

Calcutta Notebook

DRC

The engineering students of Jadavpur University boycotted their semester examinations, which began on November 19. The final year students were exempt. The triggering issue was police atrocity within the campus.

The story started with the visit of Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharya to the Jadavpur campus on November 9 to inaugurate an auditorium, an unnecessary exercise, one would say, for a Chief Minister, unless it is viewed as part of the “turning around” drama being enacted by the present incumbent, all over the state and now here in his own constituency, in which case it makes sense as a deliberate provocation, Jadavpur University being well known as a bastion of students opposed to the major ruling party. Black flags were shown and slogans shouted about the “butcher of Nandigram” till the Chief Minister left.

It is alleged that then a woman constable had her hair pulled by girl students in response to some derogatory remark. The women constables, the other side alleges, in retaliation pulled the hair of the girls, and the policemen started a lathicharge in tandem with supporters of the major ruling party, drawn from the employees, a familiar scenario in this state. Some boys had to be hospitalized and a FIR was filed against 35 boys.

Responding to provocation by police personnel is never wise, and pulling the hair of a constable, man or woman, cannot be applauded, although the media hype over the hair-pulling reminds one of the ill-disguised glee of the same media in reporting how police drag women demonstrators along the main road by the hair – with matching photographs. But, the hair-pulling, in this case, was a minor incident, almost a farce, and the revengeful attack by policemen exhibiting heroics, at the cost of unarmed young people, absolutely uncalled for. The policemen used too much force, and that, too, unnecessarily, but such behaviour with the taxpayers and their children has been encouraged by the Left Front government and its Home Minister.

The students approached the Vice-Chancellor with three main demands:

1. The university authorities must apologise publicly for setting the stage for the lathi-charge and must have the FIR against students withdrawn.
2. The CPI(M) supporters who beat up students must be publicly reprimanded and punished.
3. The university must take responsibility for the treatment of injured students.

The VC and the Registrar made it clear that there was no question of an apology.

FETSU, the engineering students’ union, called a boycott of the examinations to realize their demands. It was the most successful boycott in the turbulent history of the University, there being zero attendance to date, that is, on November 19, 20 and 22.

The University is still in threatening mode, without an iota of sympathy for the victims of the lathi charge, and a section of the press tries the usual diversionary manouevres, charging the FETSU chairman and secretary of sitting for the examinations themselves, obfuscating the fact that they were final year students and, so, exempted from the boycott.

The incident brings to the fore again the undesirability of inviting the police into the campus. The VC has made quite clear where lies his allegiance, and, no doubt, views the police as “our police”. But, one expects teachers to be more vocal on this greater issue. It may be asked: how will the security of visiting dignitaries be ensured without guards? The answer is simple. Obama or Buddhadeb, you won't be welcome if you bring rifles.

Actually, the Jadavpur authorities have been curtailing the freedom of their students for quite some time. A restrictive code of conduct has been prepared. Students are forbidden to sit even in the gardens.

Finally, the JU authorities have shown their credentials by installing CCTVs.

Jeremy Bentham would be ecstatic. His idea of the PanOpticon, a tower from which every room can be watched, while no room can see the watchers or the inmates of any other room is materializing in the classier English medium schools of Kolkata, and now in a real, flesh and blood University. Prisons, hospitals and other houses for monitoring and correcting 'deviant' functioning have long become PanOpticons. Michel Foucault saw the whole of society as a huge PanOpticon, incorporating Bentham's notion of power being most effective when its presence is known but never seen. Foucault's nightmare is Jadavpur's dream. Of the types of 'deviant' practices targeted, there is the organization of meetings without vice-chancellorial consent, inviting visitors to the campus without clearing their names with the authorities (no more Gillanis!), and 'undesirable conduct on the campus', presumably holding hands.

Another charge against FETSU and other students' organizations is their opposition to CCTV installation. More power to their elbows.

STOP PRESS : Kudos to the Progressive Students' Union, students' wing of the RSP, a partner in the Left Front, for their condemnation of the lathi charge, following Buddhadeb's visit to the JU, and their support for the boycott of semester examinations. □□□