


POLITICIZATION OF UNIVERSITIES IN A POSTCOLONIAL CONTEXT: A HISTORICAL SKETCH OF STUDENT POLITICAL ACTIVISM IN INDIA

A politização das universidade em um context pós-colonial: um esboço
histórico do ativismo político estudantil na Índia

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the nature and historical trajectories of student politics in India. In doing so, it seeks to centrally carry forward the argument that students represent a powerful and informed political agency, motivated along the axes of either ushering large scale changes or in addressing minor campus issues. It also seeks to map the background and dissects the factors that have led to the beginnings, decline and resurgence of student movements in postcolonial societies, particularly in India wherein the contribution of youth or students towards nation-building via activism or participation in mainstream politics can hardly be discounted. While the 1960s did witness the rise of student movements globally, this paper centrally argues that it has been an intrinsic feature in the Indian context for almost a century now, both before and after Independence from colonial rule and thereby concludes with the idea that university spaces have been integral to such developments. Thus, a novel contribution of this paper lies in laying out a periodization of student politics within such a milieu.

KEYWORDS

India. Student Politics. Nation-Building.

RESUMO

Este artigo examina a natureza e as trajetórias históricas da política estudantil na Índia. Ao fazê-lo, procura levar adiante o argumento de que os estudantes representam uma agência política poderosa e informada, motivada ao longo dos eixos do lançamento de mudanças de grande escala ou da abordagem de questões menores do campus. Também procura mapear os antecedentes e dissecar os fatores que levaram ao início, declínio e ressurgimento de movimentos estudantis em sociedades pós-coloniais, particularmente na Índia, onde a contribuição de jovens ou estudantes para a construção da nação por meio do ativismo ou da participação na política dominante pode dificilmente ser desconsiderado. Embora a década de 1960 tenha testemunhado globalmente a ascensão dos movimentos estudantis, este artigo argumenta que essa tem sido uma característica intrínseca no contexto indiano há quase um século, tanto antes quanto depois da independência do domínio colonial e, assim, conclui com a ideia de que os espaços universitários têm sido parte integrante de tais desenvolvimentos. Assim, uma nova contribuição está em traçar uma periodização da política estudantil nesse contexto.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Índia. Política estudantil. Construção da nação.

While addressing a Students' Congress Conference at Banaras (now Varanasi) on February 15, 1946, Jawaharlal Nehru observed and highlighted a prominent 'defect' within the student movements in India. In his view, it was 'not' the function of the student movements in India to offer political leadership to the country that was at the cusp of Independence from British colonial rule.¹ In favour of de-politicising the Indian student movements at large, he was of the opinion that students could take up social service for the rural populace as a vocation instead. To quote Nehru: "The student movements all over the world are of a non-political nature, whereas in India they are linked to politics. This is the main defect with the students' movements in India" (NEHRU, 1946 *apud* DEKA, 2015, p. 36).

Although the political class and members of the ruling Congress Party (which was the principal political party at the time) sought to discourage students' political activism; since its inception student movements have been largely conjoined to the political realities of its times in the Indian context. Nehru's apprehension holds firm ground even to this day. While the tumultuous decades of the 1960s did influence global forms of activism in university campuses, such has been an intrinsic feature in the Indian context for almost a century now, both before and after Independence from colonial rule. In this respect, the sphere of higher education in general or universities in particular have played an integral role in the process of political socialization of students. Over time it has manifested as vibrant institutions facilitating participatory engagements in political processes and within such spaces – students have developed political agencies that have emanated out of ideological factors and identity-based registers.

To further demonstrate the nature and workings of students as political actors, this paper outlays a snapshot examining the nature and historical trajectories of student politics in India – delineating how and why higher education (particularly universities) continues to serve as a breeding ground for student politics; the major trends of such actions and the distinctive events that relate to the same. The attempt would be to underline how an 'ecology of politics' has mushroomed within Indian universities and thereby demonstrate how it has been largely dependent on political forces external to it for its sustenance. It must be understood that while student political activism within this context has been a constant feature for almost a century now, it has been marked by highs and lows. Several factors have been accounted for its origin, rise or decline and resurgence. Hence, the following paragraphs seek to outline the growth of student movement in India, its sustenance, and relevance for the present times.

THE PRE-INDEPENDENCE ERA

Student political activism has had a long history of origin in India ranging back to the pre-Independence era. The movement for Independence provided it the much needed fillip. While the pre-Independence period witnessed near-total commitment towards attaining independence for the nation; the post-independent period initially witnessed its decline since the ruling Congress Party wanted to de-link politics from campuses. However, it was the same Party that gave student movements the much

¹ Having been a colony of the British for almost two hundred years, India attained Independence from colonial rule on 15th August 1947. Jawaharlal Nehru was the first Prime Minister of independent India.

needed resurgence via its Emergency excesses in the mid-1970s.² Most of the commentaries on this theme have highlighted the positive nature of student political activism – the most important being that it moulds national, regional as well as local issues and thereby structures public opinion. What were the conditions and factors that led to the emergence of student movements before independence? Primarily, it was the quest for independence from British colonial rule. The pre-independence period was extremely significant for the beginnings of this phenomenon and cannot be deemed irrelevant.

