**[Crushing the campus](https://www.dawn.com/news/1434685/crushing-the-campus)**

[Latha Jishnu](https://www.dawn.com/authors/3634/latha-jishnu)

September 24, 2018

COME Saturday, universities and colleges across India will be celebrating ‘Surgical Strike Day’, ordered to do so by the University Grants Commission, a body tasked with promoting academic standards in institutions of higher education. Sept 29, 2016, is the day the Indian Army says it carried out ‘surgical strikes’ across the Line of Control and inflicted “significant casualties”, a claim denied by Pakistan. For the Narendra Modi government, the ‘surgical strike’ marks the high point of its muscular policy towards Pakistan and figures prominently on its list of achievements.

Crucially, it serves as a reference point for pushing the BJP’s favourite themes of patriotism and valorisation of the military for political gain. So it was all of a piece that the UGC wrote to university vice chancellors outlining ways to mark the day. It said “students shall pledge their support for armed forces by writing letters and cards” which are to be shared with publicity departments of the defence forces and government.

The bizarre nature of the memo — it has detailed suggestions on how the students should be marshalled to show their support for the ‘surgical strike’ — is symptomatic of the Modi regime’s attitude towards universities and college students. Central universities, the prestigious institutions run by the government, have come under systematic attack — ideologically, socially and financially. Funds have been slashed, research fellowships reduced drastically and rules that promoted social mobility and economic betterment dismantled. Students have been labelled seditious Maoists by the university administration and pilloried as enemies of the nation by the regime’s fawning media. Students unions, unless controlled by the ruling party, are viewed as hotbeds of treason and even innocuous seminars on social themes tend to be labelled subversive in the current atmosphere of anti-intellectualism.

*The systematic attack on academia reflects the anti-intellectualism of the saffron right wing.*

Almost every central university has been in turmoil, wracked by protests against the inept and mediocre administrations that have been foisted on them, talent and academic excellence being scarce in the saffron ranks. Since the primary goal of the Hindu supremacist organisation the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, which spawned the BJP and closely mentors its performance, is known to have the final say in such appointments, the results have been unhappy. In many universities, warlike situations have prevailed with the new crop of vice chancellors calling in the cops at the slightest indication of unrest. The latest is Manipur University in India’s northeast where protests by students and the faculty have forced a shutdown for several months over the appointment of a vice chancellor whom they accuse of ineptitude and pushing a saffron agenda.

Many of India’s institutions of higher learning have been in decline for years and the BJP government’s rush to formulate a new educational policy was expected to usher in a turnaround. Instead, universities and their students have been defamed and destroyed. With saffronisation as its primary goal, the BJP-RSS combine is driving even the good universities into the ground. How else can one explain the implacable hostility of the government to the highly regarded Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU)? It is consistently ranked as the top academic centre by the HRD ministry but has been in the cross hairs of saffron organisations and the government because of its reputation for being left leaning and liberal in thought, attributes that are clearly anathema to the right wing.

It didn’t help that Modi’s first choice as a minister of human resources development (as the education ministry is known) whose unfounded claim that she had studied at Harvard has eclipsed her earlier fame as a TV star. She was replaced soon enough but her successor has done little to improve the functioning of universities. These are seen only channels for instilling the RSS-BJP brand of nationalism in students as a way of countering the influence of the left. So the focus is on stalling tanks used in old wars, getting hyper nationalist army officials to lecture them and to instal walls of valour on the campus.

The attack on students is two-pronged. While the storm troopers of the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad, the student wing of the RSS, tries to capture student unions, top government functionaries abetted by their media cohorts launch campaigns to discredit the university, its faculty and alumni unless they fall in line. The most discreditable attack was, again, on JNU after the ABVP failed to make headway in the student body elections and it came from a person no less than Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, herself a JNU alumnus, who was recently described by a political analyst as “the most talented minister in Narendra Modi’s cabinet”. She took time out from her endless convolutions on the Rafale jet scandal that is roiling the government to claim that forces within campus were “waging a war against India” and they were “also seen with elected representatives of the institution’s students’ union”. It was a reiteration of old allegations of sedition that had resulted in the jailing of JNU student leaders who were subsequently freed by the court.

Sitharaman has been indiscriminate in her statements of late but her charge against JNU was disconcerting. But then, the right wing the world over — and the far left in some corners — is known to be anti-intellectual and to harbour conspiracy theories around institutions of higher education, primarily because academics are viewed as elitist or liberal.

Academic Michael A. Peters, emeritus professor in education at the University of Illinois, US, and distinguished professor at Beijing Normal University, China, has a theory that might explain the animus. Calling anti-intellectualism “a virus and condition that affects the health of the body politic anywhere, anytime”, Peters believes the particular character of anti-intellectualism “in the era of post-truth politics is associated with ‘strongman politics’, anti-immigration sentiments, anti-globalisation and local protectionism, anti-women, anti-environment and a kind of national populism that swings on emotion and belief rather than fact, reason or argument”.

All this is true of the BJP, a party which appears to fear the campus more than its political opponents. It jails students, many of them girls, for merely showing black flags to its leaders.

The writer is a journalist based in Delhi.

Published in Dawn, September 24th, 2018