



Some call it democracy

Posted at: 19/01/2019

To call for the overthrow of a stale and fearful social system is not sedition. It is democracy

- Sedition and conspiracy charges have been filed against three former students of Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), and seven others.
- If these charges are established, 10 young Indians could be sentenced to life-term imprisonment.
- A great deal has been said and written about the need to banish a 19th century law, introduced by Lord Macaulay, from the statute books.

The spirit of 1968

- In May 1968, students in universities across France rose in revolt against hide-bound, patriarchal and class-governed structures, from the family, the capitalist market, to the government ruled by the conservative President Charles de Gaulle.
- Young women and men took to the streets, and as a result were beaten up by the police.
- Ironically, police brutality incited even more students to join the movement.
- The slogan that inspired them to defy the police was: politics is the art of the impossible.
- On May 13, workers from the Renault factory joined the protests and struck work.
- De Gaulle had thought the election and referendum results would demonstrate his acceptability to the people of France.
- The French did not forgive De Gaulle for going to war against his own students.
- Fifty years later, May 1968 is remembered as the month and the year when university students launched a political, cultural and sexual revolution.

Three years ago

- Students assembled on the grounds of JNU more than three years ago spoke of liberation from a caste-ridden and inegalitarian society.
- They reiterated the need to abolish capital punishment, which many fine legal minds have also condemned.
- They pointed out that the government should address escalating tensions in the Kashmir Valley.
- Some elements, reportedly outsiders, shouted anti-India slogans.
- This is hardly sedition.
- We ought to have confidence in the capacity of India to endure youthful indiscretions, the country has survived infinitely more serious attacks on its territorial integrity.
- It is ridiculous to charge students with sedition when all that they were asking for was the breaking of shackles.
- The conversation was in perfect conformity with the spirit of public universities.
- The public university is not a teaching shop.
- Within the metaphorical walls of the university we find classrooms and libraries.
- We also find open spaces where students assemble and discuss political predicaments, cafes and dhabas where they interact with co-students who come from different regions of the country, and statues of leaders that form a rallying point for protests.
- Through these activities, students become familiar with the notion of citizenship.
- They connect with others, they learn that they have the constitutional right to challenge the power of elected representatives.
- It is in the university that they absorb the virtue of solidarity.
- It is here that they learn that in a democracy they have the right to make their own histories, even if they make these histories badly.
- University students have the right to acquaint the public and the government with depressing tales of how lives are led in an inegalitarian society.
- In a representative democracy we are supposed to communicate opinions and demands through elected representatives.
- People in power should recognise the importance of political debate in civil society, they should learn to heed demands catapulted into the public domain by student associations.
- If some hotheads shout objectionable slogans, ignore them as long as these do not lead to harm.
- This is how mature democracies behave.

The political impulse

- The age when young people were infatuated with the politics of the impossible, 1968, ended, but it threw up several movements that changed the world.
- They re-cast gender relations, emphasised civil liberties, empowered alternative sexualities, and familiarised us with the tyrannies of power.
- To call for the overthrow of a stale and fearful social system is not sedition. We call it democracy.

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