



The Condolence Meeting and Open House on 14.3.17

15 MAR
2017

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The condolence meeting began by the House observing a minute's silence in respect for Muthukrishanan, M.Phil. student of the Centre for Historical Studies. Prof. Vijaya Ramaswamy conveyed the shock and grief that the faculty of CHS felt at this sudden end of a bright young person, whom they had met just last week as an enthusiastic participant in the CHS Young Scholars Conference. Others at the meeting, both students and faculty, spoke of the feeling of loss and bewilderment they felt at hearing of Muthukrishanan's unfortunate death.

Prof. Ramaswamy and the other members of the CHS faculty clarified the academic arrangements at their Centre. All fresh entrants are assigned a Faculty Adviser when they enter the programme, whom they consult with while they do their coursework. Advisors may become the M.Phil. dissertation supervisor, who is formally designated as such through a faculty meeting in April. If the student so desires, she may ask for another Supervisor. Like all other students of his batch, Muthukrishanan had a Faculty Advisor. His request for another person as his Supervisor would have been addressed, as is the norm, in April.

The overwhelming sense of the House was that we were a community

in crisis, with too much left uncommunicated and unacknowledged. In the immediate aftermath of catastrophic events such the axe attack and suicide of July 2013, we come up with excellent suggestions about institutionalising a culture of solidarity, mutual care, and of building collectives of students and students and teachers be they in Centres, within and across Schools, but very soon, even the gains made from just meeting to discuss what we can do are frittered away.

The extreme situation that the university has been thrown into since last February, enduring attack after attack, has traumatised us all. Even knowing as we do that such uncertainty and insecurity hits those who are from disadvantaged backgrounds the hardest, Muthukrishanan's death reminds us that we have not succeeded in creating a work and living atmosphere in which those who need some support can receive it without the onus being on them to ask for it..

Many issues were dwelt upon in the discussion that followed, and all that I can provide by way of summary is an impressionistic synopsis. There are different voices that speak the sentences below, but it is just one conversation.

- However much we tout our unique admission policy that draws in students from all corners of the country and from all sections of society, institutional structures in JNU do not enable teachers to respond sensitively to this diversity of backgrounds once students are in JNU. Our system requires us to evaluate students for coursework etc as if the differences taken into account in our admission policy had miraculously vanished. While there may exist SFCs and schemes for personal tutors,

these are implemented with varying degrees of seriousness, and do not always serve to foster inclusion. Students often just drop out of the very same programme that they competed so hard to get into. A personalised, non-punitive follow-up of students' adjustment into the academic programme and into life at JNU is necessary, but how can we sustain it?

- The living conditions that particularly entering students have are atrocious, and this has a severe impact upon academic performance. This scarcity is only bound to increase and it was suggested that given the current political reality, seeking endowments from alumni. Faculty acknowledgement of these severe impediments in students' lives is next to nil. Students' sense of responsibility for the wellbeing of their fellows also has declined.
- There is an over-emphasis on the academic as the means by which a sense of inclusion grows. Cultural programmes and other modes of being together in a Centre foster both confidence and self-expression, but we do not encourage such activity. Simultaneously, there has to be a greater documentation of what it means to be excluded for those who feel so, specially with respect to the content that is taught, the language used, and what encourages and discourages students in the classroom. What is needed is an institutional mechanism that can address caste discrimination frontally.
- Stress, depression, and insecurity are a part of most of our lives. There are competing discourses about what they express (underlying illness or social determination) or there is agreement that the university must provide psychiatric and counselling services that do not consume 1.5 months waiting time for an appointment, that provide a safe haven accessible confidentially when one is having an episode. We all need to

be trained to see distress, to respond to it.

- Many students have terrible financial constraints, many others have financial responsibilities of family added to them. Fellowships are not renewed on time and there is so much financial insecurity. And humiliation, so much humiliation in not being able to pay the mess bill. JNUTA should bring out a notice that faculty will help in any case of financial trouble.
- Teachers' perceptions of how things function are so different from that of students. It is NOT as easy to get your supervisor changed, as they seem to think. Teachers are always inviting students to approach them, but it is not easy. But teachers feel human too, they feel a deep sense of not coping all the time; they try to do their best, battling the grim reality that whatever they do, they cannot offer anything close to a systematic and systemic solution.
- The emphasis on English by the faculty is stifling and is essentially a meritocratic insistence. Students have been made to leave after M.Phil. because their English writing skills have been poor. But dissertations can be written in Hindi; and not everyone speaks Hindi too. Those of us who can, we must translate, help others by proof-reading and copy-editing. Perhaps, we should revert to the old system where one could get a six month extension for writing the dissertation. Language is such a huge barrier, there are so many, and each one can exclude. Above all, how do we find one in which we can be understood?

Our university is going through a terrible time, and we cannot draw hope from the possibility of change in circumstances any time soon. We, teachers and students, only have each other. We shall have to do things for ourselves, by ourselves. It is better that harsh words are said, spoken face

to face, than not said at all. We have to create the space to talk. We will all go anywhere to have this conversation. This cannot be the last time we have it, we have just begun.

We hope that JNUSU will host the next meeting and soon.

Sd/-

Ayesha Kidwai

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