

12 IDEA EXCHANGE

NEWSMAKERS IN THE NEWSROOM

‘Everything at JNU becomes news. Universities must be left alone... Let them do their work’

Jawaharlal Nehru University Vice-Chancellor M Jagadesh Kumar asserts that protests on campus must not cross the ‘*Lakshman rekha*’, says he would never term students anti-nationals, explains why JNU had to cut intake of PhD students, and believes “intellectuals everywhere are same — they love to disagree”



Professor M Jagadesh Kumar with Assistant Editor Ritika Chopra at *The Indian Express* office. Praveen Khanna

RITIKA CHOPRA: In hindsight, would you have done anything differently during the February 9 protests last year?

I have always maintained that it was an internal issue. We formed an inquiry committee and talked to people. Finally, we took a decision based on university rules. As far as the university is concerned, the issue is closed. We are moving ahead with our academic programmes. We have done quite well in research and training in the past one year.

RAVISH TIWARI: But the case went to the police station, courts...

The university has no role once the issue goes outside. Whatever was within the boundaries of the university, we have handled those matters. If it has gone to the court, the court will deal with it.

RITIKA CHOPRA: At the time, many politicians had called JNU students anti-national.

I never used the word anti-national. In the university too, we don't use that word. I always told my faculty and students that while it is our right to exercise our freedom of expression, we should also be aware of the boundaries of the law and the Constitution.

RAVISH TIWARI: Do you think those students are anti-national?

We see if the things they do are as per rules of the university or not. If they are not, action is taken. I can only say that. I will never use the word anti-national. We can never do anything that is anti-Constitutional; that is something the courts can decide.

ARANYA SHANKAR: The February 9 incident had sparked a discourse on nationalism. Today, nationalism has become more about what someone eats or wears. What do you have to say about this brand of nationalism?

The same question was put to Mahatma Gandhi. He said, 'According to me, nationalism means getting freedom for the country. For the sake of survival of the human race, Gandhi said he wanted freedom for the country. Today, our country is facing a lot of challenges — we need to educate the youth, create jobs and build infrastructure. For me, working towards achieving these goals, for the inclusive growth of the country, is nationalism.'

The purpose of a university is to provide high-quality education to students, so that they can go out and contribute to the inclusive growth of the country. If we are unable to do this, then we are not performing our duty as a university. So, again and again, I have appealed to my students and faculty to bring the focus back on what we are supposed to do as a university community — research, come up with solutions to problems faced by the society. Time is running out. We always talk about the demographic advantage that our country has. Unless we work 24x7 and find solutions to the challenges the country is facing, we will be doing a disservice to our nation.

ABANTIKA GHOSH: Given that it all started with a protest, do you think

WHY M JAGADESH KUMAR

Within days of M Jagadesh Kumar taking over as vice-chancellor of Jawaharlal Nehru University, the university hit the headlines when, in February 2016, some of its student leaders were charged with sedition. The same year, the disappearance of



one of its students, Najeeb Ahmed, put Kumar, a former professor of electrical engineering at IIT-Delhi, and university authorities in a spot. More recently, JNU has been in the news for slashing MPhil/PhD seats following a UGC notification

students should be allowed to protest on campus? Also, what are your views on student politics?

I always welcome protests; it works as a kind of feedback in a democracy. If you come to our university, you will see there are always protests taking place.

Politics is intrinsic to the nature of Indians. If someone can vote at the age of 18 and have an opinion on the situation in the country, then it is their fundamental right to have political opinions as well.

ARANYA SHANKAR: The rule in JNU, banning protests within a certain distance, has always been there in the statutes, but no V-C has ever exercised it. Why did you decide to do it?

There is something called a '*Lakshman rekha*'. If protests block a building and we are not allowed to enter, it hampers the functioning of the university, the *Lakshman rekha* has been crossed. In such a situation, we have to look at the university's rules and statutes and tell students what needs to be followed. That is why I said, whatever we do must not violate rules and regulations. Within the boundaries, any protest is welcome.