Altbach has argued that student political involvement or activism can contribute to the processes of nation-building; political socialization; social change in the Third World and focuses national attention on political and social questions that might otherwise be ignored by the political system (ALTBACH, 1984, p. 653). Altbach also attests other factors that have been favourable for the rise of student movements which include: the size and location of a university, residential patterns, class backgrounds as well as streams of study. Herein, he outlines that students in the social sciences and humanities tend to be more active than those from natural sciences or professional fields (ALTBACH, 1987, p. 107). In this regard, Altbach has also argued that in emerging countries such as India, traditions of student political involvement often date back to the struggles against colonialism (ALTBACH, 1999, p. 57). The Non-Cooperation Movement against the colonial regime under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi in the early 1920s was the first major agitation which witnessed large scale involvement of students via forums such as youth leagues and debating societies. This was one of the first traits of student political activism in the Indian context. Students also provided manpower for the Congress party, at times, assuming leadership when its leaders were arrested (ALTBACH, 1968, p. 256).

With the attainment of Independence, the project of nation-building assumed supremacy and as a consequence the class of students were persuaded to contribute to the same, although in an apolitical manner. Altbach attests that ideological fervour was on the decline due to a major factor: withdrawal of the Congress' support (a reversal to its former position) to the student movement with political figures and educators urging students to avoid politics and to concentrate on acquiring the skills necessary for national development (ALTBACH, 1968, p. 255). In this regard, Altbach further states that:

The strong pro-Congress student movement collapsed shortly after independence was achieved. Student leaders continued to demand rapid action to socialize the land and to end caste restrictions. Adult leaders, engaged in the problems of the partition of the country and the need to establish government authority, ignored, and then opposed the student demands. Even Nehru, one of the staunchest supporters of the student movement, criticized student impatience and urged the university community to follow the lead of the government and simply participate in the tasks of national development (ALTBACH, 1987, p. 147).

² Lasting for a 21 month period between June 1975 and March 1977, the Emergency declared by the Indira Gandhi Government witnessed the rule by decree; curtailing of civil liberties and freedom of the press as well as the cancellation of elections.

Nation-building did become the buzzword for a new nation that was riddled with the ills of social hierarchies as well as the aftermath of a violent partition. As a consequence, it was a conscious as well as convenient approach of the middle and upper classes in Indian society to de-link students from politics; keep them engaged with the goals of nation-building and as a consequence, help in the steady erosion of ideology – all of which went hand-in-hand. Feelings and sentiments of nationalism were at its peak during the struggles against colonial rule and parochial natures of this particular upper and middle class did emanate during resistance to the British educational policy as well (MAZUMDAR, 2019, p. 19). In this regard, Mazumdar has further suggested that:

[...] even before independence there were strands in student politics whose central concerns were different. The growth of communal politics that served the British objective of *divide et impera*, for instance, also found its expression within student politics. If 'unified' All India Students' Federation (AISF) came into being in the 1930s, so too did the All India Muslim Students' Federation and the Hindu Students' Federation (MAZUMDAR, 2019, p. 18).

Student politics has been conceptualised as a key component of national politics wherein students formed a literate, politically conscious and a modern populace whose political orientations had far reaching consequences for the emerging political culture of respective societies. Student participation in the Independence movement forms a glorious phase in the history of India and it was for the first time that a semblance of political identity was provided to the Indian youth in general. As a consequence, most of the present day political leaders received their political baptism during that phase. However, it has also been argued by scholars and commentators that no massive student movement of an all-India dimension occurred after Independence. Only strikes and agitations affected universities and certain state governments (HAZARY, 1988, p. 106-108).³ While one can agree to a certain extent that the magnitude of the Independence Movement and the participation of students therein was massive; the post-Independence period also witnessed major movements spearheaded by students which resonated with global upheavals across the length and breadth of university campuses worldwide.

STUDENT MOVEMENTS IN POST-INDEPENDENT INDIA

India attained Independence from British colonial rule on 15th August 1947. The young nation was envisioned as a Union of federal states, each one diverse from another. Talking about student political activism within such a milieu, Jayaram has deemed that a change from pre-independence to post-independence was qualitative in nature. While the pre-Independence period of student activism had a single definite goal which lay in seeking independence for India, the nature of the student movements

³ In this regard, Hazary has also argued that students' participation was characterized by aspects of militant unity and ideology and was considered to be a prestigious engagement.

were conjoined within the country's life and politics back then. Student agitations thereafter had not been directly political but concerned with local and non-ideological issues. It is opined that they had become disruptive in nature and had lost the character of a concerted movement (JAYARAM, 1979; 1990). Jayaram has also stated that, student political activism has had multiple causalities, ranging from 'timepass' to acute politicization of the academia. He makes an important point here that student unrest is not always necessarily a manifestation of delinquency, but under certain conditions can develop into a concerted social movement. As a consequence the decade of sixties witnessed the makings of such concerted student movements which ushered during the seventies but were stifled during the Emergency that lasted from 1975 to 1977, only to reappear once it was lifted (JAYARAM, 1979, p. 695-696).

The early phases of the post-Independence period witnessed cracks within the student movement in India, one characterised by a lack of ideological uniformity. Nevertheless, while higher education was an elite affair in earlier times the post-Independence period witnessed greater democratization of such spaces whereby historically and socially marginalized groups were able to access them. However, there are differing positions on the predominance of indices of hierarchy such as caste or class within such spaces. For instance, while Andersen and Pant (1970) have noted the dominance of caste in student politics in provincial universities such as the Allahabad University; Oommen (1974) has argued that identity registers such as caste or religion were weak factors within the realm of student politics in the centrally located Delhi University at that time.

