula had snatched their sleep and made them restless. How could they be expected to know the sin, cos, delta or omega of the cinema of protest?

This prologue was necessary because it shows the character of the state in the BJP rule. Also, it shows that even Universities have become porticos of power with no space left for freedom of thought and expression, leading us to conclude that the idea of Universities is on its way out.

The fourth Udaipur Film Festival was dedicated to Iranian film director Abbas Karostami, Mahashweta Devi, Punjabi novelist Gurdayal Singh and Sulabha Deshpande. Organized by Udaipur Film Society and Jan Sanskriti Manch the festival raised the voice of what happened in the model state of Gujarat at Una and in Maharani's Marwar with Delta Meghwal. In the wake of war hysteria and blind folded glorification of the armed forces, the plight of the sweepers and cleaners of Mumbai and Pune municipal corporation was depicted in a film Kachra-Vyuh directed by Atul Pethe. It documents that 22,327 employees engaged in this job of scavenging die every year. Are they not martyrs? Their wages are so low that they cannot take loans from banks. Will the PM's swachhata abhiyan include revision

of their wages?

A highlight of the festival was the premier of the film Kairana Surkhiyon ke Baad. Directed by Nakul Sahni, the celebrated director of films like 'Muzaffar Nagar Baki hai' and 'Izzatnagar ki Asabhya Betyan', Naqul Sahni had come to Udaipur in the last film festival. The twenty seven minutes film exposes the real causes of the communal divide and economic backwardness of Kairana, which never find place in TV debates. In fact, this film was also a cause of the restlessness of the Hindu brigade who were saying that why should such films be shown in Udaipur which is a calm place. It shows their status quoist character. The children's session was a very lively session in which children from a number of schools including DPS participated in good number. They made paintings, sang songs, listened to stories and saw a film 'Gattu' based on the life and dreams of a rag-picker boy.

Another very important film was Flames of Freedom directed by Subrat Kumar Sahu. The film documents the struggle of the tribes, dalits and OBCs in Odisha's town Ichchapur. It presents how the brahminic forces have captured the land and other natural resources of these people and how they have united to fight against this exploitation. The presence of Samuel John in the festival was a great motivation. The film 'Anhe Ghode Da Daan' in which he played the lead role touches and disturbs the audience. The pathos, helplessness and a robust optimism make a contrasting ethos of the film. He plays the role very convincingly. Other films and documentaries like Sairat and Masaan were also liked by the audience.

The spoilers succeeded in the sense that the audience was about the same in number as in the earlier festivals, however the viewer stayed longer on for the screenings and discussions and enjoyed every bit of the festival. The organizers succeeded more because the crooked design of the administration

working at the command of the RSS, ABVP and other allies were fully exposed and this message spread all across the country. The film festival was successful because of the presence of the father of the deceased Delta Meghwal, Ideologue along with the Dalit thinker Bhanwar Meghwanshi, Prof. Sudha Chaudhary, Jayesh Parmar from Una

Ladat Samiti, Saurabh Kumar who made the film Agnishikha on honour killing, writer and poet Prem Chand Gandhi, general Secretary of Pragatisheel Lekhak Sangh. It was a success that the policemen also saw the films and finally it was a success because the teachers accompanying children said that such films should be shown in schools also. Mention

should also be made to the driving forces of the Udaipur Film Society Shailendra Pratap Singh, Himanshu, Pragma, Shanker Lal Chaudhary and the entire team who do this every year to shake this town and wake it from slumber.

My message is - You show me your lathi, I will show you my film/ you call me names, I will sing you a song. □

Debate is Vital for Change, says Jodhpur Professor Suspended in the Latest Nationalism Controversy

Rajshree Ranawat was the organiser of an event on February 2 at which JNU professor Nivedita Menon allegedly made anti-national remarks.

Shreya Roy Chowdhury

Rajshree Ranawat, a professor at the Jai Narain Vyas University in Jodhpur, is afraid for her safety. After being suspended on Thursday for an allegedly anti-national speech that was made at an event she organised on February 2, the 39-year-old Ranawat is wary of returning to campus.

She has run into trouble for putting together a conference at which Jawaharlal Nehru University professor Nivedita Menon is alleged to have said that Kashmir was not an integral part of India and that soldiers worked for their livelihood and not the nation – charges Menon has denied. In the aftermath of Menon's lecture, there were protests and dharnas by students – especially members of the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad, the student wing of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. Several police complaints were filed. The backlash forced Ranawat to leave Jodhpur and seek shelter with her family in Jaipur. She returned to Jodhpur on Tuesday, only to receive the suspension order from the university's governing body two days later.

