

Chant of the Masked People

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Some significant events took place in recent months in the Jawahar Lal Nehru University (JNU) in Delhi. As the dust on these events is beginning to settle, reflective evaluations have started. According to one historian, these were ‘tumultuous events that have convulsed the subcontinent’ (‘From Institution to Mechanism’, *The Hindu*, 8 April). According to another, they signaled a ‘coming Left-Ambedkarite revolution’ as ‘soaring chants’ ‘rang out on the streets’ (‘Appropriating Ambedkar’, *The Hindu*, 21 April).

From a less charitable perspective, we will see that there indeed were chants by both masked and unmasked protestors; as the official unmasked chants ‘soared’, they drowned the masked ones, as if by design. In the process, the ruling reactionary regime got what it wanted.

The Arrests

So what happened? According to reports, on 9th February this year a small demonstration took place inside the JNU campus to commemorate the third death anniversary of Afzal Guru. Afzal Guru, a Kashmiri muslim, was hanged and buried inside the Tihar jail in New Delhi for his alleged involvement in the terrorist attack on the Indian parliament on 13 December, 2001. As the evening shadows lengthened, some young people reportedly made speeches and shouted slogans to protest Guru’s hanging; allegedly, they also engaged in slogans and chants demanding freedom of Kashmir.

Specifically, it was alleged that, within the collection of young persons, some people masked their faces with cloth. It was also alleged that, during the demonstration, some people shouted slogans that wished the dismemberment of India; they also pledged the continuation of the struggle for freedom until the destruction of India. It is important to note that that is *all* that happened. No arms were displayed and no specific plans for turning these slogans into material action were mooted. At worst, it was a rather strong expression of indignation at perceived massive injustice in Kashmir.

Apparently, a rival student group in the campus protested about what they perceived to be “anti-national” slogans and speeches. As a clash was likely to happen, the Delhi police was informed. Subsequently, after preliminary investigation, three JNU students—Kanhaiya Kumar, Umar Khalid and Anirban Bhattacharya—were arrested. The JNU authorities also proceeded to take disciplinary action against 21 students including the ones just named.

Since the matter is under examination by the courts, in what follows I will not be concerned with the veracity of the reported facts, details about who was present during which part of the event, and who shouted which slogan etc. I will also not comment on the latest disciplinary actions enforced by the JNU authorities; this is a matter internal to the administration of JNU. I am concerned with the larger political significance of 9th February.

To proceed, let me note that the police action was located in a politico-historical context that has nothing to do with JNU per se, the community of students as a whole, the university system, the caste system and tragic suicide of Rohit Vemula in Hyderabad, teachings of Babasaheb Ambedkar, etc. In so far as *this* police action was concerned, it was *not* directed specifically to crush ‘what JNU stands for’, the ‘alternative kind’ of students, if any, it nurtures, and the idea of ‘liberal education.’ To think otherwise is to unduly glorify the intellect governing the Delhi police system.

The police action was specifically directed at what in fact was the case: public display of support for Kashmir and Afzal Guru. The site of JNU was merely incidental. For example, on the same day, a small demonstration to protest Guru’s hanging was also organized in Jadavpur University in Kolkata, and the police wanted to take action. However, the vice chancellor of the university did not allow the police to enter the campus and a crisis was averted. As protests on Afzal’s hanging refuse to die, it is conceivable that many such meetings took place across the country, especially in Kashmir, often in small public forums outside the university system.

More significantly, a very similar event took place in Delhi itself on the next day, 10th February, at the Press Club of India where people gathered to commemorate the hanging of Afzal Guru. Here as well there were songs, recitations, speeches, and much chanting and sloganeering for nearly three hours. Incidentally, the speakers seated on the dais were associated, not with JNU, but with Delhi University.

This meeting was formally reported to the Delhi police. The speakers were interrogated at length for days, and Dr. S. A. R. Geelani, a teacher in Delhi University, was arrested for conducting the meeting. More on Geelani later. Importantly, the entire focus of the interrogations was to seek information about connections of people in Delhi, such as Geelani, with the resistance in Kashmir. Since I happened to be one of the speakers, the police showed much initial interest in my work on both the parliament attack case and the maoists in India. Here was the juicy prospect of unearthing the shadowy ‘mass-front’ of a terror network linking maoists and militants in Kashmir with intellectual coordination from universities in Delhi under the very nose of the union home ministry. Unfortunately, the fervent prayers of the police remained unanswered.

