

## **Justice for Najeeb: Between Identity and Insaaf**

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“Rahiye ab aisi jagah chal kar jahan koi na ho

ham-sukhan koi na ho aur ham-zaban koi na ho”

—Mirza Ghalib

(Go and stay in a quarter where no one lives

None to hear your speech, none to speak in your tongue)[1]

This is a personal statement of facts about an event that occurred in Jawaharlal Nehru University last year. Since the disappearance of Najeeb Ahmad from JNU in October 2016, students especially Muslims have felt tremendous insecurity in campus. I have written many pamphlets and have posted many updates on social media, describing the protests for ‘Justice for Najeeb’, the dwindling number of protesters, the lack of justice and creation of further injustice. But there are other more narratives, about personal tribulations as influenced by political events, about coming to terms with one’s own vulnerability as a Muslim student in a campus where progressivism is now only a veneer, about the alienation of that progressive space itself. With the disappearance of Najeeb and the protests which followed after it, I became fully involved in student activism on JNU campus. But there are many lingering discontents, about the nature of politics itself. Where do Muslim students place themselves, in a campus where the traditional left has also descended into thinly disguised Islamophobia, where the ‘new left’ also has immense secular anxieties about Muslim organisations? Should we distinguish ourselves from ‘the left’ by subscribing to the mores of ‘identity politics’? Or should the term ‘identity politics’ be

jettisoned completely, because of the sheer condescension and disparagement shown by the left when speaking of it? Should Muslim students evolve their own vocabulary of politics, as Ambedkarite student bodies have done very recently? Should they ally themselves with a re-invented notion of leftist progressive politics or give up any hope for the left's reinvention, especially because the benchmarks of progressivism are always used as a measure for Muslims? The answers to these questions are not uncomplicated. But these questions, regarding the Muslim Self and its location in university politics, have emerged during protests. During protests demanding for justice, one's own positionality and identity are reckoned. We may not have immediate responses to our own doubts and we have not proffered our own discourse. Nevertheless, our questions are substantial enough to provide us with a vantage point from which we can give critiques to the extant modes of student activism in JNU. And these critiques cannot be ignored, they demand a hearing. It is not easy to launch a critique of those who denounce criticism. It is not easy to confront alienation from these well-established actors bearing indubitable progressive credentials. But the enunciation of identity as the 'personal confronting the political' is very necessary in times of fascism, when minority identities face greater levels of victimisation. Therefore, how do we imagine *insaaf*? How we understand the lack of it? Najeeb's Muslim identity seems to be the prerequisite for many cycles of injustice. This essay is an exploration of this. This essay lays down and reflects upon the facts of Najeeb's disappearance. These facts have been twisted beyond credibility. An honest appraisal of the narratives about Najeeb's disappearance is sorely needed.

The life of Najeeb Ahmad is marked by his absence. He came to be known as the person who disappeared. His last known place, the premises of Jawaharlal Nehru University where he was enrolled as an M.Sc. student of Biotechnology, became aware of his existence only after his existence itself became untraceable. He was in JNU for barely a month, and had probably not even familiarised himself to its environs. But after he disappeared, Najeeb began to be featured in screeching news headlines, in circles of rumour-mongering, in half-hearted protest gatherings. He became the focus of numerous questions: Where is Najeeb? Has he been found? Some questions were deliberately arranged by a controversy-generating media to hint at something murky: did Najeeb watch ISIS videos? Has Najeeb joined ISIS? Did Najeeb go away out of his own volition? Some other questions were unspeakable: Is Najeeb alive? Will he ever be found? Such is the nature of these questions that they cannot elicit any satisfactory answer.

The disappearance of an individual casts a permanent doubt about not only his life, but also the circumstances of his disappearance. A disappeared person's life is itself marred by the

conjectures of others. His life becomes a post-life as it were, in which he is defined by the statements of others. He loses any chance to represent his own life in his words, to hold any stakes about his own existence, to express any dissonance from the many narratives that are circulated about him. But since a disappeared person's existence is still held in limbo, since he has not yet been marked 'dead', there are many narratives which are constructed about him. This, then, is his post-life, wherein frame upon frame is imposed upon him, each of these frames jostling with each other for credibility.

