

Setting wrong precedents: Government's handling of Public Universities



Source: <https://www.oneindia.com/india/hyderabad-university-locked-inside-campus-for-days-students-cry-help-2059247.html>

I. Introduction

On 20th September, Manipur police raided the Manipur University (MU) campus looking for 17 students and teachers. They were accused in an FIR by the newly appointed pro-vice chancellor accusing them of manhandling and detaining him and registrar M Shyamkesho Singh. The police

detained 89 students and 6 teachers on the basis of the FIR. On the following day, the internet services of the state were shut off. Out of all the arrests, 7 students and 6 teachers were sent for judicial custody by the local court.

The university was a site for unrest for almost 4 months. It was shut for nearly three months from May 31 to August 23 as the student union and the teachers association asked for the removal of the Vice Chancellor Adya Pandey accusing him of “administrative ineptitude” and “saffronisation”. Pandey, was suspended on August 10, only to resume his duties in September. He was again ordered to go on leave on September 16 by the Union ministry for the second time and an inquiry committee was set up to look into the allegations by the students, teachers and staff members. Things were returning to normalcy but Pandey before leaving his office appointed Yugindro Singh as the pro vice chancellor and reinstated M Shyamkesho Singh as the registrar in-charge. The student and teachers union objected to this move as they believed this might impact the investigation against Pandey (Saika, 2018). Although the internet services were restored, the central as well as the state government has been at the receiving end of criticism for its handling of the event. A total of 284 academics which includes names like Noam Chomsky and Gita Spivak wrote to the president to intervene in the matter (Chomsky, Spivak and 282 Others Send Petition to President on Manipur University Arrests, 2018).

Similarly, Hidayatullah National Law University (HNLU) in Raipur, Chattisgarh witnessed protests by students since August 27 demanding that the concerned authorities address their grievances which include “sexual harassment by teachers, harassment by hostel wardens and the university administration’s mismanagement of state grants meant to fund student participation in moot court competitions” The protest finally led to the resignation of the Vice Chancellor Dr. Sukhpal Singh (Raipur: Vice chancellor of Hidayatullah National Law University resigns after student protests, 2018). In this cover story we not only put together protests from various higher educational institutions across the country but we also present before you the argument that a concerted effort is on to establish a pro right wing administration and faculty across the country. This also involves manipulating courses and suggested reading material in a manner that will reinforce the right wing agenda of nationalism, majoritarianism and a monolithic society. While

protests by student community or teachers association is not a new phenomenon in the public universities in India, the past four years under the current regime have witnessed a substantial increase in the number of such incidents. But a more distinguishing factor in these protest movements has been the reaction of the state. Instead of looking at the protests as a symbol of the democratic process or trying to engage in constructive dialogues, what we have repeatedly witnessed is complete indifference, usage of state machinery to curtail any dissenting view or complete discrediting of the institution if the first two have proved to be ineffective.

The second aspect to this issue is the targeting of liberal arts and humanities which by the nature of the subject introduce students to critical thinking and questioning. Authoritarian governments tend to suppress this part of the educational process and in extension to this also come on heavily on student political activism. Education is not seen as a means of developing and shaping the mind, instead there is a tendency to push towards education as a means of employment only.

Table: major incidents in central university in last few years

S.No	University	Incident/Issue	Year
1	IIT Madras	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ambedkar Periyar Study Circle (APSC) was banned after complaint from the HRD Ministry, the ban was later revoked • A Research Scholar associated with the APSC was allegedly assaulted for participating in the Beef festival 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ May 2015 ➤ May 2017
2	Osmania University	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • University witnessed tensions between opposite student associations. Democratic Cultural Forum (a group of 25 student association) wanted to celebrate within the campus while opposition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ December 2015

		student protested to celebrate pork festival.	
3	Tata Institute of Social Sciences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students in all four TISS institute witnessed – Mumbai, Tuljapur, Hyderabad and Guhawati protested against administration’s decision to stop student aid to SC, ST and OBC students. 	➤ Feb 2018
4	IIM Ahemdabad	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Global IIM Alumni Network filed a petition in the court against IIM-Ahemdabad alleging that the institute has not followed the constitutionally mandated reservation policy in its doctoral programme, 	➤ Jan 2018
5	Aligarh Muslim University	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aligarh Muslim University was targeted for a portrait of Mohammad Ali Jinnah. The University witnessed violence by members of Hindu Vahini Group. 	➤ May 2018
6	Jamia Millia Islamia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tensions flared up in the University when a set of students and Hindu Right Wing activists entered the campus and protested against alleged discrimination against Hindu students in the University. The protest eventually failed to gain any traction and was opposed by students 	➤ May 2018