Unlike the JNU arrests, Geelani’s arrest was not interpreted as an attack on what University of Delhi stands for and the kind of teachers it nurtures. As we will see, the atrocious arrest of a university teacher on sedition charges—for organizing an open public meeting in a very prominent place with due permission—barely found mention in the months that followed. Even though the JNU and the Press Club events were concerned with identical issues, the former was relentlessly highlighted in the public domain while sustained efforts were made to sideline the latter. We need to understand why.

Public protest

The sketched perspective on the arrests—with Kashmir at the center—was largely missing from the very impressive public protests that ensued after the arrest of the JNU students. Consider for example, an otherwise fluent and representative recent article in *The Hindu* on the apparent rise of Ambedkarite politics in some campuses ('Appropriating Ambedkar', April 21). This is how the author, who appears to be a witness to the protests, describes the student movement in one rousing sentence:

Anyone who participated in the multiple marches, teach-ins and demonstrations that took place in Hyderabad, Delhi, Calcutta, Bombay and elsewhere throughout January, February and March, following Rohith Vemula's suicide and the arrest and subsequent release of JNU students Kanhaiya Kumar, Umar Khalid and Anirban Bhattacharya, will recall immediately the visually arresting sight of red and blue flags raised, waved and carried by thousands of citizens, and the soaring chants of a coming Left-Ambedkarite revolution that rang out on the streets, in the squares and on university campuses for the first three months of 2016.

The point to note is that the author mentions the arrest and release of three JNU students in the context of a "coming Left-Ambedkarite revolution" that apparently started with the dalit student Rohith Vemula's suicide in Hyderabad in January. The remark gives a distinct impression that the JNU students were arrested for their involvement in widespread protests on Vemula's suicide.

The author is not alone. Many writers and speakers have so depicted these events. For example, Kanhaiya Kumar, the president of the JNU student's union who was arrested along with two others, repeatedly asserted after his release that the JNU students were "targeted" by the government for protesting on Vemula's suicide and for sustained agitation—the occupy UGC movement—on the withdrawal of non-Net fellowships by the UGC. While making fiery speeches in the parliament, Mr. Sitaram Yechury, on more than one occasion, directly linked the arrest of the students with Vemula's suicide to illustrate the government's repressive policies towards the student community.

Neither the *Hindu* piece under discussion nor Kanhaiya Kumar nor Sitaram Yechury in parliament ever mentioned Geelani's name while commenting on the arrest of JNU students. It was interesting to observe the leader of a communist party, wedded to the ideas of justice and equality, maintaining a deafening silence on the appalling arrest of a university teacher while loudly protesting the arrest of JNU students for exactly the same 'crime'.

Geelani's case was also systematically ignored in the dozens of 'teach-in' lectures in the JNU campus that continued for many weeks apparently as a form of protest against the arrests of students. The lectures were organized in the evenings in the open area in front of the JNU administration block. The area was temporarily designated 'freedom square'. The topics discussed in these lectures included concepts of nationalism, theory of Aryan invasion, Gandhi on Swaraj, Tagore on humanism, Ambedkar's vision of an inclusive

India, lessons from Nehru's Discovery of India, contribution of Bhagat Singh and others in the Indian freedom movement, history of fascism in Europe, linguistic diversity of India, history of the Hindu right, neoliberal world order, political economy of communalism, feminism and the caste system, and much else. There was much fanfare, radical chants, and clarion call from the freedom square to change the world. It reminded us of the legendary sixties, at Berkeley and San Francisco.

The dark Kashmir issue was mentioned exactly once, and the spirited speaker was hounded for her 'aberration' for weeks; the case of Afzal Guru was not mentioned at all to my knowledge.

It is also pertinent to note that the Delhi University Teacher's Association (DUTA), which is currently dominated by the Congress-Left forces, promptly issued a strong letter of protest after the arrest of the JNU student, Kanhaiya Kumar. S. A. R Geelani, a DUTA member, was arrested four days after Kumar. DUTA maintained a studied silence on the arrest of its own member for nearly a month before it issued a note of protest following persistent petitions from groups of DU teachers. Significantly, the JNU teacher's association, JNUTA, and JNU student association, JNUSU, issued statement after statement protesting the arrest of JNU students; they never mentioned the arrest of Geelani.