The institution has also constituted an inquiry committee, which is reportedly looking into "terminating her services", and has served her with a show-cause notice.

Ranawat studied in Ajmer, did her research at the Jodhpur University in 2002-'03, and taught in various colleges in Rajasthan before finally taking up her current position at the Jai Narain Vyas University in 2013. Organising the conference, titled "History Reconstructed through Literature: Nation, Identity, Culture", on February 1-2 was a dream that quickly turned into a nightmare, she

said. Dispirited by the reaction to an event she worked so hard on, she spoke to *Scroll.in* about the controversy, the conference and the university.

Edited excerpts from the interview:

The university has, in its show-cause notice to you, asked why you invited a controversial figure like Professor Nivedita Menon, whether you knew what speech she was going to deliver, and if you introduced her as someone known for "anti-national speeches". How did you respond?

I told them I did not know she was controversial. I knew her only as a political scientist and the conference I had organised was inter-disciplinary in nature. It was on "History Reconstructed Through Literature: Nation, Identity and Culture", and we wanted people from as many disciplines and political backgrounds as possible. Also, Professor Menon had been invited as a resource person. We do not check the papers of resource persons or ask for abstracts the way we do for regular paper readers. And I certainly did not introduce her as someone known to deliver anti-national speeches. Who does that?

Did you expect trouble after the conference?

Frankly, no. I was very busy, so I did not even hear the entire speech. But I do know that when Professor Menon was speaking, no one interrupted and the audience was listening with rapt attention. She even said that what she was expressing was her opinion and that the audience had the right to disagree. It was only later that a professor and a couple of students asked questions. It was time for a

break and I said that if anyone had any doubts, those could be sorted over tea. In any case, what Professor Menon said was her stand on the issue. How is the organiser responsible for that?

What impact will this controversy have on the academic atmosphere of the university?

There has always been a sense of fear here. But even in such an atmosphere, someone was bold enough to try and organise a large, interdisciplinary conference. How that turned out has been very demoralising, not just for me but for all those who wanted change – more debate, discussion and research.

To be honest, I was expecting some appreciation for stepping forward. The university had sought proposals and I had sent mine in July. It was approved and we started work then. I wrote to dozens of writers and academics inviting them as resource persons because I wanted our students to be exposed to the best brains in the country. Many of them declined because the event was in Jodhpur. Now I am being punished for showing initiative.

How will things change if there is no debate between people from different subjects and ideologies? After this, people will not dare to come forward, especially women.

Why is it more difficult for women?

It is generally very difficult to do anything. Also, the atmosphere in the university was not very conducive to proper academic work. There was already a lot of turmoil over the 2013 appointments – there were allegations that some were not legal – and there were even arrests of teaching faculty. One of the teachers involved in the

conference was arrested the day before it. Even in these circumstances, we managed to put a conference together.

Do you have the support of your colleagues and students?

Students, especially those who attended the talk, are supportive.

They say this controversy should not have happened and ask the same question I do: if a resource person says something, how is the organiser responsible for it? How can I possibly control what a senior professor will say? Among my colleagues, too, some back me. They come to my

place but do not declare support openly.

Feb 18, 2017

(*Courtesy scroll.in*: <https://scroll.in/article/829656/debate-is-vital-for-change-says-jodhpur-professor-suspended-in-the-latest-nationalism-controversy>) □

Exemplary Violence

Satish Deshpande, Prof. Sociology, Delhi University

A second way of understanding the Ramjas College events would be to compare the pattern they are a part of with similar patterns in the past.

Unlike doctors of medicine, doctors of philosophy love complications. "Too simple" is a devastating put-down in the academic world peopled by PhDs. But sometimes even we academics encounter an issue that is so utterly, undeniably simple that it is impossible to complicate. Violence has no place in a university. That is it, and that is all — no room here for any of the ifs, buts, or on-the-other-hands that we are always eager to invoke.

Ramjas College Protest: Virender Sehwal Tweets Following Kargil Martyr's Daughter's Anti-ABVP Post
Any discussion of what happened at Ramjas College and Delhi University on February 21 and 22 has to begin with a complete and categorical condemnation of the violence that has been displayed on social media and television screens. Students — and even teachers — were beaten, hit with bricks, pulled by the hair and comprehensively assaulted. Many of the injured had to be taken to hospital. Journalists were also targeted, often deliberately. An entire neighbourhood was terrorised over several hours. Contrary to filmy tradition, the police arrived early, but were so ineffectual as to invite accusations of complicity. And all of this happened because of a seminar or, if the defenders of this violence are to be believed, merely because of two specific invitees.

