

Interview with Aishe Ghosh, President of the Jawaharlal Nehru University Students' Union (JNUSU)



Aishe Ghosh raising slogans at the students-youth protest at Mandi House, Delhi, against the central farm laws on 03/02/21. Picture Credits: Samim Asgor Ali.

The Indian students' movement has a legacy of being in the forefront of many struggles in the country from the time of the freedom struggle onwards. The students' movement in Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi is a fine example of this legacy. Elections to the JNU Students' Union (JNUSU) have been the cynosure of many eyes across the country, with the fact that the elections are wholly and meticulously conducted by students themselves with little or no intervention from the administration giving it the sense of a democratic process at its finest. The Presidential Debate in the run-up to the JNUSU Elections, where the

candidates to the post of President debate issues ranging from university fees and facilities to national and international politics have regularly attracted media coverage.

Over the years, there have been many attacks on the student's movement in JNU. Efforts from the administration, backed by the government, to stifle and subdue the voice and strength of the students' movement have been many. These attacks have increased manifold since the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) assumed power at the centre.

When Aishe Ghosh, representing the major left student organisations of the campus, became the JNUSU president in 2019, she did so by winning the elections with a thumping majority over the nearest rival candidate from the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), the students' wing of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). This naturally invited the wrath of the right-wing forces in power at the centre as well as that of the university administration. There were various attempts to crack down on students who opposed the imposition of arbitrary rules, dilution of existing progressive policies that helped underprivileged students, and increase in the burden of hostel fees on the students.

On 5 January 2020, masked thugs – allegedly belonging to the RSS and BJP – barged into the JNU campus, and using iron rods and sticks, they brutally beat up students who were holding a peaceful protest against fee hikes in the university. JNUSU president Aishe Ghosh and her fellow students confronted the assailants fearlessly. While the police indulgently looked on, the thugs went on a rampage across the campus chasing the protestors, even barging into women's hostels. Aishe sustained head injuries that required several stitches. The images of the attack, splashed in the media, triggered massive outrage, with the courage and determination shown by this seemingly frail student leader and her fellow activists attracting the attention of the youth across the country.

In the following interview, Aishe Ghosh speaks to Satarupa Chakraborty on the ideas and vision that drew her to the students' movement, and on her journey from being a young student from West Bengal studying in Delhi University to being a leader of the JNU students' movement during a period of acute crisis in the campus.

How did you become a part of the students' movement? What drew you to student politics?

I am from Durgapur in West Bengal. I grew up in a place where I witnessed left politics from my childhood onwards. My father was sympathetic to left politics, and I used to talk to him about politics and government policies that affected our lives. Unions played a major role in Durgapur, so I got to see them in action. This provided the backdrop to my own direct experience with unions and political activity.

I came to Delhi to study at Daulat Ram College. There, I understood what it meant to have a union and the importance of unionisation for students. Things that appear to be unrelated to politics – such as fees, the syllabi of our courses, and our accommodation – began to appear to me as indeed very political. How much students must pay to study is not an apolitical decision; it rests on the values of the government. In a capitalist society, education becomes a commodity; but in a truly democratic society, education should be free. Even the question of accommodation is a political matter. Lack of concern for the living conditions of students shows disregard, by the government and by the college administration, for the well-being of students. In private colleges, where education is fully commodified, students are treated like consumers, and education is a

commodity that is bought by the highest paying consumers. Isn't the government complicit in this commodification when it starts withdrawing from the task of providing education?

If everything is determined by politics, I learned, my participation in politics becomes essential. It is in the realm of politics that issues such as fees and living conditions, the syllabus and the orientation of study are debated. I joined politics to take my views forward, and to work to make things better.

Unions give their members a platform to raise their voices. We have found in our experience that if students want to raise issues that trouble them, there is no substitute for a students' union. The same goes for workers, who need workers' unions, and for teachers, who need teachers' unions. Each section has its own set of issues, its own demands. These unions are places where students, workers, and teachers raise their issues, which are then – in discussion – further developed. It is important that students' unions support teachers' demands, and that teachers' unions support student demands. This solidarity is important.

You have been a student at both Delhi University and at Jawaharlal Nehru University. What has been your experience of student politics in both these universities, and how do they differ?