RITIKA CHOPRA: If students were to seek permission to hold an event commemorating Afzal Guru, will the JNU authorities allow it now?

We will not. There are certain university rules — one has to state the purpose of the function and the activities that will be a part of it. On February 9, what happened was that the students gave one title for the function but conducted something else. So we need to be careful as it could lead to law-and-order situations.

We want JNU to be an outstanding university, and all of us, faculty and students, must focus on achieving academic excellence. We cannot achieve this if we bring in such controversies. A university cannot function like that.

RAVISH TIWARI: How will cutting the number of PhD seats help in achieving academic excellence?

We are not cutting PhD seats in the university, it is a misconception. Across the world, the average number of PhD students a teacher can guide is three-four. It is only in JNU that we have 30-40 PhD students per faculty member. JNU has 600 faculty members and on an average they can guide four-five students. We can only

have 300 PhD students. This year, we have announced 240 vacancies. So, as students graduate and vacancies are created, new students will be admitted.

Look at the Indian Institute of Technology, the average intake of students is only 3-3.5 students per faculty. Indian Institute of Science is one of the top 200 universities in the world. Here too, the number of PhD students is three-four per faculty.

UMA VISHNU: But the counter-argument is that JNU is primarily a research university. Teachers say they have more time on their hands and can mentor more students.

Some members of the faculty say they can guide 30, 40, even 100 students. But this isn't the right way to go about things. We also need to look at how top universities in the world function. They are top universities because they focus on the quality of research. We need to do the same. This year, we are number one in the country. But there is no guarantee of this 10 years down the line, unless we emphasise on the quality of research.

RAVISH TIWARI: What is the maximum number of PhD students a faculty member can guide?

Some faculty members have up to 40 PhD students. But no professor can guide 40 PhD students. It is not a classroom. You need to give individual mentoring to the students, and even the faculty has to think, work on research problems etc. It is not easy to guide 40 students, and nowhere in the world will you find such a situation.

RITIKA CHOPRA: The HRD Minister

Universities such as JNU suffer from two issues — intellectual blindness and political one-sidedness. All ideas should co-exist. All should have the freedom to express their ideas”

was apparently worried over the “drastic cut” in PhD seats. He had gone on record to say, ‘I had advised the V-C that while there are faculty members who are guiding around 30 students, there are many who aren't guiding any students or rather haven't touched the stipulated limit yet’. It was to probably to encourage the teachers to take on more students. And that's how, probably, you can increase the intake of candidates.

We are doing that. In December, we are conducting the JNU entrance examination. We are asking all our centres to tell us how many students we have. Then, according to the UGC upper cap, if there are any vacancies, we will advertise those. We are already doing it.

RITIKA CHOPRA: But why wasn't this done earlier? There have been many protests.

Earlier, it wasn't possible because our administration building was seized by students for more than 20 days and it took another two months to work on the backlog that was created. The centres too did not respond. They did not give the information. They did not tell us how many vacancies are there with each faculty. The choice before us was either not to take anybody or take in some students with the available data. So then, we were able to offer about 250 research positions.

ASHUTOSH BHARDWAJ: A large section of the ruling alliance keeps criticising JNU as a centre for anti-national activities. How do you, as head of the institution, feel about it?

It is a democracy. Everybody has the fundamental right to express their opinions. As a university, we will continue to work hard to achieve academic excellence. We do not want our focus to be disturbed.

VANDITA MISHRA: How essential is student politics? Do you see any limits to it?

If students want to protest and conduct *dharnas*, and it affects the functioning of the university, then they have obviously crossed the *Lakshman rekha*. As long as the functioning of the university is not affected, students are most welcome to protest, debate and discuss.

AMITABH SINHA: Would you say JNU is excessively political, more than other university campuses?



You can come to the university anytime and see that a large number of seminars also take place there — there are visitors from across the country and outside. At JNU, academics is given top priority. But what you see outside... now, every small thing, whatever happens in JNU, becomes news. Sometimes, I think, universities must be left alone; let them do their work.

VANDITA MISHRA: When do student protests become seditious? Can they be seditious?