Violence and intimidation negate the very idea of the university and there is no cause large enough to justify them — not subaltern classes nor oppressed castes, or as in this case, aggrieved patriots. The university cannot afford to accommodate violence precisely because it is meant to be an arena for the battle of ideas. This is the sense in which the university is indeed a privileged space set apart from the everyday world. It is not that the rest of the

world lacks ideas or intelligence, but that it is permeated by power relations. In the real world, the ruling ideas are those that are dear to the ruling classes and dominant groups. Of course, power relations extend to the university context as well. In fact, all universities — including the ones perceived as radical — are, for the most part, supported by and in turn support, the existing power structure. This has been the historical condition for their survival as predominantly state-sponsored institutions.

At the same time, however, the very design of the modern university requires that it set aside some space for cultivating and professing unconventional, dissenting or radical ideas and questions. Paradoxically, it is this small island of intellectual autonomy that defines an otherwise subservient and conventional institution. If even this island is violently coerced into subservience, the university can no longer play its crucial symbolic role in modern society as the great exception to the worldly rule of might is right.

How, then, do we understand the events of February 21 and 22 at Ramjas College in Delhi University? One way is to see them as the culmination of an ongoing process of regime change, triggered by the landslide victory of the BJP in 2014. As is well known, the ABVP and its parent organisations have been involved in a series of confrontations across several universities in the past two years, the best known of which have been in Hyderabad, Allahabad, JNU, Jodhpur and now Delhi University. The overall effort on the part of the RSS-BJP-ABVP combine is to leverage their new-found state power to enforce their entry into, or consolidate their hold over, university politics.

A second way of understanding the Ramjas College events would be to compare the pattern they are a part of with similar patterns in the past. Two instances that come to mind are those of West Bengal in the late

1960s and early '70s, and Bihar in the mid-1970s and 1980s. In Bengal, an established Congress regime was being challenged by a then ascendant CPM, itself facing a stiff challenge from Marxist-Leninist groups popularly known as Naxalites. In Bihar, the extended turmoil of Jayaprakash Narayan's Sampoorna Kranti transitioned into the Lalu Prasad era of Yadav dominance. The latter case should be of particular interest to the Modi regime. Despite being one of the most astute politicians of our times, Lalu Prasad made the historic blunder of deliberately destroying the university system in Bihar because it was monopolised by his upper caste enemies. He failed to recognise the peculiar fragility of the university as a liberal institution that is easy to pull down but extremely hard to rebuild.

Returning to the immediate context, it is clear that the most chilling aspect of the violence of last week is its deliberate and strategic nature. The stone throwing and manhandling of students on the afternoon of February 21 happened in spite of the fact that the main demand of the ABVP — namely, the exclusion of Umar Khalid from the seminar — had already been conceded by the college authorities. The more extensive mayhem of February 22 was a pre-planned effort to disrupt a proposed silent march in protest against the censorship imposed by the ABVP. This unnecessary and excessive violence can only be explained if it was intended to be exemplary, as a lesson for all universities. If so, it seems to be working. The stormtroopers of the ABVP have sent shock waves through the academic world, intimidating even liberal administrators and faculty into self-censoring themselves and their students.

The irony is that these methods may win some battles, but will certainly lose the war. If the intention is to wrest the university from the enemy, then it

is imperative to recognise that capturing it makes sense only if it can do for you what you think it has done for the enemy. But as a powerful yet strangely vulnerable institution, the university is a classic instance of a situation where the means matter as much as the end. Violent means will

kill the university ensuring that what is ultimately won is but a shell. The organisers of the seminar which triggered these events can be justly proud of their prescient title — “Cultures of Protest”. There remains an unanswered question: Are such dire predictions

prompted by the high stakes that academics like myself have in the university as a liberal institution — and little else? I would, of course, say “No”, but more credible answers can only come from others located elsewhere. Courtesy: February 27, 2017 Indian Express □

Closing of the University **Pratap Bhanu Mehta** *President, CPR Delhi*

As the right stamps itself, central universities will see politicisation that destroyed state universities. The moral sickness and thuggery on display in the aftermath of Gurmehar Kaur's brave Twitter post is too nauseating for intellectual analysis. The patterns are depressingly familiar. Young women cannot express independent political views without being subject to misogyny, violence and political intimidation. This form of casual brutality may almost have the character of a social pathology but it is also empowered by a total lack of political outrage. An otherwise prudish culture seems quite comfortable with open talk of rape threats as an instrument of politics.