		of JMI countering the claims.	
7	Jammu University	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ABVP students protested alleging that few students disrespected the national anthem during an event. • Students from Kerala studying in the University wrote to Kerala Chief Minister Pinari Vijayan asking him to intervene in the ‘highly volatile situation’ in the campus. University administration has allegedly denied non-vegetarian food to students and also reprimanded them for protesting against Gauri Lankesh’s death. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ April 2017 ➤ September 2017
8	IIT Kharagpur	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • IIT Kharagpur administration issued a noticed barring any kind of ‘Political/Apolitical gathering/meeting’ without prior approval. Students alleged that this was politically motivated and questioned the timing of the circular as it was issued hours before a solidarity march by Ambedkar Bhagat Singh study circle against violence in Aligarh Muslim University. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ May 2015
9	Central University of Tamil Nadu	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students accused the administration of ‘saffronizing the university’ on basis of multiple events. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ September 2018

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Registrar issued a notice advising student not to indulge in any ‘unauthorised activities against government policies’. • Students of the University also raised objections against special privilege being given to ABVP by the administration to hold meetings in the classroom. • SFI students claimed that while ABVP was allowed to screen a film of their choice, they were refused to screen ‘Ram k Naam’ by Anand Patwardhan by the administration. 	
10	Pondicherry University	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students of Pondicherry University protested against ‘Saffronisation of the campus’ by the administration. • Students alleged that they are not being allowed to conduct peaceful meetings while ABVP has been granted the permission for the same on multiple occasions. 	➤ September 2018
11	Central University of Kerala	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers and Student protested against alleged ‘saffronisation’ of the campus. This was after university took actions against leftist and Dalit students. 	➤ September 2018

12	Panjab University	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> University witnessed large scale protest by the students against fee hike for the academic year 2017-2018. The protest took violent turn and 66 students were booked under charges of sedition which the police claimed were on the behest of the university official. 	➤ April 2017
13	Film and Television Institute of India	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The institute witnessed 139 day strike by students against the appointment of Gajendra Chauhan as the director of the Institute. 	➤ June 2015
14	Jadavpur University	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> University witnessed protest and violence by different students group after some students protested against the screening of 'Buddha in a traffic jam'. 	➤ May 2016
15	Jawaharlal Nehru University	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Three JNUSU Scholars including JNUSU president Kanhaiya Kumar were accused of sedition for sloganeering against the death penalty of Afzal Guru. More than thirty months after the event, police is yet to file the chargesheet against the accused. 	➤ February 2016
16	Delhi University	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ABVP members attacked the venue of a cultural event which had JNU research Scholar as one of the 	➤ February 2017

		speakers.	
17	Manipur University	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> University remained shut for more than 4 months as students and Teachers protested accusing the vice-chancellor of corruption and saffronisation. 	➤ May 2018
18	Banaras Hindu University	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students staged strikes against molestation of a girl student in the campus and discrimination in hostel rules with girls, The administration chose to retaliate through coercive measures allowing police to lathi charge. 	➤ September 2017
19	Hidayatullah National Law University	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> University witnessed protest by students for months for number of reason including mismanagement of funds by the management and sexual harassment by teachers. The protest led to the resignation of the vice chancellor. 	➤ August 2018

In this issue of Policy Watch, we will identify some of the salient aspects of the tension that has unfolded in some of the central universities in the last few years.

