The Battle for Cultural Space
Pramod Ranjan

It is essential to find out how this university, created in 1966 by a special Act of Parliament, became a leftist bastion. The answer lies in its unique reservation system. In this university, from the very outset, aspirants from backward districts, women and other weaker sections were given preference in enrolment. Kashmiri migrants and wards and widows of defence personnel killed in action also get preference. The nature of the questions in the admission tests of the university is such that only the ability to answer multiple-choice questions related to one’s discipline is not enough to see one through. Only those students who have, apart from command over their own subject, analytical skills and reasoning power get admission here. The undergraduate courses of foreign languages are an exception in this regard. But even here, once they have a bachelor’s degree, they can join an MA or an MPhil course only if they have the aforementioned skills. Thus, for years, JNU has been home to the finest and most fertile minds from economically and socially deprived sections of society. And when they analyze the hows and whys of their socio-economic background, they get drawn to Marxism.

This fully residential university, spread over 1000 acres and nestled in the lush green Aravalli Range, never attracted the elite class. The hostels serve plain food and residents drink from jugs—instead of glasses. Estimates suggest that at least 70 percent students of the university come from either poor or lower-middle-class families. Though the Left always dominated the students’ politics in the university, till 2006, students from economically weak but socially higher classes ruled the roost here. That was DSCN675 because they outnumbered all other groups. The number of Dalit and Tribal students was capped by the 22.5 percent reservation for them, although OBC students have been given preference in enrolments since 1995, the credit for which goes to the agitation launched by the renowned students’ leader Chandrashekhar (1964-1997) (Samajik Kranti Ke Sutradarh, Ashok Kumar Sinha, Shabda Prakashan, Patna, 2012).

Even then, the percentage of students from socially deprived communities, including OBCs, in the university never exceeded 28-29 percent. In 2006, the government announced reservations for OBCs in institutions of higher learning and that drew these classes towards JNU. The fact that all students of the university get scholarships was an added attraction. As Abhay Kumar pointed out in his article “Assertion of Dalitbahujan discourse in JNU”, published in the August 2015 issue of ‘FORWARD Press’, “According to the Annual Report 2013-14, out of the 7,777 JNU students, there were 3,648 Dalitbahujan students (1,058 SCs + 632 STs + 1948 OBCs). Simply put, the percentage of non-upper-caste students today is roughly around 50 percent. If one includes other deprived social groups, minorities and women, the upper castes and classes are a minuscule minority. As a result, during the last three years (from 2012-14), JNUSU presidents have been from the marginalized sections of society— V Lenin Kumar (2012, SFI-JNU or DSF), an OBC from Tamil Nadu; Akbar Chawdthary (2013, AISA), a Muslim from UP; and Ashutosh Kumar (2014, AISA), a Yadav from Bihar.”

In 2012, OBC students were elected to all the four posts of JNUSU (See “Jai Joti, Jai Bheem, Jai JNU”, ‘FORWARD Press’, October 2012). The winners in the 2015 students’ union elections also reflect the same trend: President Kanhaiya Kumar, AISA (Bhumihar, Hindu upper caste); Vice-President Sheila Rashid, AISA (Muslim); General Secretary Rama Naga, AISA (Dalit); and Joint Secretary Saurabh Kumar, ABVP (OBC). It may be mentioned here that it was after a gap of 14 years that an ABVP candidate emerged victorious in the JNUSU elections.

But his victory had a lot to do with his OBC roots. As the videos of his speech reveal, the current students’ union president Kanhaiya Kumar, who has been arrested on charges of sedition, is not only a brilliant speaker but also his speeches are a beautiful amalgam of Phule-Ambedkarism and Marxism. JNU students say that his powerful oratory was a major contributor to his victory in the elections.

After the enrolments last year, the percentage of students in JNU from SC, ST and OBC has gone up to 55. A large number of Muslims are enrolled in Arabic, Persian and other language courses in JNU. Data on them is not available. But if, along with them, the number of Ashraf Muslims and other minorities is added, it can be safely presumed that at least 70 percent of the students in the university are non-Dwji. Note that the number of OBC students in JNU has gone from 288 in 2006 to 2434 in 2015, ie a tenfold increase in nine years. The number of women students has also gone up substantially.

This change in the social texture of the students not only changed the composition of the students’ union but also the dominant discourse on the campus. Though leading students’ organizations continued to hold the flag of Marxism aloft, their slogans started changing. The graffiti started changing. Instead of Marx, Lenin and Mao, the slogans increasingly started quoting Birsa, Phule and Ambedkar. Portraits of Bahujan heroes who took on Musaad and casteism started adorning the walls—so much so that it became impossible for any students’ organization to survive on the JNU campus without sporting these symbols. And the change was not limited to slogans and graffiti; the topics of research also underwent a sea change. The students from the deprived sections brought with them life experiences and thinking processes that were, hitherto, alien to the Indian academic world. They gave a new momentum, a new energy to research in the humanities. The “Left” had taken a new turn—a turn that took it away from the discourses that interested the upper classes. The radical Left has always been present here. Discussions on Naxalism, Maoism and freedom to Kashmir have been fairly common. The number of big and small functions and meetings on these and related issues to date must easily be in the thousands.