It is for the law agencies and the courts to decide. As a university, we have no role in that.

AKASH JOSHI: In Jadavpur University, there was a situation similar to the February 9 incident. The V-C there was seen standing by his students. He said whatever happens will be handled by the university, police don't have to come in if there has been no violence. Don't you think that is a model that can be followed?

I will give you two instances. For 22 hours we were confined in the administration building (The students were protesting against the administration for its “lack of initiative” in tracing missing student Najeeb Ahmad). We had a colleague with serious health problems. You might have seen on TV — I came out and pleaded with folded hands and said, ‘Please let us go home’. We did not call police at the time despite the grave danger that my colleague was in. I was functioning out of the convention centre. So where it is possible for us, where the situation is in our control, we never call the police. And we will never do it because these are all our students.

MALLICA JOSHI: How many vacancies for teachers do you have at JNU now?

Currently, there are close to 300 vacancies. Because of the implementation of the UGC gazette notification, we would like to take more students. But for that, we need more faculty. We have advertised for almost 260 positions already and started the process of selecting faculty.

MALLICA JOSHI: How difficult is it for an institute such as JNU, that focuses on research, to get good quality teachers?

For higher education institutions, including the IITs, getting good quality faculty is becoming difficult. There are two reasons for it: there is a dearth of good quality PhDs in the country and sometimes, good candidates go off to work in other industries.

We cannot compromise on the quality of candidates. You must have seen, in IITs, there are 30 per cent vacancies. It is not like we do not get applications, but by the time we shortlist people, our list is thin. We are prepared to take on extra burden of teaching and research, but we are not ready to appoint people who are not up to the mark. Hence, we spend a lot of time interviewing candidates. We, at JNU, also have something called the Internal Quality Assurance Cell. We check the academic backgrounds of the candidates very carefully and make sure only good candidates

are selected as faculty.

VANDITA MISHRA: A long-running charge against JNU is that it is a Left bastion. The Right says it is intolerant to their points of view.

Universities such as JNU suffer from two issues — intellectual blindness and political one-sidedness. All ideas should co-exist. Everybody should have the freedom to express their ideas in a legitimate manner. The moment a university becomes ideologically blind and politically one-sided, democracy goes for a toss. In JNU, we always encourage everyone to have a chance to express their viewpoint. Ultimately, what is our goal? We all want our country to develop. We want to build an inclusive, peaceful, developed country.

MONOJIT MAJUMDAR: You are an engineer by training, and a professor of electronics engineering. The way Indian higher education institutes are, science and technology institutes do not see as much political activity as liberal arts institutes. JNU is at the highest end of the spectrum. So coming from that background to JNU, what are some of the significant issues that you have had to deal with?

The meetings at IITs are as stormy as they are at JNU. Intellectuals/professors anywhere are not different — they love to disagree. But to respond to the point that you are making, about the political environment, I would say JNU has very strong social sciences and humanities schools. If someone who studies sociology goes to a slum, observes the issues that plague the place, and raises questions about it, you have to understand that it is feeding that student's research, it is part of that person's work. So liberal arts students are more aware of social problems while science students are busy with their work inside the laboratory and do not have the opportunity.

By the way, this is precisely why we, at JNU, are planning to start an integrated BTech programme, where BTech students will also do a Master's degree in social sciences. We want to create a socially aware engineer, not just a mechanical robotic engineer or a social scientist who does not understand the implications of technology.

DEEPTIMAN TIWARI: How many of your own students do you see coming back to teach at JNU?

A lot of my own students at IIT have told me that teaching is hard. Teaching is not just going to a classroom and delivering lectures, you have to remain a life-long mentor for students. Unless one has that passion, he or she may not be willing to return and teach. Having said that, my students who have joined as teachers have not left the profession.

UMA VISHNU: I was curious about this tweet that was attributed to you, immediately after the UP election results, where you said the “people of India have once again demonstrated that we stand for development and inclusivity”.

What I said is still valid. Maybe the timing was wrong... It was misconstrued.