In the wake of a disappearance, there are other lives whose vulnerability and assertion together become visible. These lives are of those who are immediately affected by the absence of the disappeared person. Fatima Nafees, Sadaf Irshad, Mujeeb Ansari, Hasib Ahmad are the family members of Najeeb. They have raised their voices, tremulous at first, but with a gradually increasing vigour. Their demand for justice, for insaaf, for the return of the disappeared, makes them extremely susceptible to more injustice. But their cry for an ever elusive justice is far more resonant than their cries of pain and anguish.

Finally, there is a bevy of individuals and collectives who are involved in the demand for justice for the disappeared individual. Belonging to university spaces, or the larger civil society, these individuals are simultaneously engaged in a process of creating discourses about the disappeared individual, vulnerable identities, and statist agents. These individuals have varying social locations, which determine their power vis-a-vis the state. Not all these activists are motivated by concerns of justice. Some are present only for the sake of maintaining a progressive vocation. These individuals are those who believe that they are destined to enunciate the maxims of every protest that takes place anywhere. They are always engaged in carving out an electorate for themselves. Of course, electoral politics is an essential element in every democratic institution and its significance must not be undermined. But the urgency to be triumphant in student union elections trumps all other considerations. Therefore, for many progressive leftists organisations, especially those that are affiliated to parliamentary political parties, participation in protests for 'Justice for Najeeb' is valuable only to the extent that it ensures Muslim votes for them in the next Students' Union election in JNU. But solidarity does not arise from a self-professed claim to uphold justice for the sake of gathering vote counts. Solidarity arises from a feeling of identification and empathy with the disappeared. Thus, solidarity may be determined by identity, but need not be reducible to it. Be that as it may, it is not possible to sustain the momentum of any movement by excluding those who have vested interests. Such an effort might as well be self-righteous and counter-productive. Thus, the quest for justice involves all shades of motive and concern.

## The Event of Disappearance

The *prima facie* “narrative” of the events which occurred on 14th October 2016, at the premises of the Mahi-Mandavi hostel in JNU, is fundamentally flawed and rife with contradictions. It has been alleged by the members of the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (the student organisation affiliated to the Bharatiya Janata Party) that Najeeb was the one who had precipitated the incident of violence which took place. Najeeb had apparently slapped Vikrant, an ABVP member, who had visited Najeeb’s room on a campaign for the upcoming elections in Mahi-Mandavi hostel. The reason behind this ‘attack’, as given by ABVP, seems bizarre: that Najeeb had taken offence to a sacred thread on Vikrant’s wrist. No witnesses have testified to this story; it is clearly a fabrication, designed to play off the trope of the butthurt Muslim. The counter-attack on Najeeb which occurred seemingly in response to this has been justified by ABVP as a ‘reaction’. The action-reaction formula for justifying attacks on Muslims had been popularised by Narendra Modi during his tenure as the Gujarat Chief Minister. And the counter-attack was vicious. Najeeb was brutally beaten up even in front of the hostel warden. He was lynched repeatedly by ABVP members and also given threats that he will be sent to the “bahattar hoor” or ‘72 virgins’. The anti-Muslim slur and the verbal violence implicit in this threat is unmistakeable. Besides, graffiti saying ‘Pakistan ke mullah wapis jao’(Go back, Muslims of Pakistan) and ‘Muslims are terrorists’ was scribbled in the hostel washroom and dining table respectively; and the same ABVP ruffians also intimidated other (Muslim) students who had gathered to shield Najeeb.

When the initial account of the events on the night of the 14th of October was made known to the larger student body in JNU, it emerged that in the written version of the scuffle, Najeeb was portrayed as the ‘accused’ and not the victim of a brutal assault. This document, which was prepared immediately after the assault on Najeeb, was written and attested by a committee chaired by the warden of the Mahi-Mandavi hostel. This committee consisted of the senior warden of the hostel, the mess warden, the JNU Student’ Union’ president, the then president of the hostel, the former president of the hostel and Najeeb’s roommate. As per the decision of this letter, Najeeb stood guilty of physical violence on Vikrant and was expelled from the hostel forthwith. It was decided by this letter that Najeeb would have to vacate the hostel by 21st October 2016. It was even written in this letter that Najeeb had admitted to his act of violence. Najeeb’s intense vulnerability to a near mob attack was completely obscured by the signatories. The president of the Students’ Union himself was complicit in the anti-Muslim victimisation of Najeeb.

