

Keep The Flag Flying in This Hothouse

The Needle's Eye



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Every time Indians feel the hot and heavy breath of their government on their necks, they recoil. This is true of all governments going back to Independence. It is why Narendra Modi's promise of 'less government, more governance' fell like music on our ears. Sadly, there is too much government. It pits everybody against somebody. The discord infects more and more limbs of the State.

How else can you explain the extraordinarily censorious order of a Delhi High Court judge who granted six months' interim bail to Kanhaiya Kumar, the president of the Jawaharlal Nehru University Students Union, who had been nearly lynched by a pack of patriot lawyers before spending three weeks in jail on sedition charges? The judge ruled that anti-national slogans raised on February 9 were not protected by the fundamental right to freedom of speech, including "...if the infection results in infecting the limb to the extent that it becomes gangrene, amputation is the only treatment."

Chilling words. But they have not frozen Kumar, who in the week since his release has become the darling of the Opposition and the media. The Modi government has created a new political poster boy who sounds eerily like Arvind Kejriwal. It is too early to call Kanhaiya Kumar a political leader, but he is already looking too big for his All India Students' Federation boots. The PhD scholar won his political spurs in his undergraduate days in Bihar. Now, with grown-ups swooning over his 'electrifying' oratory, he is suddenly a

horseman of the apocalypse.

You only have to listen to Kumar to sense that he is a practised politician, and he did not become JNUSU president only to fight for better mess food, or more hostel rooms. He had already said he would fight to scrub the recommendations of the Lyngdoh Committee on regulating political activity on campuses. The



MODERATE FACE



Kumar sounds moderate in comparison with JNUSU VP Shehla Rashid and Rama Naga

Lyngdoh panel was set up at the behest of India's Supreme Court. Its 2006 report said Indian universities should be allowed to elect students' unions, but keep political parties at arm's length as the primary function of a university is education, and not political indoctrination. It noted that the majority of university students just wanted to get on with their studies and found too much politics distracting.

Kanhaiya is magnetic because India's political landscape is not awash with charisma. Modi was incandescent two years ago; he still sparkles, but his effulgence has dimmed. Rahul Gandhi has found his voice, but the combined opposition does not faze Modi. Hence Kanhaiya. Despite the glamour of

the 28-year-old student leader taking on the 65-year-old prime minister, the transformation of the traitor into an opposition mascot has been a bit too rapid. For the moment, though, Modi must feel like the Ancient Mariner: 'Ah! well a-day! what evil looks/Had I from old and young!/ Instead of the cross, the Albatross/ About my neck was hung'.

Somewhere in this tumult, and just ahead of five provincial elections in April and May, India's flaccid Left parties seem to have perked up. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) which now rules only the tiny north-eastern state of Tripura, is hoping to win back Kerala in the south and put up a good show in their former fortress West Bengal. CPM leader Sitaram Yechury, a JNU alumnus, jumped the gun to declare that Kanhaiya would campaign for his party in the elections, but that canny young man is already speaking of creating a new platform.

You can't blame the communists for seeing Kumar as a talisman. Kumar's election as the JNUSU president in September last year was good news for the All India Students' Federation (AISF), the student arm of the Communist Party of India (CPI). Although the AISF has been active on the JNU campus for decades, this was the first time it won the presidency of the union. The CPI has been in precipitous decline for many years. In the May 2014 general elections the party got only 0.79 per cent of the votes cast and won a single seat in parliament's lower house, down from four seats and 1.43 per cent in 2009, and ten seats in 2004.

It is also important to get campus politics in perspective. For a long time, JNUSU and its counterpart, the older Delhi University Students Union, have been nurseries of political talent. JNU professors and alumni are sanguine about the fallout of the sedition ruckus. In 1975, six years after its inauguration, Indira Gandhi clamped Emergency rule on India. JNU's pliant vice-chancellor then set up a 'Court of Honour' to enforce Gandhi's draconian restrictions on political activity and freedom of speech. Two years after the Emergency was lifted, the undaunted AISF, as I noted in an investigation of student politics in India that I wrote in June 1979, vowed a nationwide agitation to "free the educational system from the clutches of capitalist and communal forces". Little has changed.

Firebrand he may be, but Kumar

sounds moderate in comparison with JNUSU vice-president Shehla Rashid and general secretary Rama Naga, both of whom owe allegiance to the far-left All India Students Association, the student wing of the CPI (Marxist-Leninist). In late December, after JNUSU successfully blocked yoga gurupreneur Baba Ramdev from speaking at a Vedanta conference on campus that had been organised by JNU's Special Centre for Sanskrit Studies, Rashid boasted about resisting the "silent right-wing onslaught".

These kinds of confrontations presaged the early-February event where anti-India slogans were allegedly raised and triggered the crack-down. They also preceded an order by the Ministry of Human Resource Development that the national flag must fly on 207-foot flagpoles at all 46 central universities nationwide.

Each 60-by-90-foot flag will need to have a few spares as well as a maintenance crew standing by; each will be floodlit at night by a ring of thousand-watt bulbs. One estimate puts the cost of flying the tricolour at central universities alone at about Rs 150 crore the first year. The cost to the taxpayer, I mean.

Four months before the sedition row, when the University Grants Commission, announced it was scrapping financial aid to all research students at central universities who had not passed a National Eligibility Test (NET), an OccupyUGC campaign was launched, and snowballed despite Irani's offer in November not to pull the UGC plug until a committee ruled on the issue. Kanhaiya Kumar was one of the leading protesters against the UGC decision to base financial aid on merit. The emboldened students now want the UGC's "non-NET" financial aid to be expanded to provincial universities, too. Check one more box for the taxpayer:

A very large number of students at state-funded universities come from the middle and bottom of India's social pyramid. Many critics have called for JNU to be shut down because, they allege, taxpayers are subsidising a den of traitorous, dangerous anti-nationals. The last time I checked, most of JNU's 8000-plus students were boning up for competitive exams that will land them top bureaucratic and police jobs. Armed with a good education, they will soon turn law-abiding taxpayers themselves, and start to pay for those monumental flags.

