The Attacks on Universities Represent an Agenda to Eliminate Safe Spaces

For the new social contract and its demand for unconditional loyalty towards the state to take root, questioning voices must be silenced.

Masked people carrying sticks at JNU campus. Photo: Special arrangement

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In the dark hours of Sunday evening, when some street lights were temporally shut off, graphic footage of bleeding students and faculty members emerged from Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU). The university campus witnessed a mob-driven terror attack for over an hour as the administration and police (stationed outside the premises) failed to intervene.

The attack wasn’t (and mustn’t) be viewed as an ‘act of violence’ or ‘vandalism’ alone but rather be acknowledged as a coordinated attack specifically directed against a group of students, faculty members and with a clear political agenda in hindsight.

What happened at JNU is a blotted moment of national shame in post-independent India’s modern history, signifying how those in present positions of power have gone on a war against their very own ‘future’ (young students), rupturing the social fabric of a nation’s youth and collective well-being.
From Jamia Milia Islamia, Aligarh Muslim University (AMU) and now JNU, what does one interpret from such acts of violence and brazen attacks led by mobs with impunity?

People walk inside a partially damaged library at the Jamia Millia Islamia University. Photo: Reuters/Adnan Abidi

For one, they signal a harsh reality of today’s India, one in which there are no ‘safe spaces’ left anymore. India may still electorally be a democracy, but not the kind that it was founded upon (or aspired to work towards). An illiberal democratisation of violence inside campuses, libraries, hostels, personal rooms has destroyed the existence of any public (or private) safe spaces. This occurred with the explicit approval of a ruling political leadership, the functionaries of which (especially the police), allow the resentful to vindicate themselves by beating down those with contrarian views (or ideologies) with iron-rods and lathis.

Still, there is a deeper, more insidious attempt underlying these events.

Centuries ago, Thomas Hobbes, articulating his theory on state of nature, emphasised how the desire to protect oneself against acts of violence committed by others can allow a citizenry to be willing to collectively give up their natural rights (or even claims of liberty or freedom) for a larger ‘collective good’ or ‘social contract’ to be achieved between ‘the state’ and its own ‘subjects’. Hobbes argued that individuals require a “visible power to keep them in awe”, to remind them of the purpose of ‘the social contract’ and to force them, for ‘fear of punishment’, to keep their promises. This power must also be sufficient to keep in check the yearning for superiority of those who desire ‘honour’ or ‘glory’ (or national pride). Hobbes called the state’s power necessary to transform the desire for a social contract into a commonwealth, the sovereign, the Leviathan, or the “king of the proud”.

Drawing from Hobbes, one can observe a (new) social contract emerging in Modi’s ‘New India’, with an unwritten charter somewhat like this:
Become a statizen and align your views and actions with what the state of nature puts forth. If you (any group or an individual) fail to offer an unconditional loyalty towards the state, the agents of the state shall do everything in our power (through law or force) to annihilate you by instilling ‘fear of punishment’ through legitimate or illegitimate means. So, understand your ‘national’ duties than claiming your natural (constitutional) rights, else you would be labelled or be asked to leave the country and settle in some other land (which is what most elites may eventually end up doing against such a state of nature).

This charter appears to be the new social contract between the state and its citizens (especially the youth), emerging from recent episodes of targeted attacks against Muslims in UP, and through state-sponsored violence against any groups with dissenting voices.

For this politicised social contract to continue entrenching itself, eliminating safe spaces is critical. If a premier elite institution like JNU can experience an attack as it did, one can hardly imagine the condition of universities anywhere else in the country, away from the national spotlight.

A bleeding JNU is also a powerful example of how an institution, which allows a select group of students access to quality higher education and allows everyone to cohabit a space promising equal opportunity for ‘un-equals’ (or those with an experienced history of discrimination), has now become a political instrument for an ideological war zone to be created.
Young students, in the process, have become ‘collateral damage’ for the state, which cares little about their education, state of employability, or well-being. It rather uses their ‘blood’ to hegemonise its ideological and political project. Still, a couple of troubling questions arise at this point:

- Are most citizens (or those aware of recent events) indifferent or naïve to realise how this new social contract or ideological hegemonisation is being legitimised through both social and political action?
- If a ‘democracy’ is viewed as the ‘politics of the governed’, as Partha Chatterjee might argue, have we become, by a conscious choice, a democratically illiberal political space? And if that is the case, is there a finality to this dark occurring in absence of a credible political alternative?

Sadly, there are no clear answers to these questions yet, but there is a tiny glimmer of hope. Over the last few weeks, the women of Shaheen Bagh (peacefully protesting 24/7 for more than 23 days now), students of universities across India and members of civil society have exhibited strong acts of solidarity against an authoritarian regime.

Their acts reflect a conscious, collective spirit of voice-based activism, where, each ‘voice’ represents a type of activism where people cannot, or do not want to leave because they deeply value the institution (say, a government) that finds itself in a crisis. Instead, they are interested to improve its performance through active participation, even through resistance and at the risk of being brutalised by those who wield power, just trying to bring about change and reform a state’s nature of existence. Let’s hope such voice-based activism can help us create new safe spaces over time and resolve the questions that remain unanswered for now.