Najeeb had called his mother, Fatima Nafees, on the night that he was attacked. Fatima Nafees immediately left her hometown, Badaun (which is approximately 230 kilometres from Delhi) and travelled to JNU to see if her son was safe. She even spoke to Najeeb on the morning of the 15th of October. But when she arrived, Najeeb was missing. His roommate did not have any knowledge about his whereabouts. No one could provide any clues. Neither the security guards perpetually sitting at the gates of the hostel, nor the hostel authorities could furnish any information about where Najeeb could be.

### **‘Framing’ the Disappeared**

From the account provided above, it is obvious that a frame of guilt was imposed on Najeeb immediately in the wake of his assault. Najeeb’s defenselessness and inability to resist being framed is a contrast to the power of those who framed him, sentenced him, and made a mockery of the injuries borne by him. In his hour of extreme vulnerability, when his life itself was in danger, Najeeb was forced to accept that he had ‘started the whole thing’. He was forced to acquiesce to falsehoods about him. He was forced to witness his own humiliation. But this frame of guilt, which was imposed upon Najeeb in his presence, was just the beginning of a more sordid narratives.

In the days following the attack on Najeeb and his subsequent disappearance, there was a sustained attempt by the government to stereotype and demonise him. He was said to be of depressed and unsound mind, thereby suggesting that he alone was to be held responsible for his disappearance. Meanwhile, Najeeb Jung, the then Lt. Governor of Delhi declared that Najeeb had been sighted in Darbhanga, a place associated with terror modules of the Indian Mujahideen. More rumours were set afoot, of Najeeb joining ISIS, of Najeeb watching ISIS videos on his laptop. These rumours were published in leading newspapers such as the Times of India. Rumours of Najeeb having been sighted in Darbhanga, or speculation that he has gone astray to join global terror groups, constantly impose a frame upon Najeeb and his disappearance.

All these frames have been imposed because they coincide with a demonised, stereotyped notion of Muslim identity. Najeeb’s susceptibility to getting framed is directly related to the fact that he was a Muslim. But the Muslim-ness of Najeeb is invoked only while framing him as the culprit or the terrorist. His Muslim-ness is neglected and obscured when it comes to the question of acknowledging vulnerability and giving solidarity. For example, the likes of Kanhaiya Kumar and JNUSU office-bearers have repeatedly insisted that the

near-fatal attack on Najeeb must be seen as one that occurred on a common student. This 'common student', as per leftist vocabulary, is not marked by any identity. The 'commonstudent' is not Muslim, not a minority, not someone who will force the majority to lift their veil of ignorance as it were. The vulnerability that Najeeb bore as a result of his Muslim identity is not acknowledged. No efforts have been made by these leftists to render his targeted Muslim identity free from blame and suspicion.

Therefore, when Najeeb was 'framed' after his disappearance, his identity as a Muslim was emphasised or suppressed only as per the convenience of the framers. The framers are those who belong to the majoritarian identity, or can be easily ensconced within the majoritarian identity. Majoritarianism exists within the ranks of both the Hindutva right-wing and the Brahmanical, Islamophobic left-wing. The right-wing actively persecutes and demonises Muslims, whereas the left-wing refuses to counter right-wing propaganda. Both right-wing and left-wing governments use anti-terror laws to incarcerate innocent Muslims. Both are active in bolstering discrimination, marginalisation and exclusion of Muslims. Thus, it is a part and parcel of the minority's benighted status in a majoritarian state to constantly battle with the frames that are imposed on it. These frames arise due to Islamophobia, anti-Muslim hatred, Hindu caste supremacy. The Muslim man is framed as the Pakistani, as the Taliban or Al-Qaeda or ISIS sympathiser, as the fundamentalist and the terrorist, as the obvious suspect in any counter-terror regime, as the quintessential misogynist who oppresses women, as the bearded and backward patriarch with a circumcised penis. Muslim lives come to be defined by these frames of suspicion and supposed guilt, such that these frames become more real than life itself. But after Najeeb disappeared, how could he possibly resist any of the myriad frames that were imposed upon him: the violent student who slapped a fellow student, the Muslim who took offence at the sight of a sacred thread of Hindus, the mentally unstable individual implicitly believed to be a misfit and wrongdoer, the disappeared person sighted in a place known to be infested with terror modules, the ISIS recruit? Even though Najeeb continues to be missing, the frames attached to his life have stuck. Like branded cattle. Like the yellow star in Nazi Germany.