My college in Delhi University – Daulat Ram College – was not affiliated to the Delhi University Students' Union (DUSU). But I did experience the work of the DUSU in colleges affiliated to it. DUSU has been mostly dominated by right wing student organisations, such as the National Students' Union of India (NSUI) and the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP). Students did not see their representatives, nor did the representatives hear from the students – except during the period of the election campaign. During elections, right-wing student organisations would come to us to distribute chocolates or to give us treats from Domino's Pizza or Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC). This was to buy votes. Their interest was to win elections, not to work for the students.

In our college, there was an incident when the ceiling fell. This should have provoked general outrage, since it could have seriously hurt the students. When we raised this issue in a protest, we were immediately branded as 'Leftists'. A similar process took place when we protested the sudden rise of our annual fees from Rs. 5,000 to Rs. 16,000. These escalating fees affect not only undergraduates but also masters' students, who – in some colleges – have to pay as much as Rs. 30,000. There is no uniformity in the fee structure. There is also no mechanism to hear the grievances of students when these fees are arbitrarily raised. Even these basic demands – for better living conditions and for reasonable fees – evoked from the right-wing student organisations and the administration the idea that we are somehow dangerous students. The union did not come to ask us about our problems, nor did they lead any protests. It was the college students who protested against administrative policy, not the union led by a right-wing student's organisation. Their entire focus is on winning elections, by hook or by crook.

Things were very different in JNU. I got there in 2016. The Jawaharlal Nehru University Student's Union had a totally different culture. It is not merely a vehicle for students to win elections and then have ambitions for higher office. The point of the JNUSU is to work for the good of the students, from minor to major issues. The JNUSU gets involved not only to fight fee hikes, but also in issues such a defective tap in a bathroom. Each of these issues must be addressed by the union because each of them impacts students. The union has to make it possible for students to study without hindrance – if you cannot bathe or you cannot afford to finish your degree, you are being adversely impacted by administrative inaction (in the case of the tap) or action (in the case of the fees).

One of the key problems in any university campus is safety, particularly for women students. If I feel uncomfortable going about my business on campus at night, and if I face any sexist behaviour, I have always felt that it was my right to approach any office-bearers of the union. Of course, the Left office-bearers are more sympathetic because they have a greater commitment to gender equality.

The sharp contrast between the two streams of politics – the right and the left – can be seen in Delhi University and in Jawaharlal Nehru University, as well as in universities across India. In JNU, thanks to the left culture of politics, the student organisations of the left work amongst the students and raise student demands before the administration. In Delhi University, on the other hand, right-wing student organisations whose leaders are only interested in their individual careers are dominant.

You mention the left culture of politics in JNU. How significant is left culture in shaping campus life in JNU?

Democracy is about people. Democratic institutions must be able to represent the voices of all people. For that, a democratic culture is necessary, a culture of debating, listening, courteousness and conviviality. For us, a university must be a place to incubate the culture of democracy. That is what the history of JNUSU has been – to model a form of democracy for a university campus. The JNUSU sees all those who live and work in the campus – the students, the teachers, the non-teaching staff, the workers, the families of the teachers – as ‘citizens’ of the university.

The democratic institutions in JNU shape the character of the university. We have a student-run Election Committee to conduct our students’ union elections. This makes an enormous difference to our confidence in our election process. This year [2019], the administration interfered with our elections – it was a clear-cut attempt to shape the outcome of the elections. But despite pressures and harassment, our Election Committee stood firm and did not surrender to the administration. They upheld the student mandate. This demonstrates to the students that our democratic institutions should be protected, and that they are the backbone of our campus democracy.

The culture of JNU includes the *dhaba* culture. *Dhabas* are roadside teashops, and the *dhabas* in JNU are spaces where students – and others – sit and talk, even through the night. Here we discuss everything – from our intellectual lives to our student lives to our political world. Sometimes even the teachers join us. Ideology of course plays a role in our discussions, but this *dhaba* culture is very open to all views. It is like the Greek *agora*: a meeting place of minds to learn from each other and to push each other in a progressive direction. Democracy needs such places of interaction. JNU also has the poster and *parcha* (leaflet) culture, where our different student organisations put out our competing views on the walls and in leaflets to educate other students about the issues before us. If you don’t have something like the poster and *parcha* culture, you do not have a way for students to transmit their ideas to each other. These posters and *parchas* are the newspapers of an Indian university campus. If you can’t sit and talk or if you can’t distribute a *parcha*, you cannot pretend to have a democratic culture.

