

# Why the JNU ordeal is about more than just intolerance

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2016-2-24

*More than ten days after the arrest of the JNU Student Union President on charges of sedition, the conflict between student protestors and the government shows little sign of abating. **Saanya Gulati** writes that the incident raises issues that are deeper and far more disturbing than just a debate about the legal limits on free speech.*



Much of India's media coverage for the last few weeks has been centred on the activity in Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), starting with the arrest of Student Union President, Kanhaiya Kumar on 12 February.

Kumar's arrest was made under the pretext of anti-national sloganeering that erupted during the public demonstration held on the anniversary of Afzal Guru's execution. Afzal Guru, accused of the attack on the [Indian Parliament in 2001](#), was hanged in 2013. Several activists have disputed the judicial proceedings that led to the Supreme Court's decision. Arundhati Roy, a prominent Indian author termed it a [stain on India's democracy](#).

Kumar's arrest has re-ignited the debate on freedom of speech and the validity of a colonial piece of legislation under which he was booked: the [sedition law](#). Once used by the British Raj to keep seditious activity against the colonial state in check, even the UK [repealed this law](#) in 2009, on the grounds that it has chilling effects on free speech. India's former Attorney General, who is [representing Kumar's case](#) in court, has categorically stated that the slogans chanted at JNU do not amount to sedition. However, the incident raises issues that are deeper, and are far more disturbing than just a debate about the legal limits on free speech.



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## A selective and violent vision of nationalism

The aftermath of the arrest resulted in a spate of violent clashes attacking journalists who covered the incident, students who protested it, and Kumar himself, who was reportedly [assaulted by lawyers](#) in broad daylight outside the courthouse. A particularly [haunting photograph](#) that captures the brutal force exercised by those in power was featured on the front-page of the Telegraph India newspaper. The picture is of a student activist bracing for another blow from a gang of men led by a BJP legislator, OP Sharma. Later, Sharma even [went on record](#) to say: "I would have opened fire if I had a gun. If someone abuses our Mother (India), won't I beat him up?"

Sharma's comment, appalling as it may be, is characteristic of the riled-up nationalism that the BJP government is tacitly – and in many cases not-so-tacitly – supporting. To understand the gravity of its implications, one needs to consider them against the backdrop of the BJP's ethos as a political party.

The BJP is the political wing of the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh), a right-wing Hindu nationalist group that propounds *Hindutva*, an ideology that defines India as a land first and foremost for Hindus. Several policies enacted by the BJP, since it was elected to power in 2014, impose its Hindu majoritarian interpretation of nationalism on the populace, from banning the sale of beef in various states, cancelling a [Pakistani singer's concert](#) in Mumbai, and most recently removing the works of [Western poets and Urdu from school textbooks](#) in the state of Rajasthan.

But what is more problematic than the government promoting an ideology is the repeated misuse of power by a section of society that feels emboldened by the *Hindutva* agenda that these policies advance. Last October, a Muslim man was [lynched to death by a mob](#) over mere rumours that he was eating beef in his own home. While outlawing beef is one thing, individuals taking the law into their own hands is another. A few months prior to that, a renowned scholar, Dr. MM Kalburgi, [was shot dead in his own house](#) for espousing ideas that are strongly critical of idol worship and Hindu rituals. Such incidents not only exemplify intolerance in its most vile form but vigilantism and lawlessness.

### **The witch-hunt for anti-nationals in student politics**

The JNU row is by no means an isolated one. If anything, it is a reminder that the institutional witch-hunt being instigated against those perceived as a threat to *Hindutva* tenets is now spreading its tentacles to university campuses. [ABVP](#), the student wing of the BJP, which appears to have increasing leverage in campus politics, has been vehement in vocalising its opposition toward activities that it deems anti-national.

Last August the ABVP [disrupted the screening](#) of *Muzaffarnagar Baaqi Hai* at the Delhi University, a film that portrayed the communal violence committed during the 2013 riots in Uttar Pradesh. More recently, its opposition toward a student demonstration against another controversial execution case, that of Yakub Memon, resulted in the indefinite suspension of five students from a university campus following a dispute with the ABVP. The incident sparked a chain of events that resulted in the suicide of one of the indicted students, Rohith Vemula, on 17 January. There is evidence that BJP's Minister for Labour and Employment had a hand in the suspension, as he pressured the school authorities into taking this action despite the fact their own investigation had cleared the students of wrongdoing. The rapid escalation of the Afzal Guru demonstration at JNU was not a coincidence, but again a consequence of the ABVP's interference and this time the [Home Minister ordering police action](#) on the pretense that the students were supported by Hafiz Saed, leader of the terrorist organisation Lashkar-e-Taiba. Saed has [explicitly denied](#) any connections to the protest.

The political establishment's increased meddling in university affairs naturally sets a dangerous precedent for educational institutions, which are considered the bastion of diverse and dissenting viewpoints in a democratic society. What is particularly ominous about the JNU incident is the breakdown of law and order that has accompanied government interference. This week, a group of BJP activists attacked a student at the Banaras Hindu University (BHU) for demanding a revival of Student Union elections after the Prime Minister had delivered a convocation speech. According to media reports, BHU had [indefinitely banned these elections in 2007](#) due to a violent clash that broke out on campus. In the case of Kumar, the pressing question remains: why was there no security present with him, especially if he was under arrest for an ostensibly heinous crime such as sedition?

### **No signs of restraint or remorse**

Even if one were to accept the BJP's position for a second, that grieving the death of a man responsible for unprovoked mass-murder crosses what they believe is an acceptable expression of free speech, that neither justifies the hooliganism in the name of nationalism, nor erases the fact that they clearly misread the situation on more than one account. The police action, which the Home Minister justified in the name of terrorist linkages, is thought to be

based on a tweet from a [parody Twitter account](#) of Hafiz Saed. In a more recent twist of events, a media channel has been accused of [tampering with the footage](#) of Kumar's speech, to overlay 'anti-national' slogans.

But rather than showing a morsel of restraint or remorse, this incident seems to have reinforced the government's resolution to continue masquerading as a messiah of nationalism. It recently announced that it would [continue to expose](#) anti-national elements through street protests and an aggressive debate in Parliament. The most extreme statement, however, is evident in the online world that has become a convenient outlet for (often anti-intellectual) right-wing groups to abuse those who voice opinions that are anti-BJP, which is slowly becoming synonymous with anti-national. Anupam Kher, a Bollywood actor who openly supports the the BJP recently [tweeted](#):

*"When there is pest control in houses, cockroaches and insects are thrown out. The house gets cleaned. Similarly, the country is going through a pest control right now"*

His terminology not only dehumanises an entire group on individuals but also has eerie similarities with those used by Hitler to justify atrocities against the Jews. A few months ago, Kher led a march to protest those who were raising their voice against rising intolerance in India. Here he claimed, "Nobody has the right to call our country intolerant." The sad truth is that he's probably right, because intolerance barely begins to capture what is happening in our country today.

*This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the South Asia @ LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.*

### **About the Author**

**Saanya Gulati** is an MSc Candidate in Politics and Communications at LSE. Her interest in Indian politics stems from her professional background in public policy, and media. She brings diverse experiences from working as a legislative aide to a Parliamentarian to managing digital media campaigns for political parties and elected representatives. She is a passionate writer and blogs on contemporary politics and culture at [www.saanyagulati.com](http://www.saanyagulati.com). You can also follow her on Twitter at [@BombayDelhiGirl](https://twitter.com/BombayDelhiGirl).



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