### **The Chequered Path of Seeking Justice**

On 16th October 2016, there was a blockade of the main gate of the JNU campus. The demands of the students from the chief proctor of the university were: punish the students responsible for assaulting Najeeb and file an FIR reporting the disappearance of Najeeb. When it became clear that the administration intended to make light of the whole matter and that the JNU vice-chancellor was refusing to assume any responsibility, students

imposed a gherao of the administration-bloc. This was sustained for nearly 24 hours during 19-20 October before it was unilaterally called off by the Students' Union. Protests by JNU students, whether at Vasant Kunj police station or Delhi Police headquarters at ITO or at India Gate, were met with the usual high-handed apathy of the administration and detentions by Delhi police. There were no signs of succour; Najeeb's sister, Sadaf Irshad reported intimidation by the JNU Vice Chancellor. During the march to India Gate on November 6th, even Fatima Nafees, Najeeb's mother, was dragged away into a police vehicle. She was detained until the intervention of Arvind Kejriwal, the Delhi Chief Minister. The images of the manhandling of Fatima Nafees went viral, made it to national headlines and were soon followed by mutual blame-gaming among the country's top political parties.

News of the cruelty meted out to a mother were immediately sought to be diverted by invoking a cliched trope about the JNU campus being a hub of terror and crime. A bagful of weapons was found near the JNU gates immediately the day after the protests at India Gate. It was linked to 'outsiders' who were regularly visiting the campus to join the 'Justice for Najeeb' protests. The incident provided the perfect alibi for the ABVP members on campus to notify the VC about the 'threats' they were facing, supposedly by Muslim students, on campus; the VC responded with alacrity, announcing that CCTV cameras would be installed to monitor the movement of students to and from campus. Incidentally, the 'outsiders' alluded to happened to be students from Jamia Milia Islamia (JMI) and Aligarh Muslim University (AMU), who have been an integral part of the student protests in and outside JNU. Needless to say, it was again a consciously stereotyped Muslim identity which was demonised.

While the fascist minions in the JNU administration ranging from the VC, the rector and the proctor continued to make a mockery of justice for Najeeb, the JNU Students' Union demonstrated that it is increasingly inept in undertaking any sustained mobilisation or carrying out any coherent struggle within the campus to ensure justice for Najeeb. The initial demands of the students were also forgotten in course of time. A 'Chalo JNU' was held on the 15th of November, and it was attended by students from AMU, JMI and Delhi University. But this was another cosmetic exercise and even lacked a proper agenda. These solidarity meetings were held only to pacify Muslim students and to give them a sense of false comfort. They were not backed by any stringent action against the apathy of the administration.

As protests waned and struggle diminished on campus, a University General Body Meeting (UGBM) was called in late November 2016. But the UGBM failed to achieve anything concrete. In fact, the UGBM in JNU has just been reduced to a body which indulges in petty public slander of students who oppose the parties which form the Union. Moreover, the UGBM functions on a majority-minority division of the attending students, wherein JNUSU supporters are in the obvious majority. The sole intent of the JNUSU in the UGBM held for 'Justice for Najeeb' was to gather two hundred-odd students to vote in favour of JNUSU resolutions, and to vote against any resolution which seemed to oppose the JNUSU/AISA-SFI's ultimatum.[2] Thus, only the Union's resolution for 'Chalo Badaun' was passed during the UGBM. But it was not implemented. After the UGBM, the momentum for protests in JNU was completely broken. The JNUSU leftists and their supporters moved on to other issues which needed their attention, however tokenistic that attention may be. In December, there was a march to Parliament, in which Asaduddin Owaisi and others Members of Parliament participated. But the JNU administration had more diktats up its sleeve.

