

## STUDENT ACTIVISM IN INDIA: SOME IMPRESSIONS FROM MY FIELDWORK IN JNU PREMISES

Anna Schnieder-Krüger

"It's hard to be an activist these days. You pay a huge price for it."<sup>1</sup>

This quote from one of the interviews conducted for my Master's thesis, alludes both to the financial (fines) and security (violent attacks) dimensions of the pressures presently faced by student activists in India. The fieldwork was conducted during February and March 2019, on the campus of JNU in Delhi. The empirical research was focused on the changes and challenges that student activists on the JNU campus face on an everyday basis. Since the Hindu nationalist government came to power in 2014, there has been a systematic attempt to restrict academic freedom and expression in many universities, mainly through new bureaucratic rules. Particularly since February 2016, JNU, its students and teachers gained much attention, as they were labeled as "anti-nationals" by the media and government, turning them into supposed "enemies of the nation". Since then, the campus has changed into one of the main symbolic battlefields between the Hindu nationalist forces and the longstanding liberal "campus culture" JNU has been famous for.

Ever since, the campus has been transformed in many ways. It changed physically, through new statues and street names, but also structurally, through new regulations of attendance, Dhaba<sup>2</sup> timings and regulations of students' movements within and outside of their hostel rooms. All these changes have had an impact on the campus culture that has evolved with its own histories, memories and traditions. The altering space occupied by the Administration Building,

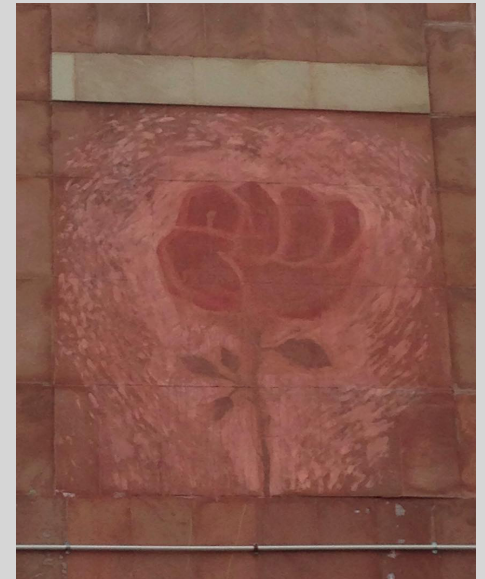
also known as Freedom Square, is a symbol of such structural and physical transformations. After the attack on JNU

in 2016, it was occupied by students and professors to create a space for public lectures in

order to redefine themselves as an institution. Since then, the Freedom Square has become a central space of struggle in and for the students' protests, but presently it has been cordoned off by a 100-meter zone that forbids any form of gathering. Simultaneous to the cordoning off of physical spaces, the spaces for free speech are shrinking. As the introductory quote mentions and ever since the student Najeeb has disappeared from campus in 2016, it is very clear that activists face actual danger.

In my fieldwork, I focused on how the Administration since 2014, and particularly since 2016, tried to control the bodies and their movements on campus through bureaucratic rules, physical and structural changes, effective fear tactics and a division of space. I based my research on the assumption that the campus, as a physical space with its own memories tied to it, is an essential element for student movements. As a reaction to the changes, the JNU Student's Union (JNUSU), along with the Teachers' Association developed a multilayered resistance movement, which opened new spaces of resistance through self-archiving and generated its own protest aesthetic and rhetoric. Since the physical spaces are constantly shrinking, parts of the protest have shifted to the digital realm. Self-organized Dhabas, critical discussions and teachings among the students and teachers as well as the refusal to sign attendance registers are resistive practices performed regularly. To hold up the protest, a nostalgia for the past as a promise for the future is also furthered, because more and more students refer to the campus as being "exhausted" and "tired".

To end with a quote of the current JNUSU president N Sai Balaji: "The campus is alive because it is fighting on everyday. [...] we are alive just because we are fighting the everyday basis. The day we will stop, that the campus will die. [...] It is all about the moment, it's all about strategy, it's all about how do you fight that."<sup>3</sup>



Administrative Block, JNU. June 2018 © Anna Schnieder-Krüger



Administrative Block, JNU. June 2018  
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### About the Author:

Anna Schnieder-Krüger is an MA student of Modern South and Southeast Asian Studies at IAAW. While studying at HU (Berlin), JNU (Delhi) and UNIBO (Bologna), she developed her research focus on student activism and protest culture in India.



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1 M. INTERVIEWED ON 23.02.2019. JNU CAMPUS.  
2 SMALL FOOD STALL

3 N SAI BALAJI, INTERVIEWED ON 24.03.2019. JNU CAMPUS.