

**By Sidharth Mishra**



We are in the midst of Republic Day celebrations. With the French president in town, the media space has been grabbed by issues related to terrorism and strategic partnership. 'The Republic' for the time being has decided to put the Dalit research scholar's suicide in Hyderabad University on the back burner. Rahul Gandhi is busy rescuing peasants in Bundelkhand, Arvind Kejriwal is now battering the Prime Minister for not making the country safe for Karan Johar's sexual preferences and HRD Minister Smriti Irani has decided to send the Hyderabad University Vice-Chancellor on an indefinite leave.

The story in Hyderabad University is about rival political groups contesting each other to establish dominance on campus. What is so unusual about it? Student groups do battle it out on campuses. But seldom do we hear of such rivalries turning so bitter that somebody is pushed to take the extreme step of committing suicide.

This is worse than the actual physical violence committed by student groups on campus.

As we have witnessed in the past, violence perpetrated by student bodies on the campus can be dealt with an iron hand. Be it Mamoodur Rahman in Aligarh, MA Zaki in Jamia or Hari Gautam in Benares Hindu University, they all dealt with the crisis on their campus with a very firm hand and managed to contain the violence. They could do it because they were generally seen to be non-partisan administrators.

Closer to home, I am reminded of veteran jurist Upendra Baxi, who was the Vice-Chancellor of Delhi University during the turbulent anti-Mandal Commission agitation days. He had come to address the first big anti-government "Mashal Jaloos" (torchlight procession) on campus. He

had climbed into his ambassador car and addressed the huge rally saying, “Carrying torches to register your protest is fine but please ensure that you don’t end up torching your libraries and classrooms.”

The anti-Mandal agitation was one of the biggest post-Independence student movements. The agitation was almost as big as the JP movement of the 1970s and it started from the Delhi University campus. It saw one Rajeev Goswami popularise the hitherto unheard cult of self-immolation. But all through the agitation, the Delhi University campus remained largely free of violence, despite rival groups sitting on protests at a distance of fewer than 500 metres.

This was possible because the teachers on campus, despite their well-pronounced ideological leanings, remained non-partisan in dealing with their students. The other day Congress veteran Purshottam Goyal, who taught economics at Shri Ram College of Commerce (SRCC) for four decades, told your reporter, “When I recall my bright students, I realise several of them don the non-Congress colours, be it Arun Jaitley, Rajat Sharma (India TV) or for that matter Jagdish Mukhi (former Delhi Finance Minister).”

During the 1980s, DU was a centre for great ideological struggles. With Rajiv Gandhi rising as a youth icon, the Congress students body National Students Union of India (NSUI) was challenging the might of right-wing Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP). Ajay Maken (present Delhi Congress president) had in 1985 become first directly elected head of students union from the Congress benches. He had worsted Vijender Gupta, the present Leader of Opposition in Delhi Assembly.

During the next few years, NSUI and ABVP fought pitched battles in the DUSU polls. These polls were huge, spread over 80 colleges and across seven parliamentary constituencies. However, neither student body needed to draft the services of our country’s HRD Minister to sort out their differences or teach a lesson to an opponent. A Jagdish Tytler (then Congress Minister from Delhi) or a Madanlal Khurana (then Delhi BJP stalwart) could have never written a note to anybody in the establishment to sort out campus rivalries.

I recall Vishwanath Pratap Singh visiting the campus and addressing a mammoth rally at Maurice Nagar Chowk after quitting the Rajiv Gandhi government. So did Arjun Singh, when he addressed a huge gathering in the Convocation Hall after quitting PV Narasimha Rao’s government. Even BJP governments allowed space for ideological rivalries. Murli Manohar Joshi as HRD Minister did not take umbrage at Vice-Chancellor Deepak Nayyar for paying a courtesy call to Arjun Singh when he visited the Delhi School of Economics in 2002-03.

Political patronage to the ideological battles being fought on campuses is most uncalled for. This can be best resisted by people at the helm on the campuses, i.e. the Vice-Chancellors and their team. But for a vice-chancellor to stand his ground, he is required to be an academic of eminence. The tutelage of political bosses cannot be his sole merit. The person should be a man or woman of character, possessed with the confidence to not act on the directions of the HRD Ministry, the way one Appa Rao Podile acted in Hyderabad.

On its part, the Narendra Modi government also needs to understand that its ministers are meant to engage themselves with larger issues than hold a press conference on campus violence. The ABVP can win campus ideological battles only through its own strength and not the adrenaline provided by any government. If Rahul Gandhi is being incorrect in taking a partisan position in student politics, the Modi government is committing a grave mistake in giving him the opportunity for it.

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