The Vice-Chancellor M. Jagdeesh Kumar, who has time and again proved his pro-Modi stance, demonstrated the effectiveness of fascism in shielding the minions of BJP. In December 2016, the ABVP members who were found guilty by a much delayed proctorial inquiry, were given a mere hostel transfer by way of 'punishment'. At the same time, the VC capitalised upon the 'opportunities' provided by the attack on Najeeb to unleash a fascist onslaught upon the spaces of free speech and unconstrained protest cherished by JNU students. The admin-block which had been rechristened as 'Freedom Square/Azaadi Chowk' was declared out of bounds for student protests. The installation of iron grilles cordoned off the space which had been used by students to hold hunger strikes, to gherao the VC for his inaction on Najeeb's disappearance, and to put up alternate accommodation for students without hostels (this was called the 'Tents at Freedom Square' initiative by students). But despite the all-out fascist attack upon the democratic space for students, the Union continued to be undecided upon any active measures to be taken to fight the fascist muscle-flexing of Jagdeesh Kumar. Even the JNU teachers' association (JNUTA) was unable to issue any concrete statement in defence of Najeeb. Apart from a single 'human chain' protest outside the VC's residence, the JNUTA did not organise any protest for Najeeb.

How do we place the 'Justice for Najeeb' protests in the context of student movements in JNU? JNU is currently facing an all-out fascist conspiracy to saffronise higher education. In other words, there is a Hindutva agenda to introduce yoga into the curriculum, to reduce



the deprivation points enjoyed by women and students from backward regions, to take over recruitment procedures in order to ensure that only pro-establishment professors get appointed as faculty members. By implementing the UGC Gazette of 5th May 2016, sweeping changes have been made to alter the admission and supervisor allotment policies. There has also been a massive reduction in the seats available for M.Phil and PhD. This implies a drastic curtailment of the opportunities for students from marginalised backgrounds, and an unprecedented curb upon the research potential of students. Students in JNU have been resisting these untrammelled attempts at turning JNU into a Hindutva fiefdom. There have been stringent demands to reduce the viva-voce marks in the entrance test which in its extant form is highly discriminatory to marginalised students, to implement deprivation points for Muslim students to improve their abysmal under-representation in JNU, and to fulfill the reserved category seats in teaching posts. All these demands spring from objectives of social inclusion and democratisation of university campuses. But the question of 'Justice for Najeeb' is focused on a more fundamental demand: making university campuses safe for the life, liberty and dignity of personhood of minority students in campuses. An enforced disappearance of a student from a campus makes explicit the deepest vulnerability of those students who share the identity of the disappeared student. It forecloses the aspirations of students like Najeeb to enroll in universities like JNU. The question of securing social justice and inclusion no longer then stands as one of demanding affirmative action from a tentatively welfare state; instead, justice becomes a much more difficult quest for protecting bare life from an implicitly genocidal state. This is testified by the fact that Fatima Nafees, Najeeb's mother, has insisted in several protest meetings that if her son were to come back, she will take him back to his hometown Badaun and not let him remain a student in JNU.

Be that as it may, in 2017, the locus of protests for Najeeb has shifted from the JNU campus. In January, there was a protest demonstration outside the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD). In February, in view of the upcoming State Assembly Elections of Uttar Pradesh (where Najeeb's hometown Badaun is located), a number of protests were held, such as the Insaaf rally in Badaun and Lucknow. But these also had their consequences. An FIR was filed against Najeeb's mother for undertaking the Insaaf rally. Najeeb's relatives in Badaun were also harassed by the Delhi police one night. This relentless space of persecution and harassment faced by Najeeb's family members highlights the vulnerability and precariousness of people belonging to minority identities, wherein they have to rely on the protection of the same agents of the state which unleash violence on them. As Judith Butler writes, 'Precarity also characterizes that politically induced condition of maximized precariousness for populations exposed to arbitrary state

violence who often have no other option than to appeal to the very state from which they need protection. In other words, they appeal to the state for protection, but the state is precisely that from which they require protection. To be protected from violence by the nation-state is to be exposed to the violence wielded by the nation-state, so to rely on the nation-state for protection from violence is precisely to exchange one potential violence for another.’[3]