Thanks to the now over four-decade efforts of the JNUSU, we had a healthy culture on campus where students had the space to discuss things with each other, and to disagree with our teachers too. Part of this culture was the creation and strengthening of important student institutions. One of them is General Body Meetings, where everyone can come and make their arguments, criticise the elected union representatives, and debate and discuss the issues of the day. This sort of General Body Meeting strengthens the union. It

strengthens democracy. It prevents the union from becoming a bureaucratic group that merely works with the administration. We represent the students, so the students must have the right to be part of our deliberations.

One of the most important institutions in our campus was the Gender Sensitisation Committee Against Sexual Harassment (GSCASH), which had among their members student representatives, teachers' representatives, and individuals from outside who are experienced in assisting women in cases of sexual harassment. As a student at Delhi University, I used to feel unsafe while walking on the campus roads after 6 pm. This was despite the various top-down attempts by the college through curfews and so on to create a safe environment. At JNU, however, I never had to think of my safety, even if I were on the roads at midnight. The existence of GSCASH made me feel secure that the students had either committed themselves to a non-sexist campus or that GSCASH would help students who were not prepared to make such a commitment. GSCASH ran sensitisation programmes to help students understand how to make the campus non-sexist. From my very first weeks at JNU, I felt that a sense of security prevailed because the students and teachers – through our own institutions such as GSCASH – worked to create a campus environment that did not allow anti-social behaviour against women.

All of a sudden, the present university administration decided to replace GSCASH with a new system – the Internal Complaints Committee (ICC). This Committee is not democratically run, but administration-run, and as a consequence of ICC not being part of the democratic culture of the university, there has been a deterioration of faith in the institution and a weakening of democracy in our campus. No woman feels comfortable to go and register a complaint with the ICC because of the way that the administration-run body has functioned. There was a case of sexual harassment by a faculty member. Eight complaints against him were filed with the ICC during March 2018. The courts said that he cannot enter the laboratory, and that the university must find new supervisors for the students who registered the complaint. But the ICC shielded the faculty member. This is a good example of the slow demise of the democratic culture in the campus. When we had GSCASH, we felt we could file complaints and that the student representatives would make sure to address them in a collegial manner. Now there is no-one taking the students seriously, and the students have no faith in the newly formed administration-run institution. This is one important example of why we need to safeguard these precious institutions and work to strengthen the democratic culture of our universities.



JNUSU's march to Save Public Education on 12/08/20; Picture Credits- unknown

One of the points you raised in the beginning is the issue of fees. As the JNUSU president you led the anti-fee hike movement in JNU, which culminated in the violent attack against you and other protesting students on 5 January 2020. Could you tell us why you believe that the issue of fees is so significant?

The issue of fees is not only restricted to India. There have been protests from Chile to South Africa. In fact, in South Africa a few years ago, there were protests known as 'Fees Must Fall'. Students were saying that they could not remain students if the fees were raised. Education, health care, and the care of the elderly are important indicators of the overall culture of a society. To make them unaffordable to large sections of society is to undermine our commitment to basic values of decency and progressiveness.

Students in India have long demanded an affordable fee structure so that pursuing higher education is not just the dream of the few, but that it can become a reality for the many. Most of us who do not come from affluent backgrounds cannot afford to pay high fees to get our advanced degrees. JNU's fee structure – with a two eighty-three-rupee fee – provides a model. This modest fee is not only for the tuition, but it pays for a range of hostel and library facilities as well as other essential parts of student life. This affordable fee is one of the main reasons why JNU attracts students from diverse backgrounds including from marginal and vulnerable sections, and why the composition of students in the university is not confined to the upper class

that can afford high fees. To get a PhD degree from an internationally renowned university without burdening our parents is possible for most students of JNU because of the affordable fee structure.

Alongside the affordable fee structure are stipends and other research fellowships that are important to students. To draw in students from different – particularly marginalised – backgrounds should not be seen as a gift to such students. It must be seen as an attempt to create a richer democracy in our society. When people from marginalised backgrounds get access to education, they articulate the problems of discrimination that they face.