Rudolph and Rudolph in their specific contribution to understanding the relationship between education and politics in India have asserted that since Independence, educational policy and educational institutions have been increasingly forced to confront and adjust to their social and political environment whereby universities have become more socially and culturally representative, been penetrated and shaped by democratic as against elite, by indigenous as against anglicized, norms and behaviour (RUDOLPH; RUDOLPH, 1972, p. 5). Even Hazary has argued that the most important criterion which divides Indian youth into student youth and non-student youth is exposure to higher education. However, despite democratization of such spaces and in spite of many educational institutions being accessible, many have continued to remain exclusive whereby prevailing social hierarchies and other structural constraints deprived an overwhelming majority of youth of the benefits of higher education – a sector which constituted a key to vertical social mobility (HAZARY, 1988, p. 105-106). Altbach has also stated that education became accessible to broader segments of the population and was no longer homogenous. However, a 'dual culture' developed in spite of diversities in identity. In this light, he argues:

Students from lower castes and classes often constitute a rather isolated, although growing, segment of the college population and seldom take part in extracurricular activities. Such students suffer most from the disadvantages of Indian higher education poor conditions and falling standards of instruction, crowded institutions and fear of unemployment and enjoy few of its advantages. Thus, they are frustrated and willing to participate in sporadic and disorganized student unrest and demonstrations. Working-class students or those from rural areas have generally



gone into liberal-arts subjects, while upper- and middle class students, who have received adequate secondary training and who have facility in English, have tended to go into the sciences, when they have been able to meet the rigorous admissions requirements (ALTBACH, 1968, p. 262).

Amid this backdrop, universities became a major agent of political socialization of students. Rudolph *et. al.* have argued that such a process provided them congruence with national politics. They further contend that since students did not aspire to be a part of the ruling class, they lacked the ideological identity and mission in the political system. As a consequence, they further attest that while students have often played a role in the 'regime politics' of a number of nations and in the ideological politics of others – the orientation of student politics in the aggregate has remained relatively congruent with that of national politics. In fact, through its connections with political parties, student politics has a 'programmatic dimension'. For instance, students know that making a name and a following in the university arena can contribute to that national or state politics (RUDOLPH *et. al.*, 1971: p. 1657-1659). Reiterating the aforementioned position, Ray has argued that:

In the pre-independence period, they (students) were involved in.....'regime politics' i.e. challenging the legitimacy of the British political order, in the post-independence period, they have been involved in the politics of programme (party), interest and issues. Unlike the students of Korea, Turkey, Indonesia and Ceylon, the Indian students, with the temporary exception of Naxalite students in the late 1960s no longer challenge the legitimacy of the political order (RAY, 1977, p. 186).

Akin to the above, even Hazary (1988) has argued that it has been difficult to identify student political activism with any specific ideological stance. While students largely tended to be leftists at one time; traditionalist parties and rightist elements seem to have received at least as much support from the students as have parties and groups with leftist orientation. He (HAZARY, 1988, p. 116-117) has noted that, "activism is no longer exclusively identified with leftist radicalism; rather its ramifications may include traditionalism, status-quoism, parochialism, regionalism, chauvinism", which posed a threat to India's federal polity and pluralistic society whereby leaders of student revolt are not particularly committed to justice and excellence but are looking for the easy ways to get into the establishment. Notwithstanding, the major exception from 1967 to 1971 was the rise of 'Naxalism'.⁴ It must also be noted that this was the phase which also witnessed major campus protests worldwide. While the Naxalbari Movement did spread to several Indian federal states such as Andhra Pradesh and Kerala, it was most active in the state of West Bengal which witnessed major participation on the part of University students, "blending into political violence that characterised relationships

⁴ The Naxalbari Movement emerged as a peasant rebellion against the landed classes in the early 1970s in the Eastern parts of India, particularly in Naxalbari, a town in the state of West Bengal. Naxalism was the inherent ideology, which found support from university students of that time who participated alongside peasants seeking land re-distributive rights.

among the three Communist (and other) parties” (RUDOLPH *et. al.*, 1971, p. 1659). It must be argued here that Naxalism rejuvenated ideological undercurrents into student political activism that had somewhat lost direction or a sense of purpose and it paved the pathway for its resurgence.

Apart from the Naxalbari Movement, student movements in Indian states of Bihar and Gujarat in 1973-74 marked the dawn of a new phase in Indian student politics. Also referred to as the JP Movement, it was led by Jaya Prakash (JP) Narayan – a prominent socialist politician at that time and drew inspiration from the *Sarvodaya* Movement.⁵ Students mobilised under the banner of *Chhatra Sangharsh Samiti* and focussed on broader societal issues like electoral reforms, eradication of corruption, and availability of essential commodities at fair prices and reorganization of the educational system. This movement was largely constituted by students many of them who went on to become prominent politicians in the sphere of national and state politics. Largely, it was non-violent and rose above caste considerations and party politics (HAZARY, 1988, p. 110), although strikes and demonstrations were integral to its *modus operandi*.

