

A Tale of Two Universities

Written by Administrator
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By Sidharth Mishra



The title of today's Notebook is of course inspired by Charles Dickens' 1859 novel, "A Tale of Two Cities." One of the underlying themes of the novel was that be it Paris or London, the two cities in question, though divided by different languages, cultures, and sea, they remained similar in many ways. My inspiration from the novel is limited to finding a suitable headline as I do not see many similarities between University of Delhi and Jawaharlal Nehru University, rather wish to expound on the differences between the two institutions. The newspapers are full of headlines and social media is more violently stirred with the fact that "Delhi University is on the boil." I think that's an overstatement. I wonder if it would be alright to say that just the main campus of Delhi University is on the boil. My friends tell me that even this would be an overstatement. What would be the most appropriate description of the "tension prevailing" on the campus? According to my friends, who are also residents of the campus, there is "no prevailing tension"; it visits between 11 am to 2 pm on a working day. At best, the "tension" could prevail for another two hours in the evening before the bells toll for dinner in most of the hostels. This nature of protest describes adequately how different Delhi University is (the main campus of which is located in the northern party of the city) from its southern counterpart – Jawaharlal Nehru University.

The only times when Delhi University had actually been on the boil was when the Vishwanath Pratap Singh government decided to introduce reservation in the jobs for other backward classes, in 1990; and a decade and half later when Arjun Singh as HRD Minister decided to introduce quota for the OBCs in the classrooms too. During these two agitations, the students of Delhi University were also joined in by pupils from technical institutions in the city, be it the All India Institute of Medical Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology, or the Delhi College of Engineering. JNU largely kept aloof from the agitation on both the occasions. The Marxian ideologues of the teacher and the student bodies of the verdant campus did not join hands with the agitating students from other institutions, which in the coming years saw the influence of Left wingers remaining limited to the campuses and

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getting reduced in the legislatures. This explains the difference in the composition, nature and character of the students of Delhi University and JNU. While JNU can afford to remain on the boil for days and months together, DU finds it unnecessary to be in a state of "hyper-activity" even beyond the - what we called in our times - the U-Special hours. The U-Specials are the buses operated by the Delhi Transport Corporation (DTC) from the campus to various parts of the city. The first of the fleet moved out at 12.30 pm and the last at 3.30pm. It was difficult to find "agitated souls" on the campus after the U-Special hours in the yore, as there was not much "excited audience" to give them a "patient hearing" except for the hostellers. JNU on the other hand, lives through the night singing anthems which revolutionised Latin America, whose hero later became an iconic motif printed on the t-shirts produced in the United States. For JNU students, doubling up as the residents of the government subsidised accommodation and the mess, the energy for such "agitated activity" comes in plenty. It is interesting to point out that majority of hostels of Delhi University have no subsidy on the food served in the mess and the rules for the retention of hostel accommodation are very stringent. On the other hand, in JNU, one can continue (the perception goes) to be a resident while being a student only in sense of the word and not exactly in spirit. Thus, Delhi University goes on the boil across all its campuses only when a threat looms "on the future of the students". The definition of future in the case of most of the DU students is very narrow – finding livelihood for a decent survival. On the other hand, in the case of the JNU students "the concerns are much wider" including "societal concerns." Such thoughts are natural to them especially when their immediate concern for 'roti' and 'makan', if not 'kapada', has been taken care off. However, it must not be forgotten that the thought process of the activists of the JNU, who have of late been working overtime to find a Kurukshetra (if their book permits the use of the word) in the Delhi University, have been propelled by their Marxian teachers. In a recent article, historian Ramchandra Guha, writing on the attacks on the freedom of expression, says that "in fact JNU has long been suspicious even of academics who challenge the university's ruling certitudes. Several departments in JNU have been dominated by a monochromatic Marxism; one being so narrow-minded that (as I recall) they would not allow a scholarly discussion on the Narmada Andolan, since environmentalism was a bourgeois deviation from the class struggle." Now that's some criticism of the activism, which is sought to be transplanted from JNU to Delhi University. Guha is no votary for the Right wing, we all know, and elsewhere in the same essay he calls the present ideological struggle between the Right and the Left as a struggle between "Left's dogmatism and Right's bigotry." In fact he goes to even say that the right on several occasions has justified its actions as a counter to the Left's intransigence. Delhi University has been there for nearly a century. It has been a fine centre of scholarship, promotion of diverse cultural aspirations, free flow of ideas, and given the nation some of its finest citizens. Nation and its wellbeing have been its unstated agenda and those looking to create troubled water here to fish in will find it difficult to get a toehold.

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