In October 2017, with the lapsing of an entire year since Najeeb’s disappearance, protests were held outside the headquarters of the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI). The legal case to find Najeeb had been shifted to the CBI in August 2017. But the status of the investigation showed negligible results. The investigation has been shifted to and from several departments. The Delhi Police, the Crime Branch, the Special Investigation Team appointed by the Home Ministry have all passed the buck. Thus, some citizen activists and a small group of JNU activists staged an all-night protest in front of the CBI on 14th October in order to urge the CBI to bring some credibility and transparency in its work.

The last hearing at the Delhi High Court was held on the October 16th, during which the High Court severely reprimanded the CBI lawyer for not filing the details of Najeeb’s disappearance after the assault on him, for changing its lawyer in every hearing instead of ensuring that the DIG himself attends the court proceedings, and for its very shoddy investigation. The next hearing is on 14th November 2017.

Meanwhile, the JNU administration has taken notice of the fact that Najeeb has not registered for the monsoon semester of July-December 2017, and has therefore asked Najeeb to vacate the Mahi hostel room where he used to stay. This is the second time that a ‘Vacate Hostel’ notice has been given to Najeeb (the first time was the very night when he was assaulted by ABVP members). This is how the admin remembers Najeeb: only as an unregistered student. The other facts about his absence are not known to the administration anymore.

The chequered quest of justice for Najeeb shows that though collective violence such as that unleashed on Najeeb is always frenzied, even though it may be driven by meticulous planning and surveillance and controversies with forgone conclusions. But collective protest is always channelised: through carefully chosen vanguards, bureaucratised methods of deliberation, and moderated avenues of criticism. This is the fallacy of democracy, in universities and beyond. The hallmark of any institute, any cognitive whole that aspires to

call itself democratic, is the extent to which it goes to stand with its weakest, most defenceless individual. In this regard, JNU has failed Najeeb.

### **Being Muslim**

In February, I attended the Madhyamam Literature Festival held in Calicut. I had been invited as a speaker on a panel to discuss student activism in universities. After I had delivered my talk, a student from Farook College, Calicut, came up to me. She asked me if there is any news of Najeeb. She said it seems like a fantasy to her, that nobody has seen him anywhere, nobody has recovered a trace of him. Where has he been hidden, that nobody in a country of millions can find him? She said that she wanted to study in JNU but Najeeb's disappearance has scared her. "What if the same thing happens to me? Nobody will protest for more than two months, people will forget." Grief and fear trembled in her voice, and I had no assurances to give her. I did not wish to rattle off a list of protest events to her, because her hunch was right: we have indeed forgotten Najeeb. How many young Muslim women like Fayiza have dampened their ambitions of studying in JNU, of moving to newer avenues for study, of leaving behind small towns for the sake of learning?

Two other Muslim women, Fatima Nafees, Najeeb's mother and Sadaf Irshad Najeeb's sister gave grim reminders at protest meetings about Najeeb's identity as a Muslim. At the protest called by Students Islamic Organisation of India (SIO) at MHRD in January, Fatima Nafees had asked, "Kya mein Hindustani nahi hun? Kya mera beta hindustani nahi hai? Mujhe awaaz uthane ka haq nahi hai? Modi jo apne aap ko UP ka beta kehta hai, kyun nahi Najeeb ko dhoond raha hai?" (Am I not an Indian? Is my son not an Indian? Do I not have a right to raise my voice? Modi calls himself as the son of Uttar Pradesh, but then why does he not find Najeeb?) At the protest outside CBI headquarters in October 2017, Sadaf Irshad remarked that a year has passed since the disappearance of Najeeb. Is this how the authorities would respond if there were a terror attack? If that were the case, the authorities would swing into action and many innocent Muslims will be picked and false charges will be slapped upon them. But in the case of Najeeb, all investigation agencies have shown nothing but silence and inefficiency.