When the JNU administration changed existing rules and arrogated to itself the right to arbitrarily increase fees without consulting the students' or teachers' bodies, we in the JNUSU initiated the anti-fee hike movement. The movement was to ensure that higher education stays affordable to the many students who come from diverse backgrounds to the campus. It was to ensure that the campus stays representative of the diversity of the country, unlike those institutions with very high fees.

The government is trying to destroy the affordable fee structure and the stipends as part of an overall neo-liberal attack on social spending. The government wants to turn education into a commodity. To buy and sell education is to ignore the rich culture of democracy created on our campuses. This culture of democracy is the JNU model. We have to fight to assert our right to an education, which includes this culture of democracy.

How do you view the present government's attitude towards scientific enquiry and research?

Logical reasoning and scientific temper have been severely attacked by the BJP government. They want to replace these approaches to thinking with falsehoods, with irrationality, and with myths. There are open attempts to replace history with mythology. This began decades ago with the debate around Babri Masjid, the 16th century mosque in Ayodhya, which the majoritarian communal right-wing claimed was built on an ancient temple. Facts were irrelevant. The point was to shout loudly and make your scream into reality.

Ministers in the current government have been making ludicrous remarks about medicine, such as 'if you put your hand on a cow, you will be cured from cancer', or 'cow urine can cure most diseases'. It is perfectly legitimate to study the cow for the purpose of science, but this is not the purpose of the government of India's Ministry of Ayurveda, Yoga and Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha and Homeopathy (AYUSH), whose minister – Ashwini Kumar Choubey – believes cow urine can cure everything. His conclusions come before any studies. This is one more example of the growth of unreason, and it demeans the legitimate work of scientists who are working on cures for ailments of all kinds. This is a serious problem. It is part of the larger weakening of legitimate scientific research. Those who do scientific research in India often do not have laboratories and funds for their experiments. Last year, scientists went out to protest this policy of starving them of funds. Meanwhile a government minister mocked mathematics and gravity. This is their attitude to the essential work of science and scientific inquiry. They have an anti-science attitude.

The BJP government sees research as a threat. Part of this threat is to its own ideology. Over the years, serious social science research has uncovered, for example, the history and agenda of the BJP's parent organisation: the fascist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). This research has shown that the RSS had no significant role in the freedom struggle, that it had strong ties to Italian fascist movements, and that it has been party to terrible anti-social riots for its almost hundred-year existence. If more research is done on the RSS, more will be uncovered. The government prefers a mythology of the RSS than a history; it can control

the former, while the latter can expose it. Starving social science and history and feeding mythological studies gives this government an advantage in the battle of ideas.

I got a fellowship of Rs. 5000 per month to pursue my M. Phil. My hostel bill came to around Rs. 3000 per month. This left me with Rs. 2000. This has to include my expenditure for research. Not a single academic journal specific to my research is available at the university library. How is a student supposed to conduct research when neither the library has the basic materials, nor does the fellowship allow her to buy them with such a meagre amount of money? This is JNU, one of the most renowned universities in India. The situation is worse elsewhere.

This government – it seems – has specially targeted JNU. Why do you think this vicious targeting on JNU is launched?

The JNU students' movement always fought for student issues, but never confined itself to student issues alone. We raise our voices against a range of oppression and exploitation, and thereby question those in power. Between 1975 and 1977, when the Indian government declared an Emergency and suspended fundamental rights provided by the Indian Constitution, JNU students courageously fought for civil liberties, even as the police arrested students and tried to crush dissent. The students spoke for millions in the country during that period. This is a culture that has been maintained on the JNU campus.

Over the tenure of this government, we have seen many protests against the rise of intolerance, and the brutal use of the state machinery to crush dissent. The students' movement of JNU has stood with those who have been attacked by the BJP, whether it be Dalits (oppressed castes) or the people of Kashmir. Those who are leading the present government knows that JNU is not just a campus, but it is also one of the places of resistance to their rule. The BJP government has therefore tried to repress our voices. In 2016, a 'Shut Down JNU' campaign was launched to demoralise and sabotage us. What kind of issues were we raising at that time which so irked the BJP and its followers? We had taken up the question of research fellowships, which had been scrapped. We believed it was a good thing to have fellowships for research. Apparently, the government did not agree. We took up the case of the 'institutional murder' of Rohith Vemula, a student at Hyderabad Central University who died because of intolerance to him as a student from an oppressed caste background and because of the slow death of institutional support for students. Once more, it appeared as if the government was indifferent to the suffering of students like Rohith.