Shah (1977, p. 701) also argues that, students were very much the vanguard of this particular movement as, “they are not earning, hence they are not in the economic market. They do not have a vested interest in society, hence they do not harbour animosity against any class. Moreover, the Sarvodaya leaders accept the theory of the generation gap and believe that students need not approve of the values, customs and institutions of their parents. Therefore, they can become the agents of change in society. Sensitive and vocal and having no family responsibilities, students can afford to be full-time revolutionaries”. The Sarvodaya Movement was successful in bringing down the state government in Gujarat at that time which was under the Congress Party. In the state of Bihar too, it had widespread ramifications. In this regard, Oommen has argued that:

I do not know of any significant movement initiated and led by students in India for the eradication of untouchability, illiteracy, unemployment, corruption or distributive justice, save the student upsurges in Gujarat and Bihar. But in both cases, the students were dependent on leaders drawn from political parties or the Sarvodaya Movement (OOMMEN, 2010, p. 253).

Hence, while student movements appeared direction-less and were in decline for approximately two decades after Independence; the formative years leading to the National Emergency (1975-77) led to its resurgence. The Naxalbari Movement and the Sarvodaya Movement bear testimony in this regard. However, the most important epoch in the history of the student movement in India has been its resistance to the Emergency. The Emergency witnessed massive excesses on the part of the state and was a major setback to student political activism. However, many commentators have witnessed this phase as favourable to this phenomenon which led to uniting students across various geographical and social locations. Menon and Nigam (2007, p. 6) have

⁵ Also referred to as the ‘Bihar Movement’, the ‘JP Movement’ was a political movement initiated by students in the state of Bihar under the leadership of Gandhian socialist Jayaprakash (JP) Narayan against corruption, price rise, unemployment and misrule in the state government. *Sarvodaya* is a Sanskrit term which generally means ‘universal uplift’ or ‘progress of all’.

contended that, “throughout the period of the JP rule though, it should be borne in mind, there were major upheavals and mass struggles, as the accumulated democratic desire damned by the Emergency burst forth in different ways: militant, working-class struggles for wage revisions and restorations of trade union rights, students’ movements and, to cap it all, a widespread police revolt against abysmal working and living conditions, which enveloped the police force of seven JP-ruled states”.

Hazary (1988, p. 111) has further argued that students became a crucial force in campaigning for the non-Congress opposition parties in the general elections of March 1977 which brought them victory and for the first time in free India’s political history, as the Congress was dislodged from power in New Delhi after its uninterrupted rule for thirty years. Similarly, Jayaram has also argued that the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi’s Congress Government dealt harshly with student political activism, recognizing its disruptive potential albeit via direct (arrest, detainment or torture) or indirect (de-politicization of student unions, banning student elections) measures (JAYARAM, 1979, p. 686-687). He further states that:

The largest and most valuable contribution to the struggle of 1975-1977 came from the students and youth. While the government apparently controlled and contained the student unrest through repressive tactics and by creating a fear psychosis in the community of students, the continuation of such a trend only aggravated the latent anxiety and anger of students. The pressure burst once Lok Sabha elections were announced and student leaders released. A new wave of student awareness was evident in early 1977. The students took the election as a challenge and became involved in campaigning for their respective parties. The students played a crucial role in the defeat of the ruling Congress government and the election of the first alternative government in the political history of India since Independence (JAYARAM, 1979, p. 690).

Apart from social location, ideological orientation or political ambition were other significant factors that have structured student political activism in India during the post-Independence years. While these trends have magnified in scale in contemporary times, one needs to understand that the beginnings were laid during that historic phase wherein watershed moments such as the Naxalbari Movement, the Sarvodaya or JP Movement and the Emergency have amplified and cemented the role of students as key interlocutors of national politics. In fact, majority of the members of the contemporary Indian political class received their baptism during the JP Movement or while resisting the Emergency.

The decade of the 1980s was not as remarkable as the previous one. While there were one or two instances of student-led movements in Indian states such as Assam, obituaries to the student movement have been plenty and commonplace at that juncture. For instance, Jayaram (1979, p. 1990) has stated that student political activism has the necessary potential to transform into a sustained movement; however he deemed the circumstances to be unfavourable at that point in time. Even Shah has argued that students’ agitations were a part of the ongoing economic and political crisis and the changing nature of the social order. Commenting on the existing literature on student political activism, he has argued that “...in-depth studies are few, and the literature is full of stray observations, wishful thinking and personal anecdotes. Since

the mid-1980s, as student movements are almost absent in the university campuses, the interest of social scientists in the area is also waning” (SHAH, 2004, p. 217) Nevertheless, the phase from 1950 to late 1980s was indeed definitive for the student movement in India carrying mixed implications – ranging from initial slowdowns to featuring rapid developments with the advent of time.

GLOBALIZATION AND THE RESURGENCE OF IDENTITY POLITICS

The decline of the student movement in the late 1980s was soon given a new lease of life with the advent of the 1990s via landmark events that shaped the political agencies of students and paved new pathways for student politics. Such was consequent upon the onset of the policy of economic liberalization and the resurgence of casteism or religious nationalism culminating to identity politics during this time-frame. The 1990s witnessed three major events – the first being the adoption of economic liberalization by the Indian state in 1991.⁶ Second, upon the Mandal Commission’s recommendations the then Government decided to implement further reservations as a part of its affirmative action policy to Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in the spheres of higher education and Government-sector employment in 1990, something that drew the wrath of the upper castes.⁷ Resistance to these recommendations were witnessed in major university campuses across the country such as Delhi University. Third, the demolition of the Babri Masjid by Hindu nationalist forces in 1992 led to heightened communal tensions between Hindus and Muslims.⁸ Often labelled as the *Mandal-Mandir* moment in Indian politics, these events have had major repercussions in the sphere of higher education too.

