

India: 'Will Have to Quit': Allahabad University Admin Unmoved as Protests Against 400% Fee Hike Rage

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Despite months of protests, a hunger strike and even an attempt at self-immolation, university authorities have allegedly refused to even enter into a dialogue on the substantial fee hike which is driving some students to consider quitting the university altogether.

New Delhi: Student protests, social media campaigns, a hunger strike and even attempts by a group of students to self-immolate by pouring kerosene on themselves – Allahabad University has seen it all in the recent past. And it all started when the University decided to increase fees by 400% for every course taught.

The decision to hike fees came at a time when the University was not functioning. The notification was issued in June. When students caught wind of the appalling news, protests began. Initially, the outcry began over social media but within a month, there was visible agitation inside the University campus.

Keshav Kumar, a student from the history department, narrated his plight to *The Wire*. The 23-year-old who hails from the Ballia district of Uttar Pradesh is currently pursuing a Master's degree at Allahabad University.

Kumar's father was a mill worker in Punjab before he had to stop working in 2017 due to a severe heart condition. The then 17-year-old Kumar did not know what to do, but being the older of two brothers, decided to step out of his home, educate himself and make things better for his family. However, when Kumar was in the second year of his graduation, the coronavirus pandemic touched down along with the subsequent national lockdown, adding pressure to his already financially unstable family.

Kumar began offering tuition classes but when these were not enough to meet his and his family's requirements, his younger brother began working as an e-rickshaw driver.

For hundreds of students like Kumar, the fee hike is a big deal.

"Sometimes I'm not able to fill up the forms for various government exams that I want to take. That is solely because arranging a sum of Rs 500 – sometimes as high as Rs 1,600 – gets difficult and I have to ask different people, including my teachers, to help me with it," Kumar said.

He added that he doesn't travel home because of the additional expenses it entails.

The fees in the history department were increased from Rs 975 to Rs 3,600; a 369% increase. And the same is the case for other departments in the University as well.

The University's vice-chancellor Sangita Srivastava said, "Without the fee hike, it would be difficult to sustain the University. The University was completely out of funds and was taking this step to keep the education going."

Further, University management has claimed that the sum the students will now have to pay is not so high as to merit protests in such huge numbers and that students can pay the sum that is being asked for.

However, the students have taken exception to the fact that the University management has allegedly not been responsive at all. For the past 19 days, at least five students have been on a fast-unto-death strike, the core reason being the management's refusal to even engage in a dialogue with the students.

As per the professors and a few other authorities in the University, over 50% of the students of Allahabad University come from financially marginalised backgrounds.

Self-immolation

On September 19, Adarsh, a student at the University, along with some of his fellow peers tried to douse themselves in kerosene. Videos of Adarsh and the other students in a scuffle with the police and trying to put more kerosene of themselves made the rounds on social media.

Adarsh and others had been protesting for a long time, even before the fee hikes, against a range of issues. As students continued their agitation even after the administration asked them to stop, on September 18 police reached Adarsh's home and told his parents about the protests he was involved in. The police allegedly told his parents to ask him to come or else "face the consequences".

When Adarsh came to know about this, he saw it as the last straw and declared that if the V-C and college management did not agree to a dialogue with the students, he would take his life.

"When they did not respond to me by 11 am and did not even give me a time at which they would actually talk to me, I was left with no choice. Surrounded by at least 300 people, I poured a gallon of kerosene on myself. The administrators and other students there stopped me, and the police registered an FIR against me. However, I will still continue to protest and the University will have to bend," Adarsh told The Wire.

Unlike Adarsh, Kumar is not usually a part of these protests. But he still wants the decision to raise fees to be rolled back. He said that seeing police lathi charge his fellow students while he is walking around campus makes him afraid. He said that he wonders what he will do if the protesters do not succeed, fearing that he will have to quit the University if the fees are not brought back down.

"I somehow managed to survive the pandemic, but a lot of my friends could not. Some headed back to their village to work in the fields. Others who did not have the nerve to go back home, joined banks or offices as security guards," Kumar said.

After sending money for his family back home, paying his rent and keeping money aside for food and travel, collecting Rs 3,600 for his fees seems impossible to Kumar.

"Now the fee would be somewhere around Rs 3,600; how will I arrange that money? Post-pandemic, I do not even get tuition classes like before. I hesitate to even eat a plate of pani puri that other students have on a regular basis," he said. "Paying this big sum will be challenging. Even to fill a form for my Masters and further education, I have to borrow money from my teachers, friends, and others. If this decision is not rolled back, I will probably quit."

Boycott for professor who supported students

The students claim to have received zero support from University professors. What's more, the only professor who chose to support students alleged that he has been completely boycotted by his colleagues.

Vikram Harijan a professor at AU, went on ground to support the protesting students on September 22. "These students come from a really marginalised background. The annual income of their families is less than Rs 1.5 lakh. I myself have dealt with the such situation when I was a student," he said.

Harijan now feels that his job may be on the line.

Harijan claims that there are a few professors who are in support of the students, but said that they will never come to the forefront for this very reason. "The country should have progressed in a JNU-model direction where, in our times, education was accessible to all," he said. "Instead, we are moving towards the complete commercialisation of education. The infrastructure of the University in the past few years has seen negligible growth."

At least two FIRs against 16 students have been filed at the Colonel Gunj police station in Allahabad. They have been charged under Indian Penal Code (IPC) Sections 147 (Rioting), 353 (Assault or criminal force to deter public servant from discharge of his duty), 504 (Intentional insult with intent to provoke breach of the peace) and 506 (Criminal intimidation).

Further, a total of eight students have thus far been hospitalised due to the toll the hunger strike has taken on their health. Yet, five students remain on hunger strike in the University.

The police and University management are adamant that protests will not be allowed and the hike will not be rolled back.

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