Rather than take up these basic issues and have a discussion around them, the RSS and BJP branded JNU as an 'anti-national' institution. The phrase anti-national is chilling. It suggests that any dissent – *even over research fellowships* – can be branded as treason, and those who raise these issues are marked for various kinds of retaliation, including violence. This is the very opposite of the spirit of democracy. JNU's culture is a culture of democracy. This is what the government found intolerable.

What led to the 5 January 2020 physical attack on you and on other students? What was the role of the administration and the Delhi police in the rampage?

Before I talk about the attack on this specific day, I want to go on record on how we have been treated throughout our anti-fee hike movement. Our peaceful long marches outside the university were brutally attacked by the Delhi Police, which works directly under the central government's Home Ministry. The administration has initiated actions against us without any preliminary enquiries. In fact, some students

received hostel eviction notices. All these things were happening simultaneously as the state and the administration tried repeatedly to break our movement. When those attacks did not succeed, ABVP members tried to divide the students. Even then the ABVP could not mobilise enough students in favour of the fee hike, after which they started physical scuffles with the protesting students and the union members who were leading the anti-fee hike strikes. On 5 January 2020, masked RSS workers from outside the campus attacked JNU students. It was an orchestrated attack by the members of ABVP-JNU and the RSS supporters among JNU teachers. After the attack, we gathered photographic and other evidence and exposed the role of ABVP leaders and that of RSS supporters among teachers (who also hold administrative positions) in organising the mob attack on JNU students.

The intention behind these attacks was two-fold: (a) to generate fear among student activists, and (b) to change the discourse from fee hikes to violence. The ruling party-backed mainstream media immediately started broadcasting how the violence happened on a campus with left-wing organisational leadership, even though in truth the perpetrators of the violence were members of right-wing organisations.

The violence could not have happened without the support of the administration and the Delhi Police. In fact, it was a well-coordinated strategy. A huge group of masked men were allowed to enter the campus with iron rods, hammers, and other weapons, and without security guards to stop them at the gates. Ironically, I had repeatedly asked the police officials for their intervention when the situation on the campus was getting tense. But they did nothing. Moreover, the masked goons were given full protection by the police as they were leaving the campus in a rally celebrating their victory. Can all this happen without orders from top officials and the university authorities?

How has this attack impacted you as a person?

After the beating (they beat me with iron rods), when I was in the hospital severely injured, I thought that I would die. Since then, I have received many dangerous threats and much abuse.

I was definitely traumatised by these acts. However, I feel I am not alone in this fight. Today, I have a voice that I must use to amplify the voices of all students. There is now more public recognition of what I have been saying. Now more people want to hear my voice. This gives me much strength and courage. I feel privileged by the extent of solidarity I have received because of the attack on me. I am aware that this is because I am the president of the JNU Students' Union, and because JNU is in Delhi. There are many such attacks, often more brutal, which are happening in other parts of the country every day. People are getting killed. The media pays no attention to them; nor does our society. If people in those struggles have the courage to continue to fight despite the trauma inflicted on them, then I too can continue the fight. We are inspiring each other in this difficult time. And I am certainly not alone.



JNUSU Elections 2019 - March by United Left in JNU after the filing of nominations for JNUSU Elections 2019.
Picture Credits: Amit Kumar

How do you see your growth as an activist and a leader of the students' movement?

When I came to the JNU campus, I saw a few comrades leading the union. At that time, I could not imagine myself in that position. But after I got elected, every single day was a learning experience. I have realised that it is a huge responsibility to be in the leadership of the union. But I knew that I had the support of the students and thus never felt alone. I grew up as an activist. No one can teach you how to be a good students' union president; it is only through day-to-day experience that one learns the duties and responsibilities of a leader and can then deliver results. Often one needs to have the presence of mind to take an immediate call and respond on issues as and when they arrive. I can say for sure that the person I was before being elected to the post of students' union president is not the same person I am today. I am sure that I will continue to grow as an activist and as a person by the time I complete my tenure as JNUSU president. Each day I learn something new from the movement and the people around me.

This interview with Aishe Ghosh was held over a period of time between September 2019 and January 2020.

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