Except for a small group of students in JNU, a handful of democratic rights activists, and some teachers of Delhi University, Geelani's arrest was essentially ignored. It is difficult to miss the elaborate planning and careful management of the protests to keep the case of Geelani unmentioned and separate from those of JNU students. One report suggested that, despite demands from a small group of students, the executive body of JNUSU deliberately decided not to shout slogans for Geelani. The handful of brave students went on to carry a few posters and shout occasional slogans for Geelani anyway, especially during the third rally. The main 'soaring' chants, however, maintained systematic silence on Kashmir, Afzal, and Geelani. Interestingly, much of the mainstream media obeyed the restrictions.

Why did the otherwise strongly motivated left-liberal sections of the intelligentsia in Delhi prefer silence on Kashmir, Afzal Guru, and Geelani? Earlier, we asked why did the regime crack down severely on events commemorating Afzal Guru. We will see that the answer to the two questions is virtually the same, in effect.

Since the present government assumed power nearly two years ago, it has been clear that, armed with a formal majority in Parliament, its aim is an authoritarian government embedded in a strong state. There is no space here to elaborate on the complex, evolving topic. The basic reason is that this regime has been catapulted to power to serve an inherently unpopular economic agenda. To serve the interests of domestic big business, rich Indians abroad, and imperialist powers, the regime will be compelled to further escalate the existing obscene concentration of wealth and the atrocious inequality thereof. In a formal democratic order, this can only be done by dividing and effectively

disenfranchising vast sections of people to prevent popular revolt. Hence the need for a strong state under the supreme command of one chosen individual.

The Home Minister of India, Rajnath Singh, and the president of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party, Amit Shah, gave rather definitive indication of the intentions of the regime in public remarks around the events of 9th February. In one public address, Singh said,

Anti-national activities and forces won't be tolerated. Anyone raising anti-India slogan or questioning India's integrity won't be spared. Government will take tough measures.

It is well-known that, in the context of a formal democracy, authoritarian regimes initially introduce their project with the widest available public approval. As this government has already seen, overtly divisive communal and fundamentalist actions have a tendency to backfire.

Kashmir and Afzal Guru

In this context, the deeply problematic Kashmir issue, especially when it is raised in connection with terrorism, offers a unique opportunity to the suggested authoritarian project. In fact, the opportunity is maximized when the situation in 'terrorist-infested' Kashmir can be projected as an attack on the sovereignty and the constitutional framework of India. The attack on the Indian parliament and the subsequent conviction of Mohammad Afzal Guru as the sole surviving 'terrorist' accomplished that job for the entire 'nationalist' right wing sections of the population, especially the Sangh parivar. Therefore, it is no wonder that, on every December 13 (the day the parliament was attacked), the RSS and BJP used to raise the pitch demanding the execution of Afzal Guru. It is ironical though that it is the second UPA government that finally hanged Afzal just months before the general elections of 2014. Such was the importance of Afzal Guru for Indian electoral democracy.

The other, dissident side of the story is that, ever since the trial on the parliament attack case began, democratic opposition to the entire legal process kept growing. By the time Guru was hanged and buried inside the Tihar jail, a considerable dissident literature was widely available. In a powerful review of this literature, along with his own careful reading of the case, the eminent historian and legal expert A. G. Noorani wrote (Why Afzal Guru Matters, Frontline, May 17, 2013),

The execution was perpetrated for blatantly electoral ends. But the ferocity of the reaction in Kashmir shocked its perpetrators in the government and others in New Delhi who had egged it on, within and outside the Congress. It revealed the complete disconnect between the people of Kashmir and their rulers in New Delhi as well as the chasm between the brave human rights activists who pleaded for Afzal Guru's release and the smug ignorant ones who justified the execution, ironically in the name of the rule of law... The entire case must be read in this context and in the historical context of great miscarriages of justice...

This explains why Afzal Guru's death aroused the wrath it did. Unlike Maqbool Butt, he was not a *symbol*. He *personified* the lot of his people. They suffer at the hands of the very forces and the agencies as he did; until he was put to death. If acquitted, he would have spoken freely. He knew too much. The man had to be killed. It was a frame-up like the famous Birmingham Six and the Guildford Four. Only this time, there was no judicial redress.

Afzal's hanging signaled a disturbing divide in the visible, articulate, non-subaltern public domain. On the one hand, there is the vast 'nationalist' crowd for whom Afzal was an enemy of the state and his execution was a patriotic action. On the other, there is the curious mix of a very small group of 'brave human rights activists' and the miserable millions in the valley for whom Afzal's hanging 'personified the lot of his people' and signaled the collapse of real democratic order. The small but determined meetings of remembrance that have been taking place every year since 9 February 2013—mostly in Kashmir but elsewhere in the country as well—symbolized this divide.

