

University and politics in India

by AG Noorani

IF NOT a wreck, the university is in a shambles in India. Legal compulsions facilitate intrusion of politics. A college can be set up by a registered society. A university can be set up only by law. It alone can confer on it a legal personality. Legislators rob it of autonomy. The head of state, the president or governor, is chancellor. He appoints the vice-chancellor mostly on the government's advice. The University of Mumbai, once the finest in India, saw the removal of its vice-chancellor — for good reasons.

The governor is removable at the whim of the centre. The president's prestige, none too high, suffered gravely when president Ram Nath Kovind reversed his own decision on the appointment of a central university's vice-chancellor at the behest of the central government. He had assented to the appointment of Swapan Kumar Dutta as the vice-chancellor of Rabindranath Tagore's Visva-Bharati University at Santiniketan. He also scrapped the panel of three finalists forwarded by the Ministry of Human Resource Development. Visva-Bharati has functioned without a regular head for two years. Its chancellor is the prime minister. The president is its visitor. If the president can act thus in such a matter, what can the nation expect of him as a constitutional check on power?

The BJP's mentor, the RSS, has a students' wing that attacks universities if they are deemed to lack 'patriotism'; it is the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad, which was set up in 1948 to evade the ban on the RSS after Gandhi's assassination. One of its targets was Hyderabad Central University. Another is the prestigious Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, which is perceived as leftist. McCarthyite dossiers are prepared.

JNU's international reputation deters greater intervention. Parnal Chirmuley, associate professor at the Centre for German Studies at JNU, has listed some it has already suffered. 'Because the composition of its highest decision-making bodies is based on a rational process of fair academic representation from its schools and departments, the present administration



A view Jawaharlal Nehru University.

[Modi's] has sought to change the composition of these bodies flouting all rules.... Student and faculty associations are not allowed within a hundred metres of the administrative building under threat of persecution for "group bargaining", an expression out of place in a university.'

Another associate professor, Vikas Bharati, recorded in 2016 the support extended by a professor at a university in Islamabad. 'She had come to be gripped by what was happening at JNU... the first thing she did in the morning was to reach out for the internet to know of the latest development at JNU... she had been surprised by her anxieties that had made her feel and react as though these students were her own...' In this lies hope for India-Pakistan relations.

At JNU, there are students and teachers who empathise with the people of Kashmir. He wrote, 'JNU students need be commended for having broken the ice between the people of Kashmir and the rest of India.'

The 70-year old University of Kashmir has been a victim of the sordid

politics of those New Delhi instals in power in Srinagar. The fearless monthly from Srinagar, the Kashmir Narrator, published a thorough exposé of UoK by Aasif Sultan in its January 2018 issue. Compliant vice-chancellors impose curbs. A course in human rights was wound up 'within a year'. A students' union is not permitted on the campus.

The Open University of Catalonia offers post-graduate courses in armed conflict and criminology. If UoK followed suit, it would provide its students with a constructive alternative, especially if it includes case studies in similar situations in Europe in the 20th century.

The travails of Aligarh Muslim University are well known. Its founder Sir Syed Ahmad Khan's son Syed Mahmood drew up a scheme for a university in 1873 'to further the cause of enlightened education' — not politics. AMU has achievements to boast of like the Aligarh School of History. What is little known is that, in contrast, Benares Hindu University was set up to promote politics as the Italian scholar

Marzia Casolari documented in an article in Economic & Political Weekly (April 13, 2003). Its prime mover was the president of the Hindu Mahasabha, Madan Mohan Malaviya. 'Under Malaviya's direction BHU became a workshop in the construction of political Hinduism.' In November, 1933, Jawaharlal Nehru visited BHU and called it 'the very citadel of Hindu communal thought'. Small wonder, then, that in 2018 Malaviya's political heirs are targeting JNU.

Walter Lippmann's description of freedom in academia in 1936 is still very relevant today. A free university is one in which the selection of teachers and of studies reflects the judgment of scholars, is determined by their standards, and is independent of money, the mob and the political power of the state.

No university can long survive in freedom in a society itself riven with strife or governed by a repressive state consumed with hate.

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