II. Discord and protests: A pattern across the country

The protests at HNLU and MU stemmed from similar causes and are in continuance with university protests that have happened in last four years. Moreover, on closer observation, there appears to be a pattern in these frictions between the student community, teachers and the administration in central universities across the country. The chief causes of the tension along with the government's response to it follow a similar template. These are:

- **Incompetent authority**

While appointment of the head of the institutions in central education institutions have always had an element of political patronage, during the present regime appointments have come under severe criticism. The appointees have been termed inept in their credentials and their political and ideological affiliations have been the sole reason for their appointment. For instance, in 2015, students from FTII protested for 139 consecutive days against the appointment of Gajendra Chauhan as the director of the institution. They argued that his body of work was not adequate for him to lead an institution like FTII. It is important to point out here that the students were willing to accept other artists aligned with the same ideology as that of the central government. Surprisingly, the government paid no heed to students' demand and decided to go ahead with the appointment of Chauhan. More importantly, the ideological bent of the directors/vice chancellors has led to constant tension between the students and the administration (Rajalakshmi, 2017). University administration in both JNU as well as Central University of Hyderabad has been constantly at loggerheads with the student and Teachers. In a referendum conducted in JNU amongst teachers in August this year, 93% teachers voted in favour of vice-chancellor quitting his office (Gupta, 2018). This is not just reflection of deep distrust among the teachers but also raises doubts over moral legitimacy of those heading these institutions. In last three years, the JNU administration led by the Vice Chancellor has been targeting teachers and students who do not subscribe to the right wing ideology and also has been trying to change the very nature of learning and teaching in JNU. Abhijit Pathak (The Wire, 2018) in his articles speaks of how teachers who have taken part in any protest- even if it is a peaceful march being served

memos almost every day and even those who have been teaching for more than 30 years are being questioned regarding their contributions and methods of teaching (Agha, 2018). He also writes how this has created an atmosphere of fear – of being pulled up every day by the administration, of losing jobs etc. He rightfully questions- can a thinking, critical mind function in such a vitiated atmosphere.

- **Accusations of Saffronisation and ABVP: The state’s non state authority**

Wherever, appointments have been made on purely ideological grounds, students and teachers from universities across the country have repeatedly accused the administration of forcing saffron ideology in the institution’s daily working. In the most recent examples teachers and students in Central University of Kerala are protesting against “disciplinary action” taken against left leaning and Dalit activists in the campus. One of the common features of this has been the involvement of Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) – the student wing of Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS). Students belonging to the organization have repeatedly been found indulging in violence against any contrarian viewpoints in the campuses across the country. The more pertinent feature of this is the patronage they receive by those who are in power. A common template seems to emerge out wherein the ABVP activists indulge in a conflict with other opposing student groups and in most cases the latter get penalised while ABVP is let off scot free. The biggest example of this is the case of Central University of Hyderabad where Dalit scholar Rohit Vemula committed suicide. Wankhede on the second anniversary of Vemula’s death recounts the incident (Wankhede, 2018):

“It all started in August 2015. Members of the RSS-backed Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) termed ASA activists as ‘anti-national goons’ for screening Muzaffarnagar Abhi Baki Hai, a documentary on the 2013 Muzaffarnagar riots. When the ASA members resisted the ABVP, it was portrayed as a deadly attack on the ABVP members in which N. Susheel Kumar, Hyderabad Central University ABVP president, was allegedly injured. A proctorial board enquiry denied any such attack and

cleared the ASA member of the charges. However, the issue got blown up when Union minister Bandaru Dattatreya, the Bharatiya Janata Party MP from Secunderabad, wrote to Union human resource development minister Smriti Irani saying that the university had become a den of “casteist, extremist and anti-national politics”.

The human resource development ministry took swift cognizance of the report and ordered the newly appointed vice chancellor, Appa Rao, to ‘expedite’ the enquiry. Due to this pressure, the university administration, without undergoing a fair proctorial enquiry, took immediate action and five Dalit students were suspended, including Rohith. The students were barred from the hostel and mess premises. They were also restricted from using the library and contesting student elections. On January 3, 2016, the suspended students were ordered to vacate their hostels.

The students decided to protest against such discriminatory acts at the ‘Velivada’. The university administration refused to negotiate with the students. Nearly two weeks after the protest, Rohith, deeply depressed and humiliated, decided to make a loud statement against the brutal establishment. He committed suicide”.

In another highlighted case of 2017, ABVP members vandalised a cultural event in Ramjas College in Delhi University last year which eventually led to huge protest march by the university students (Ramjas row: Politicians join students, teachers at campus march against ABVP, 2017). ABVP members have been accused of assaulting professors, the most recent case being that of Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Gorakhpur University in Gorakhpur (Professor beaten up by ABVP mob at Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Gorakhpur University, 2018). These are signs that should not be ignored. Action needs to be taken to prevent rot from setting in and destroying the whole system of higher education from within.