According to Visvanathan, the decision to enforce Mandal unleashed an ‘orgy of violence in the universities’ and that ‘no report has united the elite as much as this one’. He uses strong words to explain the same stating that, “it has questioned our radical and academic pretensions, our models of social change, our involvement in social justice. It has shown us what we are, nervous, pretentious, deeply intolerant...” (VISVANATHAN, 2000, p. 3602). In the early 1990s while reservations had been introduced to attain inclusivity in several sectors which were earlier exclusive in social composition, recommendations on furthering the same met with massive reactions from the affluent sections of the society. Such a recommendation also polarised the youth against each other, and for many, it defined or re-designed their political agency. Along a similar vein Beteille has argued that:

⁶ The economic liberalization programme in India was initiated in order to open up the economy to private and foreign investment, taking a market-oriented approach.

⁷ As per the provisions of the Constitution of India, the state is entitled to set reserved quotas for historically, socially and educationally marginalized sections.

⁸ The demolition of the Babri Masjid, a mosque in the city of Ayodhya located in the state of Uttar Pradesh sparked communal outrage and rioting across the country and re-laid the pathway for further communalization of Indian politics.

The recent strife over numerical quotas in institutions of higher education has brought out the leading role of the middle class in articulating the interests of caste and community in the name of social justice. The proponents as well as the opponents of quotas, though divided by caste and community, both belong to the middle class, and in the case of the IITs and the IIMs, aspire for membership of the upper middle class. The opponents of quotas want the system to continue more or less as it is. The proponents want change, not so much in the structure of society as in the caste composition of university institutions without much heed to standards of teaching and research (BETEILLE, 2007, p. 952).

Deshpande (2013a; 2013b) has also argued that caste has been at the centre of public imagination since the 1990s, which he labels as a 'momentous' decade wherein the lower castes or Other Backward Classes (OBCs) asserted their identities into mainstream national politics. According to him, reservations can ensure formal inclusion, not social justice and that, "...higher education is a field where equal access is hard to define, and policies for equalising access are always controversial" (DESHPANDE, 2013b, p. 16). Commenting further, he has also stated that:

Reservations in higher education were responsible for the First Amendment in 1951, and they are also responsible for the 93rd Amendment of 2006, which extends OBC reservations to elite state-funded institutions that were previously exempt, and opens the door to reservation in private and unaided institutions. This is effectively the end of the road for reservations in public higher education as all institutions and now covered (DESHPANDE, 2013b, p. 30).

Undoubtedly the introduction of reservations has altered the field of higher education in India. Many commentators have argued that these spaces became truly democratic or inclusive and less exclusive. However in spite of these factors, Palshikar and Patnaik (2002, p. 1491) have attested that when a Dalit (lower caste) youth comes to a university with the baggage of almost twenty years of neglect; to give the student the required skills, confidence and hope becomes a daunting task. Advani (2013a, 2013b) too has shed some light on this debate by arguing that the caste-class overlap within youth politics can be discerned from how "most middle-class students are from the politically dominant intermediate castes" while "working-class students are mainly Scheduled Caste" and that political parties play an important role in mobilising young people as well as often end up shaping the identity, if not the ideology of the youth (ADVANI, 2013b, p. 3). Nevertheless, Garalyté (2020: 140) contends that the advent of the 1990s signified a new era of Dalit student activism as central university campuses became further accessible to these groups enabling larger public visibility. Thereon, several episodes of unrest have been commonplace to universities across the length and breadth of the Indian higher education sector and these have only brought ideologies and identities to the forefront of campus politics.

Reflecting on this regard Oommen has contended that, while *Swaraj* (independence) was the guiding force for the Indian youth in the 1930s, and 'nation-building' during the first three decades (1959-1980) of free India; the onset of the

globalization and liberalization of the economy led to the concept of ‘nation-building’ being primarily perceived as creation of wealth. As a consequence, a considerable shift was witnessed in the value orientations of the Indian youth, which also reflected in their lifestyles (OOMMEN, 2002). As a consequence, while a section of youth remained committed to ideals and activism, another section dissociated from the same, aspiring for better lifestyles and livelihood. Amid such a scenario, what shape did the student movement attain? Krishnan’s arguments somewhat answers this question. She states that:

In the 1990s, the media was eager to write an obituary of the student movement. The age of liberalization, they said, was an age of aspirations, of freedom, of new and exciting possibilities of lucrative employment. This shiny new Indian youth, they predicted, would have no time or inclination for political activism or idealism. To an extent, this was, and is, no doubt true. Liberalization has indeed produced a new youth culture, new attitudes and aspirations. But in other ways, ‘the more things change the more they remain the same (KRISHNAN, 2011).

Krishnan has further argued that together with the rise of apathy (that came about with economic liberalization), oppositions to fee hikes and privatization and to the high cost and poor quality of higher education had also emerged alongside. Anxieties about declining opportunities (in education and employment) have led to reactionary movements such as the anti-reservation agitations and that the decades following liberalization have failed to convince the youth and students about the myths of ‘India Shining’.⁹ This has happened due to shrinking educational opportunities, deteriorating quality of higher education as well as severe job insecurities.¹⁰ However, in spite of all these challenges, the student movement demanding democracy and resisting privatization has proved difficult to repress and has time and again established its renewed relevance (KRISHNAN, 2011).

