

# This is a watershed moment for India

## It must choose freedom over intolerance

PRIYAMVADA GOPAL

THE standoff at New Delhi's famous Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) that has transfixed India has nothing of the routine campus controversy about it. Following the arrest of a student leader, India's Hindu nationalist BJP government now finds itself facing down a large coalition of progressive groups laying claim to the idea of an India where the right to dissent is foundational.

The hardline home minister, Rajnath Singh, believes otherwise, announcing that those who question India's integrity "will not be tolerated or spared". Questioning the Indian state's actions in places such as Kashmir, in short, is strictly off menu. This face-off between state repression and intellectual freedom, which has been some time in the making, may well turn out to be a watershed moment for the country.

A famously contentious campus synonymous in India with critical thinking and vociferous debate, JNU has long been in the sights of the Hindu right, many of whom want nothing more than for it to be shut down. Its student union president, Kanhaiya Kumar, was arrested last week in the wake of a public meeting held on the anniversary of the controversial 2013 execution of Mohammed Afzal Guru, accused of the 2001 Indian parliament attack. After that meeting Kumar gave a wide-ranging speech that was remarkable not for the "anti-nationalism" with which he has been charged but for his impassioned insistence on the need to uphold the Indian constitution.

The ferocity of his criticism was reserved for those who he said were undermining this very constitution, the forces of Hindutva (Hindu-ness) that form the backbone of the BJP government. "We don't need a patriotism certificate," he said. "We love this country." From a poor, working-class background himself, Kumar noted: "We fight for the 80% poor population of this country." Addressing a topic all too familiar to students in Britain,

he also attacked government cuts to higher education budgets and the steady decline of resources, including financial support, available to students.

In a shocking move - police are not allowed on to Indian university campuses without the permission of the vice-chancellor, precisely in order to safeguard

Gandhi, were detained under its auspices. In recent years it has been used liberally to constrain those who would challenge the transgressions of the postcolonial state.

Kumar had noted correctly that the forces of "Hindu India" now most vociferous in laying claim to true patriotism were not only notably absent in the actual freedom

while normally cautious broadsheets are issuing unusually critical editorials warning the government not to let events escalate. Student unions across the country and from as far away as South Africa have condemned the arrests, as have hundreds of academics from Britain, the US and beyond.

So what is really at stake here? In short, it

count nor widening inequality indices matter.

It is worth noting that this flashpoint has followed and is connected to another equally important campus movement inspired by the death of the Dalit scholar Rohit Vemula at the University of Hyderabad, who killed himself: an event that has blown open India's persistent and disgraceful caste inequalities, with upper castes, much like the white well-off of Britain, disproportionately dominating universities and the media as well as lucrative corporate positions. To criticise the Hindu nationalism that governs India today is also to note its roots in the continued domination of Indian institutions by Brahmins and other upper castes. This faultline is now more visible than ever, and addressing it has become a matter of urgency.

For those committed to the idea of India as essentially a Hindu country, which includes many in the government of the prime minister, Narendra Modi, the list of potential "anti-nationals" appears to be compendious. It seems to include everyone from Muslim, Dalit, Christian, leftwing and liberal activists to those who question the Indian state's actions in Kashmir or suggest that religious intolerance isn't a good idea.

Until recently, this dispensation has had the benefit of an acquiescent, even cheerleading media, but that may be changing. Today, with journalists also facing down manhandling and violence from government supporters, even as some of their more rabid colleagues appear to be inciting it against JNU students, the situation reminds many of the horrors of the 1975-77 state of emergency. Now, as then, India is poised on the brink of a choice between the dangers of authoritarianism and its historic commitment to dissent. It is essential that the latter prevails.

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Jawaharlal Nehru University's student union leader, Kanhaiya Kumar, is escorted by police to court. PHOTO: CHANDAN KHANNA/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

dissent - Kumar was arrested under one of India's many outdated pieces of legislation (which include, notoriously, a law criminalising homosexuality). The "sedition" law, intended to prevent anti-colonial resistance, prohibits inciting "disaffection" towards the government, and many in India's freedom struggle, including

struggle but were often to be seen collaborating with the British. Subject now to open thuggery - as well as state force, there have been astonishing scenes of lawyers beating up JNU students in court - dissenters have been arrested or are being hunted down. Students and teachers have responded by shutting down the university,

is a struggle between those who would lay claim to India as a democratic, heterogeneous, inclusive and at least incipiently egalitarian national project, and those for whom nationalism has devolved into a lethal cocktail of aggressive religious assertion and equally ferocious unbridled capitalist growth, where neither the body

# Developing a supportive and inclusive workplace culture in Bangladesh

B MURTEZA KHAN

A few years ago, I found myself in an ILO workshop on the business case for the employment of people with disabilities. I was reminded of my O' Level Mathematics teacher at Chittagong Grammar School, who had lost his previous job due to the sudden onset of his physical disability. His students started producing stellar results and he soon became a much sought-after teacher. Yet he always remained loyal to the school, as it offered him an opportunity when no one else would. Similar to that Maths class, the ILO workshop was revelatory, inspiring and full of possibilities, as it led us at our company to consider daily life and employment from the perspective of a person with disabilities.