It is reasonable to assume that the right-wing authoritarian regime currently in power is very aware of this divide. It knows that commemoration of Afzal's hanging is vastly unpopular with the sections of the population that fill the audience of the mainstream media. So, by taking 'tough measures' on these ceremonies, the regime can safely enforce its authority with popular approval while breaking the back of the dissident movement around Kashmir. The project is central to the communal agenda of the Sangh since an attack on the independent identity of Kashmir is ipso facto an attack on Islam in the jaundiced eyes of the parivar. The great opportunity is that, to emphasize, *this* communal task can be pursued with popular patriotic approval.

In fact, there was a significant precedence to this plan last year, also in JNU. Apparently, a small group of students invited none other than S.A.R Geelani himself to address a commemorative meeting on Afzal on 9 February 2015. To remind, along with Afzal, Geelani and two others were also charged with participation in the attack on the parliament. The notorious POTA court sentenced Geelani, Afzal and one other to death. After spending over a year in the death row, Geelani was finally released after the High Court acquitted him of all charges. Needless to say, Geelani was brutally tortured during the interrogation stage.

Thus, after Afzal's death, Dr. Geelani has emerged as the 'bearer' of the dark image comprising Kashmir, azadi, Islam, terrorism, and the attack on the parliament. That meeting last year was also attacked by a rival student group in JNU. We may presume that proper instructions were conveyed in advance this year for the concerned parties to take appropriate action. The threat of tough measures emanating from the highest authorities signaled the determination of the regime to make full use of the opportunity.

If the commemoration of the death of a 'terrorist convict' is an opportunity for the right-wing regime, it is a difficult problem for the mainstream left-liberal opposition. The mainstream left did not cover itself with glory during the entire political process leading to conviction and execution of Afzal Guru and the subsequent 'ferocity of the reaction in

Kashmir.’ To my knowledge, with notable individual exceptions, the mainstream left as a whole never gave any definite support either to the Kashmiri freedom struggle or to protest on the ‘great miscarriage of justice’ regarding Afzal Guru. This is because, within a statist framework, each of these causes tests the idea of democratic dissent at the extremities of the framework. These causes challenge the otherwise progressive left to face two sharp issues:

- (a) Do the people of Kashmir have a right to self-determination even if the Indian parliament had unanimously resolved in favour of inclusion of Kashmir within the union of India?
- (b) Is it legitimate to protest the judgment of the Supreme Court of India after all legal avenues have been duly exhausted and the President of India had given his seal of approval?

The dilemma is glaring. While affirmative answers to these questions appear to challenge the supremacy of the parliament and the Apex Court, negative answers appear to curtail the fundamental right of democratic dissent. Dilemmas often induce silence. The strategic statist silence worked well as long as Kashmir remained a distant problem on the other side of the Himalayas.

Masked Outsiders

Unfortunately, the Himalayan barrier was seriously breached with the arrest of the JNU students, especially that of the president of the student union who happened to be affiliated with the mainstream left. The situation was grave for the leftist teachers of JNU who were faced with the difficult task of adhering to the party-line on Kashmir while finding convincing arguments to defend their students in the public domain. Since the students were charged with ‘anti-national’ activities around the issue of Kashmir, it was difficult to continue to maintain silence on Kashmir.

The simultaneous arrest of Dr. Geelani on the same charges just escalated the problem for the mainstream left. As noted, Geelani is very much the face of Kashmir; he cannot be defended without sharing his cause. If Geelani’s case was placed in the same political package with the students, the pernicious cause of Kashmir would have infected the task of defending the students as well. As one well-known teacher activist of Delhi told me frankly, “If we now get involved with Geelani’s struggles, we will lose all our other battles.”

The solution to this rather turbulent problem was to, first, delink Geelani from the students by simply sidelining Geelani’s case in an otherwise charged public discourse. Second, a very impressive campaign was launched not to highlight injustice in Kashmir and people’s democratic right to protest about it, but to convert the incidental factors of students and university education as the central issues. The simmering protests on Rohit Vemula’s suicide in the University of Hyderabad were linked up with the arrest of JNU students to reach the wider perspective on university education. Third, once the “left-Ambedkarite” package was carefully formulated as the real issue regarding the arrest of

the students, the ‘party-line’ was restored by separating the JNU students from direct ‘anti-national’ engagement with Kashmir.