Recent works by anthropologists, political scientists and geographers (JEFFREY, 2012; KUMAR, 2014; LUKOSE, 2005, 2010) have offered a detailed reading on the liberalized youth, its aspirations and choice-making patterns as well as its role in politics at large. Lukose has also given a design for mapping larger cultural and political transformations in liberalized India, by drawing attention to youth aspirational as well as dilemmatic qualities and by problematizing multiple fields of enquiry (ranging from fashion to politics). That the young populace are not simply consumerist harbingers of globalization but are emerging citizens, whose engagements become the key to understand how democracy and politics are being struggled over and redefined within liberalizing India, is what she argues (LUKOSE, 2010).

Hence, the climate of economic liberalization significantly altered the political agenda of diverse sets of actors. On one hand, it brought about larger privatization; on the other hand it also brought about vote-bank politics. Ideologies became

⁹ ‘India Shining’ was the election plank of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) during the 2004 General Elections.

¹⁰ Protests against reservations in higher education and employment or on issues of fee hikes and other forms of privatization have been witnessed all over the country not only in government-run institutions but even in private institutions of higher education.

redundant and the politics of identity gained greater license. Amidst such a scenario, this definitive decade brought about hope against despair; aspirations along with anxieties and activism alongside apathy for the youth and particularly students. Therefore, in a climate when policies and politics of economic liberalization gained currency, student mobilization as well as its political agency has only magnified in dynamic ways. One can argue that the *Mandal-Mandir* occurrences served as a point of departure or a background wherein ideology-driven politics receded into the background and identity-politics foregrounded, thereby adding a dynamic angle to student political activism. Hence, class, caste, gender as well as other modes of social locations have become even more significant and relevant for contemporary politics. A survey of student parties or organizations in educational institutions or university campuses will indicate a diverse range of ideologies and identity-mobilizations that make or unmake these groups.

It must be concluded that policy-interventions by the state in the form of reservations for the depressed sections of the society brought out several forms of contestations within the spaces of higher education. It was during this phase that identity-based student organizations emerged in various universities and clashes between such student parties became commonplace. As a consequence, there were several layers of fragmentation and social identities became the prime marker of one's politics. While identity did exist in every phase of the history of student movements in India, it was during this particular phase that identity politics became the hallmark of student politics in Indian campuses whereby caste-based assertions often led to clashes between groups.

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS, CONTESTATIONS FOR AUTONOMY AND INCLUSIVITY

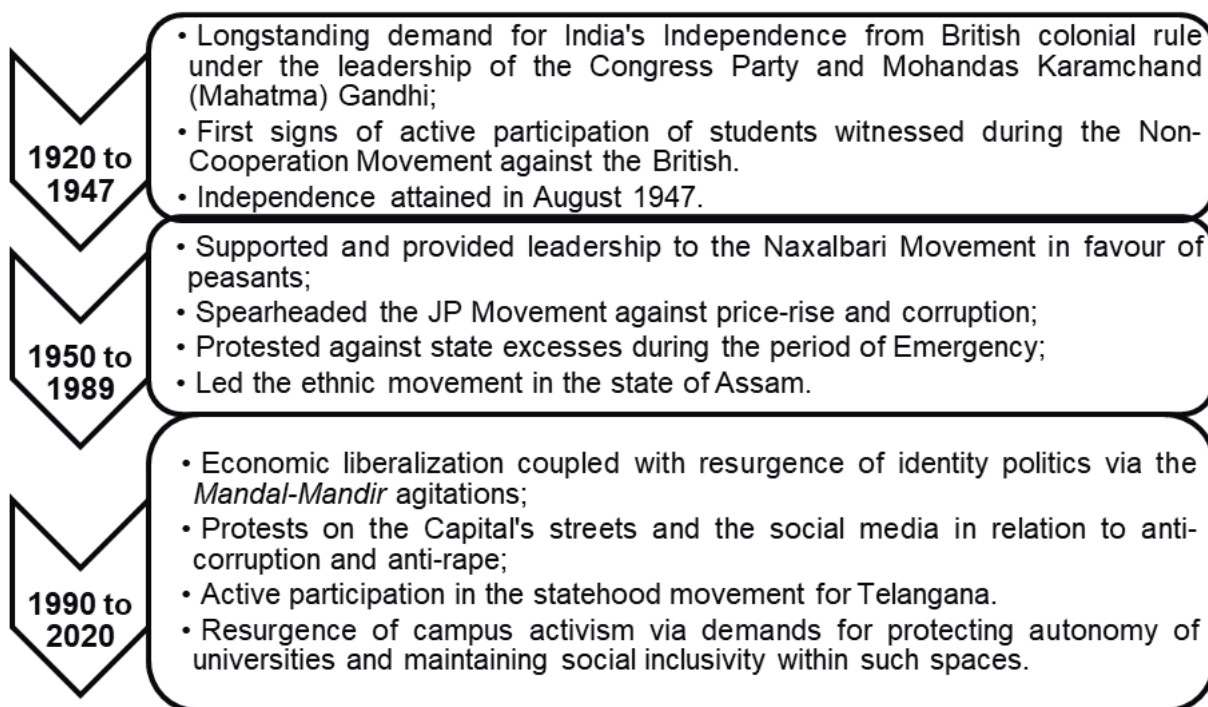
While the decade of the 1990s and the early 2000 witnessed the emergence of caste, religious and class identities in politics within an environment of burgeoning economic liberalization – heightened forms of political activism emerged around the 2010s around the issue of corruption; resisting violence against women and questions of autonomy in higher education. The recent years have further rejuvenated students' political agency. State interventions on the autonomy of prestigious institutions of higher education culminating since the last few years bears testimony to this. With neo-liberal onslaughts on higher education becoming commonplace, there has been a strong resurgence of students' agency, globally as well as in India. The following diagrammatic sketch delineates the trajectories of student movements in the Indian context and its alignments with national politics within such a milieu over the last century (Figure 1).