Source: <https://www.indileak.com/2017/02/students-protest-against-abvp-in-delhi-university/>

- **Curtail dissent – by coercive and non coercive means**

In 2016, when the Delhi police entered the JNU campus to arrest the student union leader Kanhaiya Kumar, the JNU administration was condemned for allowing the state machinery to enter the University campuses. But as it turns out, deployment of police forces have become a regular feature in last few years. The Manipur University example is the case in point. Last year when female students in Banaras Hindu University were protesting against the gender discrimination in hostel rules, university administration chose to allow lathi charge by police forces (Police Lathi-Charge BHU Women Students Protesting Inaction in Molestation Case, 2017).

Apart from resorting to violence using state machinery such as the police, intellectual activities have also been at the receiving end. There have been repeated cases of administration taking extreme step of cancelling events such as discussions, film screenings (Bhatia, 2015), talks which are based on perspective that is critical of the right wing ideology (Vincent, 2017).

- **Discrediting institutions**

A massive campaign has been launched against premier institutions like JNU, which is seen as the last left bastion. There have been repeated efforts by the administration- both from within the institute and outside (the Central Government) which we have mentioned earlier on to discredit JNU- its faculty and students. From online campaigns to fake videos, no stone was left unturned in proving that JNU students - funded by the government and in turn the tax payers money are working against the interests of the nation. In a first of its kind, the Defence minister (who is Alma matter of the institution) mid-September declared that students from JNU are waging a war against the nation. It is ironic that an institute that has contributed immensely to nation building is now on a defensive to prove its integrity. This strategy of targeting entire institutions is a reflection of the extent to which they have been made pawns to gain political mileage. Students from institutes like FTII, JNU leading are vilified for their contrarian views and are criticised for wasting state resources (Kumar, 2016). Thus, any critical intervention from these students against government working is termed as against the interests of the country.

- **Excessive Political interference**

All the points mentioned above point at the level of political interference in the working of education institutions. Yet there have been other incidents that underscore how instead of tackling the shortcomings of the higher education institutes in the country, the government has chosen to use them as a political battlefield. For example, UGC was asked to advise all the universities to celebrate the surgical strike day on 29th September to mark the military operation by Indian Army in 2016 (Pathak V. , 2018). Furthermore, as it was pointed in our issue brief (Volume 6, Issue-42) the rechristening of UGC as Higher Education commission will give more scope for political interference as it will

give the mandate of funding of the education institutions directly in the hands central government. HECI will also have lesser number of representatives from teaching community (2 in 12) as compared to UGC (4 in 10). This is not just confined to central universities. The Gujarat government in 2016 dictated a list of 82 topics for doctoral thesis which included names of central government as well as state government themes such as ‘Swachh Bharat Abhiyan’ (Chauhan, 2016).

III. Conclusion

Already afflicted by institutional loopholes like shortage of faculty and funds, the government’s approach in handling education institutions certainly does not augur well for the future for the higher education in the country. So where do we situate this perpetual unrest that has inhabited the Indian universities in last few years? At the very beginning we need to acknowledge that the motivation behind this constant onslaught stems from a clear ideological conflict where anyone who belongs to a different ideological spectrum has been painted as the enemy of the state. The government wants students in universities to align with its ideas of the nation and more importantly nationalism without accomodating any alternative viewpoint. Therefore any protest movement is strategically framed in the binary of national and anti-national. Also there is a clear directive from the government that student activism in politics is not be encouraged.

The present regime’s discomfort against these universities is fundamentally against what these university spaces stand for. It is therefore of no surprise that most of the conflicts involved humanities centres. Students in these institutes have been encouraged to develop critical thinking that interrogate the status quo. Institutions like Jawaharlal Nehru university and TISS have tradiationally been known for incultating liberals values in its students and for creating spaces that are open for debate and democratic dissent. The fact that most of these universities had ABVP as one of the major student political organisations way before a right wing party formed its government at centre is emblematic of their accomodative and inclusive nature. But these ideas as Thapar argues (Thapar, 2018) stand against the ideas of education that is promoted by RSS-BJP. Thapar argues that government’s attempt at preventing smooth functioning of these

institutions stems from their narrow understanding of education. This according to her is nothing but “memorisation of narrow set of questions rooted in faith and belief and an equally set of answers that prohibit any doubt or deviation”. Furthermore, what we are witnessing as Pathak argues is a constant push towards ‘control’, ‘standardisation’ and ‘monitoring’ (Pathak A. , 2018). It is argued by those in power that these aspects are necessary for institution to retain its order. This bureaucratic approach towards education, Pathak asserts is leading to complete marginalisation of critical pedagogies. He argues that this narrow understanding of education deprives us from therapeutic functions of critical pedagogy.