The Mahishasur and food-freedom movements were the manifestations of the new discourses that were replacing the old ones here. They drew nationwide attention. The traditional Left either looked the other way or made it clear that it would stand by the freedom of expression and would not oppose these voices coming from the deprived sections. This was, in a sense, the coming-together of Left and Bahujan ideologies or, at the very least, the two camps agreeing on a common minimum programme.

The RSS calls itself a cultural organization and is perpetually busy in protecting and preserving the brahmanical culture. The young Bahujan intellectuals were dealing blow after fatal blow to the brahmanical culture, and this won them the approval of the Left in JNU. The amalgamation of the thoughts of Phule, Ambedkar, Periyar and Narayan Guru on the one hand and Marx, Lenin and Mao on the other threw up compelling arguments and incontrovertible facts. This, in turn, started influencing the students. A flummoxed Sangh did not know how to counter this assault. The deprived sections posed a stiff challenge—the stiffest in independent India—to the brahmanical culture, which the Sangh was trying to protect in the name of the. Hindu religion, and behind it was the intellectual prowess of the JNU Bahujan research scholars. They were now capable of presenting their views in keeping with the highest academic standards.

The Sangh, so far, has been using issues like cow slaughter to further its ends. It understands quite well the meaning of the proverb “Give a dog a bad name and hang him.” Like in Europe in the Middle Ages, and in some Middle East countries today, the weapon of blasphemy has been used to silence the opposition. Whosoever did or said anything that was unpalatable to the Sangh was promptly accused of blasphemy and declared anti-religion and an atheist. This won the Sangh the support of the masses. But this time, things did not go the Sangh’s way. From within the Hindu religion—which was the mainstay of Sangh’s politics—rose dissenting voices that proclaimed that they would not worship the goddess who massacred Tribals, Backwards and Dalits. The proponents of the Mahishasur movement in JNU were saying, “You may have presented our heroes as villains in your scriptures but we will dig them out from non-brahmanical texts and re-associate them. The Asur tribe of Jharkhand—which, along with the Santhals, Bhils, Gonds, etc, has been declared a primitive tribe by the Government of India—has been worshipping Mahishasur as its ancestor for thousands of years. There are innumerable totems associated...
with the Asur tradition in other Dalit Bahujan castes. Celebrating Mohishasur’s murder was improper. This country has been worshipping women for thousands of years—primarily due to the influence of the Tribal and Bahujan traditions—but Brahminism had distorted the tradition of worshipping women and portrayed them as violent and anti-women. The celebrations of Durga Puja in its present form began just 260 years ago, when after the Battle of Plassey in 1757, Nawab Krishnadav of Calcutta organized the first Durga Puja in honour of Lord Clive. Thus, this festival is not only very new but it is also anti-Muslim and pro-imperialism by implication.”

These young intellectuals thus gave an entirely new meaning to Durga Puja, a festival that was used by the Sangh to brand the original inhabitants of India as demons and villains. Similarly, beef and pork, which were used to engineer many a communal riot, were made a food-freedom issue by the Hindu and Muslim students of JNU. Their arguments regarding pork and beef festivals started reaching the wider society through the media. They told the middle-class Hindus and Muslims, who were unaware of the ground reality: “Beef and pork had always been the staple food of the Hindu Dalits and were the biggest source of protein for the poorer sections of society. Beef and pork are widely consumed in most parts of the northeast. Since students from all over the country studied in JNU, food-related taboos put them under psychological pressure to hide their food preferences.”

The Sangh, this time around, chose sedition instead of blasphemy as the ammunition for its assault. It replaced God with the nation and declared sinful any attempt to question what the nation does or to argue about it. And punishing the sinner, of course, was the sacred duty of every citizen. The BJP, which had demanded that temples of Saraswati be established in all educational institutions, is now ruling the country. On 18 February, the Government of India, referring to “seditious activities” on the JNU campus, issued an order for the national flag to be hoisted on a 207-foot high pole in every university, beginning with JNU. Needless to say, if this goes ahead unopposed, it would be difficult to oppose the installation of an idol of Bharat Mata near the flag. In the post-Independence brahmanical myths, the tiger-riding Durga and the tiger-riding Bharat Mata are all but the same. These symbols have deep significance as far as cultural domination is concerned. One should not forget that cultural domination is the foundation of economic, social and political domination. Hoisting the national flag is a matter of pride for all Indians but the circumstances in which the government has issued this order and its motive deserve condemnation.

[source : Forwardpress.in]

Frontier

Vol. 48, No. 37, Mar 20 - 26, 2016