But despite Fatima Nafees' stringent activism and unparalleled courage to speak truth to power, the JNUSU and the left parties forming it have been complicit in making a sorry and helpless spectacle of Fatima Nafees's tears and portraying her as a victim. In October 2016, as Shashi Tharoor, Mani Shankar Aiyar and other politicians visited JNU to make speech acts of solidarity, they all invoked the grieving image of Fatima Nafees. As a nation,

we love the image of the grieving mother; it awakens the patriarchal messiah in us. But If we need a grieving mother's tears to stir our conscience into spirited struggle, we might as well cast aside our masks of activism and withdraw into submissive silence. Fatima Nafees has been nothing short of a warrior in action. On 16th October 2017, when there was a protest outside the High Court, Fatima Nafees was dragged and manhandled by the Delhi police yet again. But there are also images of her resisting this police brutality. There is an image which shows her holding on resolutely to a small pillar on the pavement by the road in order to prevent the police from pulling her away and pushing her into a police van. Fatima Nafees is never hesitant in calling out the police atrocities directed at her or at those around her. But most progressive activists tend to imagine Fatima Nafees as a victim. A victim arouses a very indulgent feeling of a saviour and dependency. A victim is infantilised and patronised, taxonomised and theorised. But an assertive resister casts aside victimhood and sets forth her own discourse. Such a resister elicits solidarity on her own terms. Fatima Nafees is the embodiment of what Muslims should aspire to be: personifying resistance despite relentless victimisation.

In all the protests that have been organised outside JNU, the number of Muslim citizens have outnumbered other individuals present at the site of the protest. At the CBI headquarters in October 2017, there were many Muslims who had come to thwart the omnipotence of the state as embellished by the towering facade of the CBI. There was a very old man with a beard and a cap, and also a small nine-year old child called Yasa. Both were both agitating against the disappearance of Najeeb. They are examples of what leftists mock as identity politics. If someone who belongs to a particular community has been forcibly disappeared, has suffered oppression and assault, it is but natural that other people from that community will come out to protest, as a mark of shared vulnerability and solidarity through identification.

But JNU continues to house anti-Muslim elements in its midst. In November 2016, posters for Najeeb were pasted everywhere on campus. But in Periyar Hostel, the Associate Dean of the Students JNU had pasted a poster for 'Swachh pakhwada' or 'clean campus' right on top of a poster for Najeeb. Needless to say, the observance of the 'Swachh pakhwada' fortnight was inspired from the Swachh Bharat campaign. The image of a clean India goes hand in hand with an India from which Muslims have been cleansed. This is what Zygmunt Bauman has called the 'gardener state': the state which perpetrates a genocide in order to exterminate undesirable elements and design a better, cleaner populace, just liked a gardener prunes and removes weeds from a garden. During Diwali in October 2017, another incident occurred in Mahi-Mandavi hostel (where Najeeb used to live and where

he was attacked), showing the extent of anti-Muslim propaganda that can occur even during a festival. There was a sheet of paper that was pasted at the entrance of Mahi-Mandavi hostel. It was put up so that everyone can write Diwali greetings on it. But apart from that, threats and taunts about “Bring Back Najeed” were written (“Bring back Najeed- nahi layenge, kya ukhad loge- lana padega- kaat denge” (Bring back Najeed – no, we won’t, what will you do? You will have to bring him– we will cut you)). This graffiti was later covered up by another sheet of paper on which the words “Jai Jai Hindu” were written. There are so many acts of routine violence and intimidation in JNU, behind the fame and glory of this leftist and progressive campus.