As it happens it has been helped in this endeavour by discourse around education that has been shaped by changing socio-economic landscape of the country in last three decades. The boom of technical level education catering to market needs has had a cascading effect on how education is perceived. It has led to depolitisation of education wherein any kind of social and political assertions are portrayed as distractions. The science and technology institutions which are often termed as ‘apolitical’ and ‘ideologically neutral’ institutes have over the years have been dominated by those aligning with the Hindu majoritarian viewpoint in the country. Two recent examples are elaborative of this trend. In mid 2015, Indian Institutes of Technology Madras banned a students group called ‘Ambedkar Periyar Study Circle’ accusing it for “spreading hatred”. The group as the name suggest was founded to promote the ideas of two of the biggest social reformers of the country. On the other hand the same university has had a student group namely Vivekananda Study Circle that was presided by the dean of student affairs (Jha, 2015).

Similarly earlier this year in May, IIT-Kharagpur administration issued a circular prohibiting “any political/apolitical gathering/meeting” without prior approval. This was hours before a planned march organised by a student group called ‘Ambedkar Bhagat Singh Study Circle’ in solidarity with the students of Aligarh Muslim University (AMU). The circular issued by the director reads “IIT Kharagpur is an institution of national importance and we do not encourage any activity, which escalates tension in the society in the name of political affiliation, religion, caste and religion. Our sole aim is to promote development of science and technology and nationalistic fervour among students” (Chowdhury, 2018). Interestingly these lines not only

reveal the nature of ideological tinge of the institution but can also be taken as a symbolic representative of kind of prevailing value system in science institutions. This viewpoint assumes that technology and its usage is immune to any sociological or material asymmetry that exists in the society. The idea nationalistic fervour is in direct synch with the ideology of the current political dispensation. Moreover, we are also witnessing what Krishnan (Krishnan, 2016) points out a discourse that dichotomises the role of education. On one hand is the technical education like medical and engineering fields which are deemed as adding value to the nation's development and on the other hand are the streams which inculcate critical thinking which are not seen as essential or useful in purely market terms.

Another argument that is given to discredit student movements is that of politics affecting the studies. These positions leave us with some fundamental question. Should the primary role of education be to produce employable youth? Are protests and movements as distractions? It is important for us to address these questions as these are the underlining premise based on which attacks on public universities have been justified. The idea of studies being separate from politics is premised on a narrow understanding of education wherein its primary role is confined to vocational. Educational institutes do not exist in isolation. University spaces are meant to inculcate critical ability and reasoning in students. They are encouraged to challenge the status quo and develop independent understanding of the issues that impact them. Students' participation in issues should be looked as an act of enhancing the democratic participation of the country. Although employability is important, public education's primary role cannot be confined to cater to market needs. Former Vice-president Prof. Hamid Ansari captured this eloquently during his convocation address to Panjab University last year in March. Countering the argument that the purpose of universities is to align what students need and what employers want, Prof Ansari argued that "this trend of thinking, essentially utilitarian in narrow sense, is not uncommon in our times. And yet to reduce it to its utilitarian dimensions is to negate the ventures of the human mind and spirit that has characterized human progress down the ages". He further added that even in disciplines with clear professional connections the university first aim should be to build profound understanding of the discipline (Ansari, 2017).

These positions and perspectives on education are reflected in the policy decisions being taken by the government- be it fund cuts for scholarships, changes in the UGC and privatization of education. These incidents are in a sense demonstrative of the implications of political interference in the higher education. Playing partisan politics through education institutions poses an alarming situation for the growth of this country. It is not only impacting the lives of the students who are getting affected by it but is also setting dangerous precedents for future. From a governance perspective, we are directly harming our human resource capital. Therefore, we need to advocate for paradigmatic change in this direction wherein educational institutions should be immune to change in political power.

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Issue Coordinator: Piyush Kumar

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