

From institution to mechanism

Instead of encouraging critical thinking, the university is being forced to become a system for training people to fit the world they know and receive

JANAKI NAIR



The time has come to make some provisional sense of the tumultuous events that have convulsed the subcontinent over the last two months. There is an intensity to the debate that is unprecedented in the public life of the Republic. The image of the public university went south, subjected to the extraordinary scrutiny of the Virtuous TaxPayer, as if desperately seeking a small gnat to swat when the rampaging elephant of the criminal bank-loan defaulter was also in the room. We are living through a time when universities (particularly departments of social science and humanities) are being seen as the incubators of hatred for the Indian nation, and campus politics in particular has been described as a "disease" to be cured at all costs. What has provoked such violent and righteous rage in the breasts of so many Indians, among the marginalised and privileged alike?

Today, as the debate over nationalism, its critics and its devotees, has moved beyond the Marxist/Ambekarite redoubts of Jawaharlal Nehru University/Hyderabad Central University respectively, and made a generalised target of certain political and cultural minorities, we also need to ask what the connections are between what is happening in and to universities and the vociferous demands for worshipful allegiance to the neo-nation.

It will not do to merely point to or deride the obvious contradictions and inconsistencies in the irrational cacophony by which we are surrounded. Instead, we need urgently to make sense of and expose the very rationality of these strident, irrational voices.

Yardstick of representations

We can begin by separating the concern about our public universities from



INCLUSIVE: "Campuses such as JNU have become among the most representative institutions of all." A student before an exam in Bengaluru. — PHOTO: K. MURALI KUMAR

representative institutions of all. Which other institution includes so visibly not only women and minorities but also all sections of the caste and class spectrum? Certainly not even Parliament stands up to the yardstick of representativeness — of gender, caste, class, ethnicity, and sexualities.

The vituperations against the public university then appear to be much more pointed: they are reserved for the perceived ingratitude of those who are, to adapt the Kannada

have allied, have actively and productively critiqued the Indian state when necessary.

Claiming moral authority

This brings me to the second, and larger, frame within which we must place the new anxiety about politics on the campus. The eddying effect in the public life of India of the hatred for student politics would have been impossible without being linked to what was clearly revealed in the speech of

figures of family, clan, and caste to build, however partially and incompletely, a new social world.

The moral panic that has gripped large sections of the Indian public is thus related to the fears about the democratising opportunities offered by campuses today. In this expression of outrage, the newly moralising Right has left no stone unturned, even displaying the full flowering of a pornographic imagination, by producing a new "drain inspector's report", an examination of the detritus of the campuses. It aims to replace critical thinking with

Instead, we need urgently to make sense of and expose the very rationality of these strident, irrational voices.

Yardstick of representations

We can begin by separating the concern about our public universities from the generalised moral panic that has now gripped all sections of the Indian citizenry. We all know that public universities both in India and elsewhere have nurtured political debates and struggles, from civil rights and anti-war movements to struggles for separate States (not so long ago, the All Assam Students' Union morphed into the Asom Gana Sangram Parishad). Why has the fact that campus politics has for so long produced very important politicians on the Left, Centre as well as Right been ignored so systematically? What accounts for this widespread moral outrage, expressed not just by the predictable "fringe elements" or the Hindu Right, but by such respected corporate leaders and academic entrepreneurs such as Mohandas Pai?

What is new about the Indian campus today is not only its enormous growth from being a preserve of the elite in the decades following Independence to a reservoir of new talents and aspirations, accounting for a full quarter of the college-age population. Campuses such as JNU, which had long ago devised and secured an admission policy which went well beyond state-mandated reservations to include "deprivation points" (which incidentally are occasionally reviewed), have become among the most inclusive and

of gender, caste, class, ethnicity, and sexualities.

The vituperations against the public university then appear to be much more pointed: they are reserved for the perceived ingratitude of those who are, to

adapt the Kannada writer Arvind Malagatti's searing term, "Government Brahmins". The Government Brahmins are those who have fed off the largesse

of the state only to bite the hand that feeds. The perceived illegitimacy of "politics on the campus" is aimed not against the various shades of the Left, which, till recently, stood dangerously isolated and endangered in the surge towards the dominance of market forces, but against at least two strands of politics which have, at least in a university like JNU, been uniquely and visibly allied. These are the Ambedkarite forces and the feminists. Not only has the public university, for the first time in post-Independence history, enabled the participation of the widest range of its citizens in higher education, it has given them the resources to think their social worlds anew, in an institutional space that permits and encourages new structures and relationships. Sometimes, it means challenging the structures and relationships which students are accustomed to or have inherited. And these political formations, like most of the Left forces with which they

This brings me to the second, and larger, frame within which we must place the new anxiety about politics on the campus. The eddying effect in the public life of India of the hatred for student politics would have been impossible without being linked to what was clearly revealed

The moral panic among sections of the public relates to the fears about the democratising opportunities offered by campuses

in the speech of Rashtriya Swayam-sevak Sangh general secretary Bhaiyyaji Joshi in Nagaur. The high-pitched, and seemingly irrational, darkly affective nature of the

protests on the question of nationalism is explained by the way in which power has been organised in the Indian subcontinent for some time now, and at least since colonial times.

Why, for instance, is there such flagrant disdain and contempt for the rule of law? Is it really the new face of power, or one that is being given new expression and shape? If the lawyers/teachers/students/citizens of the country have, for the last 20 months, been emphasising the necessity of respecting the legal authority of the state, the shrill, strident voices of unreason precisely lay claim to the moral authority of the nation. It is this sphere that is increasingly being envisaged as no longer sharing its power with, but exceeding and indeed dominating, the legal authority of the state. This refurbished moral authority of the nation increasingly entitles the dark forces of unreason to "deal" with those who are today clearly struggling to escape the ascribed struc-

ed to the fears about the democratising opportunities offered by campuses today. In this expression of outrage, the newly moralising Right has left no stone unturned, even displaying the full flowering of a pornographic imagination, by producing a new "drain inspector's report", an examination of the detritus of the campuses. It aims to replace critical thinking with worship, forms of hard-won equality with structures of deference, and forms of new community-building with a return to the ideal of the patriarchal "family". (The proposal of the Indian Council of Historical Research to institute fellowships that will foster a *Guru-Shishya parampara* which will tie a *shishya* to a relationship of obedience and honour, rather than thinking and debating, is only the sign of things to come.)

Meanwhile, in keeping with forces that have long been unfolding, since the days of the United Progressive Alliance regimes Mark I and II, the university is being pushed away from being a full-blooded and lively institution, which encourages critical thinking, if necessary, of the state, and dreaming of new worlds, to being a mechanism for training people to fit the world they know and receive. That is why the truly representative "nations" which have been constitutionally created and sustained — namely universities such as Allahabad, HCU, Film and Television Institute of India, JNU — must be thoroughly undermined and reconstructed for the unreflective neo-nation to triumph.

Janaki Nair teaches at the Centre for Historical Studies, JNU, New Delhi.