The UN estimates that 15 percent of the world's population is living with disabilities, making people with disabilities the largest minority group globally. The world is shifting from a welfare-based approach to a rights-based approach when it comes to disability issues. It is imperative to shift attitudes and accommodate the needs of people with disabilities through a holistic approach, paying special attention to the issue of skills development and employment.

The adoption of the ILO Business Charter on Disability by 11 multinational companies in Switzerland in 2015 marked a historic step in strengthening the commitment of employers to the cause of disability inclusion on a global level. The signatories of the charter are multinationals such as Accenture, Carrefour, L'Oréal and Michelin, amongst others. These organisations are members of the ILO Global Business and Disability Network, which facilitated the creation and

adoption of the charter. "By honouring the commitments of this charter, the private sector will be showing in the most concrete way how real leadership is making it possible for people with disabilities to have productive work and to live in dignity", said the ILO Director-General, Guy Ryder. Countries as diverse as Australia, Brazil, Saudi Arabia, South Africa and Sri Lanka, amongst others, have established national business and disability networks. Bangladeshi employers are also stepping up to the challenge and forming their own network.

A recent workshop in Dhaka brought together employers of various industries interested in making their workplaces more inclusive in an effort to promote diversity. Champions of this cause along with committed employers proposed the establishment of Bangladesh Business and Disability Network (BBDN), which will represent the collective voice of private sector employers on disability related issues, on a national level. The establishment of BBDN is being led by the Bangladesh Employers Federation with assistance from the ILO. The Network members will strategically work towards greater disability inclusion in the workforce. The ILO has been promoting the position that employment of people with disabilities makes good business sense. People with disabilities tend to increase productivity, boost company morale, reduce absenteeism, improve company image and customer preference, increase job retention rates and improve safety standards amongst other value additions.

At BBDN, successful models of disability inclusion in the workforce will be shared and analysed, while existing challenges are identified

and possible solutions implemented. BBDN will also connect employers with relevant NGOs and Disabled People's Organisations (DPOs) as necessary. DPOs and NGOs can serve not only as strategy consultants to develop best policies and practices, but also as project implementation partners. There have been successful collaborations, such as the RMG sewing machine operators' training that the Centre for the Rehabilitation of the Paralysed (CRP) Dhaka

percent enrolment of people with disabilities in all skills development programmes. These types of policies need to be enforced while broadly drafted ones, such as the Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities Act 2013, which alludes to the creation of employment for people with disabilities on a priority basis, as well as a possible tax exemption for employers, needs to be expanded upon for implementation. The BBDN will be well positioned to lobby for the

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provides to trainees with disabilities, who are then hired by Viyellatex Group and other RMG employers. Promising models may be considered for countrywide scale-up through public-private partnerships.

The government's legislative framework plays an integral role in protecting the rights of people with disabilities while directing the actions of employers and other stakeholders. The National Skills Development Policy 2012 sets a target of 5

enforcement of the relevant laws and policies.

As a member of the disability network, I invite all who are passionate about making Bangladesh an incredibly inclusive and friendly place for people of all kinds and from different walks of life, to join us, for only together can we bring about big change.

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### CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Deep purple
  - 2 Farm pens
  - 10 Strike settings
  - 12 From the country
  - 13 Crooked
  - 14 Sports spot
  - 15 Frank McCourt took
  - 16 Subside
  - 18 Acquire
  - 19 Like some garages
  - 21 Warsaw native
  - 22 "Guest host" and "civil war"
  - 24 News summery
  - 25 Rust formation
  - 29 Milky stone
  - 30 Evening meal
  - 32 Gents
  - 33 Brood watcher
  - 34 Lawyer's charge
  - 35 Laughable
  - 37 Move smoothly
  - 39 Henry VIII's house
  - 40 Did shoe work
  - 41 Taters
  - 42 Ties the knot
- DOWN**
- 1 Student of Socrates
  - 2 Telemundo viewer
  - 3 Like some salons
  - 4 Singer Tillis
  - 5 Shore crawler
  - 6 "-- Town"
  - 7 Eugene Setting
  - 8 Comic strip makeup
  - 9 Blackboard
  - 11 Ticked off
  - 17 Fancy fabric
  - 20 Saint with an alpha-bet named for him
  - 21 Visit briefly
  - 23 G and R
  - 25 "Let me in!"
  - 26 Kubla Khan's home
  - 27 Available for reference
  - 28 Requisite
  - 29 Drops
  - 31 Oboe parts
  - 33 Towel word
  - 36 Approval
  - 38 Blue

**BEETLE BAILEY** by Mort Walker

**YESTERDAY'S ANSWER**

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S	E	E	D	S	T	E	E	N	S

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