Further with global developments such as the Arab Spring and Occupy Movements taking shape around that juncture, students have remained a potent political class re-defining the political milieu in manifold ways. One can relate this to the Anti-corruption Movement or the Anna Hazare Movement as it was popularly called for the introduction of the Lokpal Bill in the Parliament together with the Anti-rape protests in the Capital which witnessed large scale participation by the youth and students, including the less-vocal or apolitical ones. In this regard, Sitapati has argued that the Anna Movement was a potent one as it was able to employ Gandhian motifs to popularize an urban middle class (and especially the young populace), who, he argues had less currency in the



rest of India. In arguing so, he draws parallels between this movement and the Indian national movement for Independence (SITAPATI, 2011, p. 43-44).

Figure 1 - A periodic representation of the student movement in India



Source: Data collated from various secondary sources by the author (see References).

Mohanty (2011) has also elaborated on this issue and argued that the Anna movement cannot be categorized as a middle class movement alone as other non-middle class groups have also actively participated in it. A significant chunk of these protestors came from colleges and universities in Delhi who irrespective of their social locations mobilized as a collective in order to raise their voices against the ills in the socio-political spectrum. Along a similar vein, Harriss has argued that these protests have not only involved the young middle class people centred in Delhi but have also taken place across the country. In his opinion, these were spontaneous and non-hierarchical, with no very clear leadership (HARRISS, 2014, p. 14).¹¹ However, to take Teltumbde's (2011) argument here, caste and class affiliations did render the movement its viability and longevity.¹²

It must be acknowledged that these aforementioned protests did chart out a new course and direction for the history of Indian politics – the Congress Government was voted-out from power in the General Elections of 2014 and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power with a majority mandate under the leadership of Narendra Modi. Ever since then, heightened turmoil in public sector campuses have become commonplace. The Film and Television Institute of India (FTII), University of

¹¹ Harriss (2014, p. 7) has stated that such forms of protests resonated within many different countries, most notable of them being the Arab Spring of 2011.

¹² In this light, Teltumbde (2011, p. 10-11) has argued that the 'Occupy Movement' failed to take root in India primarily due to the Indian middle classes and its infusement with the ideology of the caste system.

Hyderabad (UoH), Jadavpur University (JU), Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) and Delhi University (DU) are a few institutions of higher education that have witnessed periodic bouts of dissent due to ideological polarizations and state-led interventions on their functioning. While such upheavals cannot be understood in uniform terms; the basic premise was that there were concerted efforts by student groups to protect the autonomy of these spaces vis-a-vis the state and its loyalist student wings such as the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP).¹³ However, in what ways were these recent protests distinctive? Further, in what ways did these affect the larger political milieu?

The series of events since 2016 in universities in India have renewed the debates on student politics. In this regard, Deshpande has attested that campus politics affect the larger political milieu citing instances between the mid-1960s and the mid-1970s, culminating to the Emergency in 1975. Furthermore, he attests that university campuses have been truly democratic spaces especially with the introduction of the Mandal Commission recommendations wherein major social groups have come together within egalitarian conditions. Within such a context, state-driven control has increased to such an extent that any dissent or resistance to its programmatic agenda are labelled as anti-state or anti-nation. As a consequence, it is further acknowledged that sudden decisions to scrap fellowships or stipends for university students or research scholars are testimony to such decision-making. Against this background, the emergence of leadership (from the poorer social backgrounds) in the form of Kanhaiya Kumar and Rohith Vemula, he feels, have been noteworthy. In this regard, he attests that, “the public university is thus a unique and historically unprecedented space from the point of view of the democratisation of society” (DESHPANDE, 2016, p. 33).¹⁴

Bhushan too has highlighted that these incidents reflect on the fact that the university has become a site of conflicts and contests. In this regard, He further mentions that:

These incidents and many more force us to make an inquiry into the meaning and role of the public university in a democracy. The university, as an institution embedded in a hierarchical social and economic system, committed to values of democracy and diversity, is bound to throw up various challenges. A state that protects the autonomy of the university and helps build spaces for free public discussion and debating differing points of view within the university helps promote the growth of public consciousness in the university. Any attempt, however, to settle the differences through strategic or repressive measures by the state inflicts

¹³ One cannot underscore that these campuses have never been in turmoil. Both Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) and University of Hyderabad (UoH) have witnessed its fair share of student resistance during the Emergency years or during the separate statehood movement for Telangana respectively.

