

Jamia protests: Misled students pose a threat. But who exactly is misleading them?

Mobs do not go on a rampage on their own. They are provoked, instigated.

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In Act III, Scene 2 of William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, there is a defining moment. World famous because of Antony's lines, "Now let it work. Mischief, thou art afoot. Take thou what course thou wilt!" He has roused the mobs against Caesar's assassins.

One of the plebeians cries "use the brands to set the traitors' houses on fire". Another says, "Go fetch fire." A third yells, "Pluck down forms, windows, anything." Soon, Rome is on fire. There is a civil war, then change of government. Shakespeare understood mob psychology.

Minority report

Crowds need sensational provocation to rouse them out of their habitual stupor. Whether their cause is just or whether they have been misled is beside the point. Their rage will destroy everything it comes in contact with. Once ignited, the fires will burn.

As a teacher and citizen of this country, I feel terribly sad and distressed as parts of my city burn, especially because the perpetrators are supposedly students of some of our leading universities. Worse, a sizeable section of the intellectual and cultural elite has come out in their support. The protests have also taken on an ugly, religious turn. Many of the picketers are proudly saying on national TV that they fear only their God, Allah. Indeed a group which calls itself 'Students of Jamia', has been holding regular meetings on campus. Their posters unabashedly proclaim, "The command of Allah is above every law." If so, why are they protesting a duly passed constitutional amendment of a secular nation? How is it that the basic contradiction between a religiously authorised polity and a

constitutionally elected government fails to come to their notice? Given that they are students, shouldn't they read deeply and try to understand these issues?

The same people, alas, who condemned mobs that brought down the Babri Masjid are today supporting another set of rioters who are also breaking the law. What, then, is the credibility of such intellectuals?

How can their claims of ethical superiority be justified? When Bills are passed in Parliament by a voting majority, it is called "brute" by its critics. What of earlier majorities which ratified constitutional amendments, even draconian laws? Weren't those majorities brutish too? How is it that when lawmakers go against their beliefs, these self-righteous leaders of public opinion cry foul? What happens to their great respect for democracy? Or is it democracy only when the nation kowtows to their will?

Jamia on the boil

When the Delhi Police entered the campus of Jamia Millia Islamia on December 15, I knew no good would come out of it. They would only give ammunition to the narrative of a repressive state going against students. As expected, there were sympathetic protests all over India including at Aligarh Muslim University, IIT-Madras, TISS, Mumbai, Maulana Azad National Urdu University (MANUU), Hyderabad, Jadavpur University, Kolkata, and so on. Have the anti-government lobbies, particularly those backed by the Left, finally got a cause sufficient to start a student movement against the Modi sarkar?

No elected government can afford to antagonise the youth. In Indian universities, many students, especially in the humanities, social sciences, and other non-lucrative disciplines are feeling insecure about their future. If their confusion and uncertainty make them turn against the government, then like the student movements of the past in Gujarat and Bihar, they could pose a credible threat. Knowing this, the PM himself went into damage-control mode. On December 16, he tweeted:

He called the violence "unfortunate and deeply distressing". As PM Modi clarified, no Indian needs to worry about the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). It only affords relief to those fleeing religious persecution in the neighbourhood who have sought refuge in India.

Hue and cry over law

All this brings us to the heart of the issue: the CAA. This law is about granting citizenship to religious refugees in India. What is wrong with that? Why should this act of generosity and hospitality on the part of India cause so much controversy, not to speak of nationwide protests? That is because it excludes Muslims. According to the law, Muslims from our neighbouring countries cannot seek citizenship in India on grounds of religious persecution.

Perhaps, this exclusion has been imposed to ward off illegal Muslim immigrants from Bangladesh. But whatever the reason, this exclusion, it is argued, goes against our secular Constitution. This is certainly a matter to be discussed, even debated. But it should not, as the Chief Justice of India Sharad Arvind Bobde said, result in protestors burning buses and destroying public property.

It would seem, therefore, that there are other forces, call them anti-Indian or at least anti-government, which want to exploit the situation for their own purposes. The lines quoted at the beginning show that mobs do not go on a rampage on their own. They are provoked, instigated. Let's catch the mischief-makers, the agents provocateurs.

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