Second, Kashmir remains the mirror in which Indian nationalism dare not look itself in the face. It is still nearly impossible to have a holistic, free and frank discussion on Kashmir in all its aspects: From state oppression to militancy to the plight of the Pandits. How much intent there is to suppress all dissent is an open question. But Kashmir is an issue on which the suppression of dissent wears the garb of popular imprimatur. With other universities cancelling events on Kashmir, this trend is likely to continue. Third, there is the sheer institutional bloody mindedness. If our cabinet members spent half as much sincere moral outrage acknowledging the complexities of the Kashmir issue as they spend on fuelling conflicts on campuses we would be far better off.

Finally, there is the organised attempt to delegitimise what remains of the public university

system. An organised pattern is emerging. Use the “JNU pretext”, as it is now called, to unleash the ABVP or, in some cases, university administrations, to harass, intimidate and engage in violence. Once the spark is lit, there will, of course, be other perpetrators of violence who will get into the mix, which will then also allow the ABVP to play victim. My sense is that the point of all this is not captured simply by the idea of suppressing dissent. The ideas and people sought to be being suppressed get more publicity: That is the paradox of modern censorship. It is rather to create conflict itself. Conflict is used to mobilise political support around nationalism. Conflict is convenient because it allows everyone to present themselves as victims. By a strange alchemy all of this will end up with the “Right” presenting itself as the victim. So the core issues of violence, appropriateness of institutional norms and misogyny will soon be forgotten.

It is not that difficult to make the case that universities have betrayed their own principles very often. But the tragedy is that instead of restoring those principles and healing the university, we want to use it as a pretext for more control and destruction. Indian universities long ceased being spaces for a genuinely liberal education. The professoriate for the most part, in the eyes of the public, cuts a sorry figure; university leadership has, in most instances, become a postbox for the government. The destruction that governments of all political parties have wrought on the

university system is now coming to bite us. For those who have engaged with the history of higher education in India, this phase is relatively mild yet. But it has deep echoes of the 1970s.

We forget that from the late-'60s to the '80s, many university campuses were politicised to the point of becoming dysfunctional. In many cases, there was sheer thuggery. But the broader politicisation of universities had four large undercurrents. First was the demand for vernacularisation. Almost all the great national universities across the nation, from Rajasthan to Osmania, were provincialised and became regional universities. Materially, this was a demand for local representation. But culturally, it was a revolt against a national elite which regional identities sought to supplant. That sub-nationalism may or may not have made the universities more inclusive in the right way. But they, for the most part, destroyed intellectualism. Most nationalism is poisonous for intellectualism. The second trend was a shift in politics. With the polity becoming more deeply politicised in the '60s, with the Congress struggling to perform the mediating function, many new political groups saw their opportunity. The Left wanted to displace the Congress and there were pitched and violent battles, of which Calcutta was the most extreme example. The third was an economic crisis that made student politics the most potent means of social mobility. Finally, there was the Emergency and the spectre of authoritarianism that

deepened the politicisation of the university.

This settled into some kind of equilibrium, but at the cost of most state-level universities becoming hollow shells. There was also more of a sense in the students that disruption was harmful. But now the old trends are returning in three ways. Central universities will now experience processes similar to those that destroyed state universities. There has been a shift in the ruling politics. So the ABVP will use state patronage to violently oust the incumbents, especially the Left. And where the Left has shards of power in Kerala and Bengal, it responds in kind. This move is also congruent with BJP's project of creating an ideological state apparatus, like the Left did.

Second, just like regional politicians and forces managed to portray the universities in their states as elitist, exclusionary and out of touch with cultural identities, the BJP and ABVP will launch an assault on what they regard as elitist, privileged, culturally distant cosmopolitanism. Nationalism is the perfect wedge by which to highlight this distance. Growing up, the first political slogan I ever heard in the then-excellent Himachal University was "Himachal for Himachalis". Now there will be the search for the "authentic" Indian to represent the Indian universities. The complicated sociology of

Indian campuses, the fact that many students on these campuses feel alienated from intellectual life, for linguistic or social reasons, makes this a resonant cry. The relative optimism that characterised a lot of Indian campuses over the last couple of decades, about jobs may also be coming to an end. Perhaps that optimism was always misplaced. But imagine a scenario where students are no longer confident about their job prospects. What might that do to university politics? And finally, the fourth element: The spectre of authoritarianism will deepen the politicisation.

Politicisation can be a good teachable moment. The last wave did wonders for many political careers. But it ensured that the conversation about universities became about everything except the university, its practices and its pedagogy. The bubble of social forces and the organised way in which the BJP will continue the time-honoured practice of assaulting public universities, will once again ensure a corrosion of liberal and intellectual values and just plain decency.

Link:

<http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/closing-of-the-university-4551570/>

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