¹⁴ Rohith Vemula was a student at the University of Hyderabad whose suicide in January 2016 consequently led to massive protests against the Government inside the University and thereby to other universities across the length and breadth of the country. Kanhaiya Kumar (now with the Congress Party) is a student leader who was the president of the Jawaharlal Nehru University Students' Union (JNUSU) in 2016-17 when the campus erupted in protests pertaining to the question of nationalism. Questions of universities breeding dissent became manifest and brought forth voices advocating as well as condemning increased state-control of such spaces.

injury and harm on the growth of public consciousness within the university (BHUSHAN, 2016, p. 35).

Bhushan further makes a very pertinent point here – the case of Rohith Vemula's suicide reflects the loopholes created by the collusion of the state and corporate capitalism which does not support the inclusion of lower caste groups which then becomes ironic since inclusion and access to higher education have been key factors as well as the basic ethos and spirit of the discursive public sphere within the university. In the case of Kanhaiya Kumar, who was implicated on sedition charges, the author cites the same as an "instance of authoritative discourse on nationalism imposed from above" (BHUSHAN, 2016, p. 40).

Vilified attacks on such democratic ethos as well as constant state interference in these spaces within the last couple of years have severed as catalytic towards the rise of student resistance. More significantly, the decisions of the state have affected the students largely thereby infusing a spirit of rejuvenated activism among them. Hence, major differences of ideologies coupled with assertions of identities have been strong determinants of these protests. Even the apolitical lot of students have not shied away from participating in these campaigns.¹⁵ These activists realized that their basic fundamental rights had come under scrutiny. Chatterjee (2016) has also commented on these events citing that concerted campaigns in the public sphere questioned the autonomy of universities – further challenging the concept of constitutional democracy as well as the place of it within a university. In this light, Kumar has also contended that, "the public university seems placed at the moment at the crossroads of these two forces: the state and a punitive public trying to curtail its autonomy as a space, and the democratisation of the student body altering the character, concerns and relationship of the university to society at large" (KUMAR, 2016, p. 31).

As a result, over the last few years several campaigns have taken place in several parts of the country – each one seeking to mobilize public opinion in favour of autonomy and greater democratization in the field of higher education. Reflecting upon this particular debate, Nair has also argued that:

The public university is moving from being a public good – as it was envisaged in the late 19th century – into becoming a private investment and a vast credentialing mechanism. The changes began in the 1980s, under the aegis of global economic transformations, when universities became "public" only in name, as, say, in the United Kingdom and the United States. The effort was to replace them with other undertakings or ventures, introduce fees, and turn them into financialised institutions. Privatisation in a financialised era is driven by rankings and ratings: not just basic science is devalued in the process, but also the social sciences and the humanities (NAIR, 2017, p. 40).

While protests against neoliberal and statist onslaught on higher education have continued till date; the Telangana Movement for separate statehood also witnessed the active participation of students and serves as a case in point wherein student

¹⁵ The #StandwithJNU campaign on social media platforms serves as a testimony to this.

political activism correlates with popular social movements (PATHANIA, 2018).¹⁶ Also, the deeply contested Citizenship Amendment Act introduced by the Government of India in 2019 witnessed upsurges in campuses, particularly emanating from Jamia Millia Islamia University in New Delhi and Aligarh Muslim University in the state of Uttar Pradesh. In this regard, Martelli and Garalyté (2019, 2) have argued that, “key students and recent graduates in a handful of university campuses were the first to translate the nationwide concern about the government’s reforms against Indian Muslims into collective action because they had been exposed to organized political socialization earlier; they had consolidated networked nodal points attracting more spontaneous forms of political participation beyond campus; and they were already rallying around metonymic figures of non-partisan youth representing the future, the constitution, non-violence and the homeland”.

Nevertheless, student mobilizations within the university spaces have had a long history – recent events bear further testimony towards the same. However, does student political activism have the potentialities as well as the possibilities to transform into a sustained long-term movement? Such a development remains to be seen amid contemporary contexts, one that is defined by global threats and risks of pandemics. To sum it up, students’ contribution to social change – be it from solving campus issues as well as to participating in projects of nation-building continues to be championed and globally documented by scholars and commentators.

CONCLUSION

This paper has sought to layout some of the definitive debates on the beginnings, decline and resurgence of student power by charting out the dramatic decades of student political activism around the world. It has chronologically charted out the events that led to the consolidation of student power in India in the post-Independence era between the 1950s and the late 2010s (roughly the second half of the twentieth century to the first two decades of the twenty-first century). Student movements have emerged for various reasons – ranging from micro issues of student welfare in campuses to macro issues such as challenging state power and governmental regimes. Hence, it must be addressed that students were and are still viewed as a powerful political class worldwide.

This paper concludes with the idea that it would be worthwhile to reflect on several perceptions towards student political activism. Both in earlier as well as contemporary periods it cannot be discounted that student political activism has shared an organic link within the fold of higher education. In fact, one can attest that constructive activism has been a necessary requirement for its democratic and organized functioning. Therein, this paper has attempted to throw light into the centrality of this debate and has argued that students and politics share a symbiotic relationship and that it is a difficult task to segregate students from the ‘political’. The role played by student wings of political parties and institutionalized mechanisms that govern such processes only strengthens such a relationship and does not weaken it.

¹⁶ The Indian state of Telangana was formed in 2014 after bifurcation from the state of Andhra Pradesh.

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