

The Destruction of a University*

Jayati Ghosh

For more than two years now, Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi has been in a state of turmoil. There is reason to conclude that this turmoil is no accident: it is the result of a set of decisions imposed from above that appear to be aimed at undermining the fundamental nature of this university and all that it has stood for. The fact that these decisions and actions are being adopted by those supposedly in charge of protecting and nurturing this institution - the Vice Chancellor since January 2016 and the administration that he has appointed - is particularly alarming. These actions of the administration amount to a determined undermining of all the norms and conventions that allowed for the success and smooth functioning of the university are indicative of mala fide intent.

But why should this institution be undermined and damaged in this manner? What exactly was wrong with it? After all, JNU has been widely acknowledged to be one of the premier institutions of higher learning in India. It is consistently ranked at the top by the government's own accreditation and ranking organisations, as well as by independent observers. Over decades, it has produced scholars of the highest order, recognised nationally and internationally for their achievements in social sciences, humanities and natural sciences. Its alumni have achieved success and performed well in every walk of life, from academic and scholarly pursuits through administrative occupations and legal activities, through business and corporate fields, to social and political work. By the mainstream standards of achievement, it is hard to find a rival within the country and beyond – even though this has been achieved through JNU's unique combination of emphasis on academic rigour combined with freedom of thought, focus on social diversity and encouragement of debate, discussion and creative expression.

It is probably the latter features that were identified as the problem by the current ruling dispensation in the country. JNU has been identified as a very “political” campus, in which ideological debates and intense discussion on all sorts of topics are common and pervasive. This has not been to the detriment of academic achievement; nor has it meant the enforced imposition of any particular viewpoint. Indeed, what is remarkable is the sheer variety of political opinions on display among the members of the JNU community and the alumni. Even among the current political groupings in the country, JNU alumni have significant presence in all of them, from Ministers in the current BJP-led government to leaders of the Left parties.

But this encouragement of debate and discussion, this emphasis on thinking through issues and arguments, is precisely what is apparently anathema to the powers that be. It produces citizens who are conscious and questioning, sensitive to wider society and aware of alternative possibilities. These can all be problematic to a ruling regime that hates to be questioned, that valorises obedience and unthinking acceptance of whatever the regime chooses to decide and impose upon the people. The attack on JNU is at one level an attack on higher education in general, insofar as it produces informed and questioning citizens. But it is also a very specific attack on this particular institution, precisely because it has been so successful in doing this.

The university and the student and teacher community within it first faced an external onslaught, exactly two years ago, on the basis of trumped up charges of being “anti-national” and trial by irresponsible media on the basis of doctored videos and complete misrepresentation of facts, along with downright falsehoods that have still gone unpunished. When that attempt to suppress the university failed, the emphasis shifted to internal changes and threats to the working of the system, pushed in aggressive manner by a university leadership that has refused to engage, discuss or negotiate and instead has been hell-bent on pushing through whatever it can through coercion and the draconian exercise of authority.

In the process, it has relied on manipulation of minutes of meetings; partial and sometime blatant lies, even to the courts; subversion of all conventions of seniority in the appointments of Deans and Chairpersons to ensure that only those who will blindly follow the administration’s dictates without question are in any positions of authority; illegal abrogation of powers to appoint “experts” to Selection Committees to ensure that those of a certain political persuasion are selected over better qualified and meritorious candidates, even if they are not fully qualified for the positions; arbitrary reduction of research seats in social sciences and a wide range of disciplines without proper explanation and despite the protests of faculty and students; failing to meet the legal requirements for filling reserved quotas for SCs/STs/OBCs to ensure diversity, by imposing all sorts of peculiar rules brought in suddenly without warning; punishing those who have questioned any actions by denying them their due in terms of housing or hostel wardenships or leave, while rewarding others who are willing to kow-tow; refusing to accept academically desirable initiatives such as the introduction of important programmes such as in Mathematics that have been supported by the bulk of the university, while pushing others that directly conflict with current requirements for teaching and research; and so on.

The procedural violations and trampling upon existing norms for decision-making are too many and too detailed to elaborate here. But they are combined with a crazy approach to administration that involves sending around several new regulations each week, all of which have to be implemented immediately, and then sending clarifications that sometimes negate the earlier regulations, and then sending threats of dire consequences for anyone who does not implement and obey the vague and poorly conceived rules. Overall, they have delivered a situation in which the actual members of the university – the students, the teachers, the administrative and other staff – are in a state of constant disruption and are thwarted or prevented from normal academic functioning. The aim seems to be to prevent the university from achieving the excellence that it has striven for and to generate a sense of continuous crisis that will create instability and alienation among the community.

The move to institute compulsory attendance, that has led to the most recent ruckus on campus is just one example of this. In fact, lack of attendance has rarely been a problem across the university, and when it does happen it can also serve as a useful feedback to teachers on the quality and usefulness of their lectures. Daily attendance for research scholars is a ridiculous exercise that betrays no understanding of the nature of research work or even knowledge of the facilities available on campus. Enforced attendance is found nowhere in the top universities of the world, for many good reasons. Nevertheless, the move was imposed without any discussion in the relevant bodies (like the Boards of Studies and the Academic Council) and the

circular announcing it was sent even before the rules on how it was to be done were formulated. The rules themselves are bizarre and display evidence of no application of mind – indeed, some of them are almost impossible to implement for the larger departments. So clearly, the idea was simply to provoke, irritate and stir up things, rather than actually to do anything to improve academic functioning.

This aggressive and unthinking approach is clearly evident in another recent decision of the university administration that has received less publicity: the decision that henceforth all viva voce examinations for MPhil and PhD degrees must be held only by Skype! Since the interaction and discussion during a viva is more than just an examination but is often a potent source of learning, and in any case there are massive problems of internet connectivity that make running such vivas difficult, there can be no possible academic justification for this decision. The only possible reason could be financial, that the University cannot afford to bring examiners from different parts of the country to attend vivas.

But the manner in which this strange decision is being imposed suggests that even this financial constraint is not the reason, because the administration is refusing to allow face-to-face vivas even when the examiner is a local person who is willing to come at his/her own expense, or when the examiner happens to be in Delhi anyway and can come for the viva at no additional cost!

The absurdities that this rigid position has already resulted in would be laughable if they did not have such tragic consequences for the students. Already, on several occasions, the connectivity was so poor that Skype failed during the viva and the students' presentations could not be seen by the examiner, while the examiner's questions also could not be heard. The response of the administration to these problems is to allow vivas to be held on WhatsApp! One of my students submitted a PhD nearly a year ago, but the viva cannot be held for this absurd reason: even though the examiner (who is in Mumbai) is not allowed to use Skype or WhatsApp during office hours, the administration refuses to allow this viva to be held on a weekend or after office hours, because they require the presence of a "technical team" to monitor this weird interaction! Clearly, all this is being imposed not for any positive reason, but simply to drive teachers and students crazy. It establishes the mala fide intent of the administration, and the viciousness with which it is seeking to impose its will.

All those who have ever been involved in higher education in India probably know how difficult it is to establish and maintain an educational institution of good quality and repute. But they also know – or are now discovering – how easy it can be to destroy such institutions, with this potent combination of wanton aggression and lack of concern for the future outcome. The struggle for the soul of this university is part of a larger struggle for the soul of the country, which means that despair alone cannot be an option.

*** This article was originally published in the Frontline Print edition: March 16, 2018.**