What does it mean to be a Muslim activist in such an environment? During the protests in JNU against Najeed’s disappearance, when Muslim students argued that Najeed’s vulnerability qua Muslim student must be recognised, some leftist individuals from SFI alleged that Muslim students who propound their ‘identity politics’ are Islamists whose ideology of political Islam intends to establish an Islamic state in India. Such statements hark to an ever present nationalist anxiety about Muslims, that they are not Indian enough, that they constitute ‘the minority that had fought for, or wanted, Pakistan, and they now had not only to choose where they belonged, but also to demonstrate the sincerity of their choice: they had to prove that they were loyal to India and, hence, worthy of Indian citizenship.’[4] Muslim in JNU have also been called jihadis by secular leftists. These labels are reminiscent of the Islamophobic vocabulary of the War on Terror and makes one wonder at the bankruptcy of mainstream leftist imagination of politics in India. These labels are attached to Muslim students to deprive them of any moral courage to protest for justice, to alienate them from spaces of protest which are imagined as quintessentially secular in the leftist paradigm. Therefore, leftists assume that Muslim students need to be corrected and secularised before they can be admitted as equal participants in the field of protest. As Jasbir Puar writes in her essay, ‘Monster, Terrorist, Fag: The War on Terrorism and the Production of Docile Patriots’, ‘a certain grid of civilizational progress organized by such keywords as “democracy,” “freedom,” and “humanity” have come to superintend the figure of the monster... Today, we find the two figures of the monster and the person to be corrected in some ways converging in the discourse of the terrorist-monster. Which is to say that the terrorist has become both a monster to be quarantined and an individual to be corrected.’[5] Thus there is also a framing of Muslim students who claim identification with Najeed and assert the protection of Muslim-ness or minority identity as a legitimate political discourse. Their dissidence with mainstream leftist discourse is termed as a unity-breaker. One wonders if there are parallels between the unity extolled by the mainstream left and the national consolidation of Hindus by Hindutva. Ultimately, both are variants of

nationalism — secular nationalism and Hindu nationalism, and the Muslim has place in neither.

What then is to be done in this scenario, where to be a Muslim activist implies that we make ourselves vulnerable to all shades of Islamophobia — red and saffron? We must cease to be apologetic about our identity, and not defer to secular disciplining of Muslim bodies.

Shehr-e-mazloom: In the city of the oppressed

In February 2017, I spent a night at Najeeb's house in Badaun. The Insaaf rally was over, and I had stayed back, talking to Najeeb's sister Shifa, after the other protesters had left. By the time I decided to leave, it was already too late. Najeeb's parents persuaded me to stay back. So I got the chance to be a part of Najeeb's family for a short while. Inside the house, the din of the protest meetings was over. The flamboyance of pretentious politicians was absent. There were a number of relatives and neighbours who came, but they too left. When I was alone with Najeeb's family, I felt like an intruder in their moment of grief/hope. But they did not make me feel like one. As I sat and listened to Shifa, Najeeb's sister telling me about how Najeeb used to teach her and lend her his books, and how she has lost the urge to study after his disappearance, I realised that solidarity is not always shown in the panoply of protest meetings and speeches, but also in listening to the lonely silence of a grieving household.

The next morning, as I made my way back to Bareilly and then Lucknow, Fatima Nafees (who is called 'Ammi' by many students in JNU) gave me some bananas so that I have something to eat on the train. Hers are acts of care and concern, which are sorely missing from all the modes of student protests in JNU. 'The struggle for Justice for Najeeb' exists only in the form of scattered, half-hearted protests now. But the stupendous courage of Fatima, that name of the Prophet's daughter, is all-enduring. That is the source of inspiration, when the self has been brow-beaten by mundane politics and looks for manna. Surely, the power of an ethical and spiritual motivation in politics is undeniable. Even though the ethical may be impossible to adumbrate, the search for it is worthwhile and valuable.

Heba Ahmed

Translation by author ↑

AISA and SFI are student wings of the CPI(ML-Liberation) and the CPI(M) respectively. These two parties formed the JNU Students' Union in 2016. They came together in an alliance of progressive left unity in the elections held on September 9, 2016. AISA, SFI and another 'independent' left organisation, DSF have formed the JNUSU in 2017. ↑

Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable*, (London: Verso Books, 2009), 25-26 ↑

p. 610-11, Gyanendra Pandey, 'Can a Muslim be an Indian?', Source: *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 41, No. 4 (Oct., 1999), pp. 608-629 Published by: Cambridge University Press Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/179423> ↑

p. 120-1, Jasbir K. Puar and Amit S. Rai, 'The War on Terrorism and the Production of Docile Patriots', *Social Text* 72, Vol. 20, No. 3, Fall 2002. Copyright © 2002 by Duke University Press. ↑