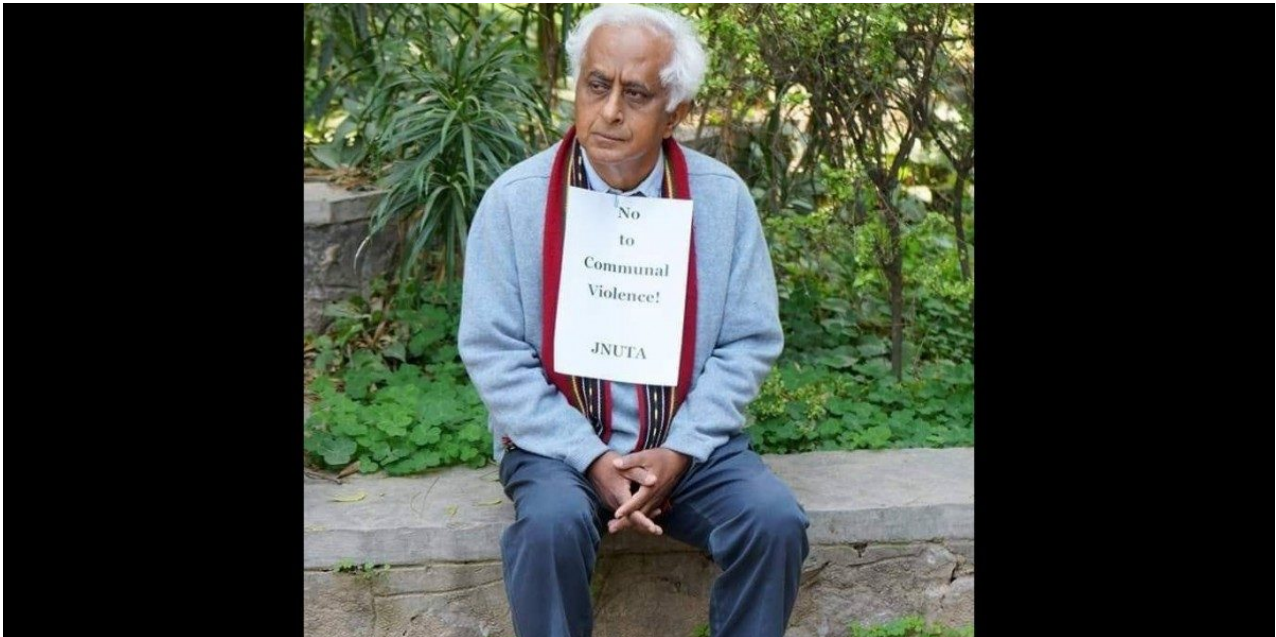


Professor Franson Manjali: A Philosopher Who Contributed to Creating an Equal World

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I met with a gruesome road accident a few days ago and as I was recuperating between painful surgeries on my leg, a friend of mine who called to find out about my well-being ended up giving me an even more saddening piece of information – Professor Franson Manjali of Jawaharlal Nehru University is no more.

Who was Franson Manjali and why did he influence so many students?

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I came to JNU in 2004 to do my MPhil in English at what was then called 'Centre for Linguistics and English'. I came from Wayanad and from a remote village. I was a first-generation college-goer from a migrant background. It did not take much time for me to recognise that I had gotten into something very tough, and a difficult academic and personal battle lay ahead. My parents were farmers and when I set foot in JNU, my house in Wayanad was yet to be electrified. India was a different place just a few decades ago, indeed. JNU was probably the only place that was generous enough to give someone like me admission and sustain me as a researcher.

Since I was a left-leaning student from Kerala, I knew that it would not be difficult to make friends in JNU. From my masters onwards, I had worked with theory, Marxist as well as other kinds. While taking one of my first courses on Western philosophy, especially of a deconstructionist kind, I was cautious. Do people like Immanuel Kant, Fredrick Nietzsche,

Jacques Derrida and Franson's own friend Jean Luc Nancy matter? What about people like Martin Heidegger, Immanuel Levinas, Gilles Deleuze and Maurice Blanchot? Do they have something in them that can change the world too?

While pursuing an elective course with Franson (in which I happened to be the only student that semester), I was more than mesmerised by the depth of the course. I never knew that philosophy could transform anyone, irrespective of where they come from. I could now look at Gramsci for insights as much as Lenin (if not more than Lenin). Immanuel Kant and Michael Foucault can tell me a narrative of self and the world as much as Marx. This was so enabling that I felt that I have become 'powerful', armed with deep insights, and it did not anymore matter which background I came from. Professor Franson made me feel that as long as I have deep philosophical insights, it does not matter whether I was from a city or from a remote village. That was enabling and I felt it for the first time in my life: it is important to know.

He told me that the idea of 'nation' is a created one and not a concrete, eternal 'thing'. He also told me that the purpose of food is to quench hunger, and the politics around it has nothing to do with hunger, often. He would insist that India and the world are deeply plural and the idea of division is dangerous. He very often asserted that freedom is inherent, and states cannot decide what should their citizens eat, who should and shouldn't they marry and how they should clothe themselves. He taught me about the French revolution.

He also made sure that his students do not use terms without knowing them fully; rather, he insisted they understand them deeply. Professor Franson distributed Art Spiegelman's *Maus* – a series of graphic novels on a holocaust survivor – to make us understand fascism from the bare basics. In order to understand the concept of 'body', he distributed Ernst Kantorowicz's famed *King's Two Bodies* – a fascinating account of Western philosophy. Whoever engaged with these texts understood them well and ended up reading more and realised the gravity of the issues they are dealing with. Franson was a philosopher of language, linguistic cultures and philosophical enquiries that can only be articulated in terms of language.

What was unique about Professor Franson's approach was that he did not think that social science is the only way to enlighten people and that data is not the only way to convince us of inequality and violence unleashed upon people. He taught me that it is possible to engage with oppression by way of thinking deeply about what oppression does to the party at the receiving end. It is possible, he demonstrated, to imagine freedom and independence by engaging with those ideas deeply. He understood that merely creating noise against the gravest threats of today are not enough, they need to be fully understood in the first place.

He was at the forefront of JNU's battle against an authoritarian crackdown and suppression of independent thought by the government after 2014. He was saddened that a great university was targeted for being just that – a great university. He discussed at length what a university meant and how universities must be protected by civilised and

democratic societies. He was bold enough to discuss all these while a campaign was on to demean and dehumanise one of India's best universities – JNU – by none other than the Union government, its sole protector.

Professor Franson will remain a unique lighthouse in the minds of those who knew him. Philosophers are hardly understood and often ignored but they also changed the world. Professor Franson has done his bit successfully and it does not matter how many people understood him the way they understood social scientists and social activists. As he leaves for a different place, I am confident that his gigantic contribution towards creating an equal world is fascinating and it is our turn to build on it. Bon Voyage, Franson – and I am writing this in both literal and theoretical pain.

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You have been thought-provoking!

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