

Student Protest And Campus Tolerance

Wednesday and Thursday's incidents on DU Campus have made many in non-political, academic and professional circles ask if we are not relapsing, wittingly or unwittingly, into pre-democracy styles of facing down student protests more by using the police and the gun. The scene of senior teacher cadres, representing the university administration, overly resorting to anti-protest activism was less than elevating.

We do hold strikes and 'bandhs' called by students need to be such as would not cause serious interruptions to academic programmes or examination schedules. But there can be occasions (or causes) of academic student rights, honour and interest, where protests by student groups put on a legitimacy. University authorities in a country that boasts of democracy need to exercise restraint enough, and more patience and tolerance to let the short protest spells pass off without damage.

In such circumstances, suspended academic schedules can be—and need to be—resumed soon after the turmoil is over. Insisting on pushing them in its midst is asking for trouble. The Wednesday and Thursday student protest had some serious student causes touching the awfully sliding Jahangirnagar University scenario plus other student interests. Democratically speaking, such student protests call rather for some sort of silent sympathy, if not open endorsement, in really genuine cases of protest, from their teachers or university administration.

But instead, reaching for the gun, and the police and administration coming down on the protesting student groups with lathi charges and tear gas shells is much too much and, cruelly, out of keeping with our democracy claims. It has a fascist look about it and is most avoidable.

There were also reported bomb-blasts and gun-fires from either side of contending student groups chasing each other, together with the police swinging into action to drive the protesting students out of the campus. These set a bad precedent, to put it mildly. When we were all expecting things to improve on and around academic campuses, their relapse into avoidable violence and terror ought to be renewed cause for worry for all concerned—students, teachers, peace, guardians and others. Meanwhile, there has been other news, for instance, of expulsion of students from residential halls etc. Authorities—local or state—should not take them lightly or welcome them as acts or actions enhancing their position. It diminishes it instead.

The universities for themselves have also to stay steadily constructive and creative more rather than anything else, in their style of running their institutions. Their sacred duty is to keep these seats of knowledge and learning unimpaired by the country's contentious politics. Time for both student protest and campus tolerance to go together — and noticeably improve.