Opinion about the ‘anti-national’ character of the event of 9 February varied. For the hardliners, the very meeting to commemorate Afzal was ‘anti-national’ and severe judicial punishment was called for. Others, mostly from the mainstream left-liberal forces, agreed that the meeting was wrong and distasteful, but it did not violate any law of the land. However, *everybody without exception* agreed that the two specific slogans about dismemberment and destruction of India were definitely ‘anti-national’ and some form of punishment was in order. With this universal agreement on the ‘nationalist’ limits of dissent, the core authoritarian project of the regime found full endorsement. In effect, the regime made sure that, outside the valley, people will find it difficult to hold memorial meetings on Afzal in public.

Even the leaders of the otherwise vigorous student movement agreed with the basic dictat of the regime. Kanhaiya Kumar, the president of JNUSU said:

We are appalled at the way the entire incident is being used to malign JNU students. At the outset, we want to condemn the undemocratic slogans that were raised by some people on that day. It is important to note that the slogans were not raised by members of Left organisations or JNU students.

Elsewhere, Kumar stated that what happened on 9 February was most objectionable warranting judicial action (“*karwai honi chahiye*”). JNUSU vice-president Shehla Rashid said,

We condemn the undemocratic slogans that were raised by some people on that day. In fact, when the sloganeering had been taking place, it was the Left-progressive organisations and students, including JNUSU office-bearers, who asked the organisers to stop the slogans, which were regressive.

The JNU community thus cannot be held responsible for the ‘undemocratic slogans’ heard on that day.

At last thus the “Left-progressive” organisations found their fall guy. The universally condemnable slogans were *not* given by anyone from JNU; they were given by ‘outsiders’. With timely help from the media, some videos of 9 February surfaced, showing several people covering their faces while shouting slogans. The insinuation is difficult to miss: *these* were the outsiders shouting *those* condemnable undemocratic slogans. As noted, the matter is under judicial review. Without judging the veracity of the suggestion, I will just hold on to it to proceed with the political argument.

Suppose, as darkly suggested in a number of reports on the incident, that these ‘outsiders’ were students from Kashmir affiliated to various institutions in Delhi. By designating them as ‘outsiders’, the JNU community extricated itself from the problem of identifying with their cause; in effect, the community turned its back on their judicial destiny. The

entire weight of an increasingly authoritarian regime is to be borne by a dozen or so young Kashmiris wearing masks and chanting furious slogans, hoping someone will listen. Do we know who they are? Why do they need to put on masks in free, democratic India? What is their compulsion for screaming those disturbing slogans and risking their lives in the process?

It is reasonable to assume that they belong to the current generation of Kashmiris who have spent their entire lives amidst catastrophic violence in which the civilian death-toll is nearing 95,000 in three decades of gut-wrenching conflict. They have heard about, if not actually witnessed, rape and murder of friends and relations on a regular basis as over half a million soldiers of the Indian union, armed with AFSPA, ransack their lives. They are witness to unmarked mass graves where erstwhile ‘missing persons’ found their place. They are surrounded by thousands of women and children undergoing psychological collapse. They have surely taken part since childhood in endless protests, strikes, shut downs, and processions as another atrocity occurred somewhere in the neighbourhood. Perhaps they know of friends barely out of their teens who compulsively joined the ranks of militancy knowing full well that, by now, the ‘shelf-life’ of a militant is a year at most. Perhaps they have carried the bullet-ridden bodies of their friends while marching in shivering cold with hundreds of others, weeping and screaming at the marauding Indian state. On the other side of the Himalayas.

On 9 February, they assembled again to commemorate the memory of a fellow Kashmiri who “personified the lot of his people.” They congregate because “they suffer at the hands of the very forces and the agencies as he did; until he was put to death.” With the instinctive alertness of a prey, they put on masks as they always do in Kashmir, before they screamed again cursing the state that has ruined their land. On this solemn occasion though they had friends from this side of the Himalayas, a tiny group of brave idealistic students who rallied in solidarity. Hand in hand, they chanted the song of hope and freedom.

The hope was short-lived as the predatory state struck. After the confusion partially cleared, the Kashmiris suddenly realized that no one from democratic India was holding their hands anymore. As if that was not enough, they have now been marked, isolated, and abandoned to the wolves so that the preparations for a Left-Ambedkarite revolution can proceed unhindered in multiple colours.

Postscript

It is another matter that the vicissitudes of electoral politics in Kashmir has its own compulsions that, for now, might have saved these masked people shouting ‘undemocratic slogans’ from further harm, notwithstanding the patriotic demand for punishment by democratic India.

Nirmalangshu Mukherji