



Universities and Students Politics in India: A Case Study

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Abstract

The University campus has been providing an important space for enabling and engaging various student groups in student politics and their participation in the larger social movement. In addition, at the same time, it provides space for the non-political student to be familiar with various political ideas and debates, which later on help them to engage in many civic activities and nation-building processes. For instance the sanctioned strength of the faculties in the year 2016 was as follows: Professor under the category of SC: 27, ST: 13 and OBC: NA, PH: 8 but whereas the existing faculty strength as of 19.01.2016 was SC: 9, ST: 0, OBC: NA, PH: 2. It clearly indicates that there was gross under-representation of SC/ST faculties and not even a single OBC professor was present. It is in this context, the paper has examined the students' activism and politics in one of the premier institutes of India, namely Jawaharlal Nehru University. This Paper has shown that, though at a macro level the university is believed to be a beacon of the marginalized section, micro-analytical studies show quite a different picture. With the emergence of a new student political organization, how the very political language of various stakeholders, particularly students has changed. In terms of methodology, this paper is based on an ethnographic study with a timeframe of 2014 to 2019.

Keywords: Student movement, student activism, ideology, left politics, Ambedkarite

Introduction

Nothing has static in the universe; everything is subject to change with time and space. Those societies that oppose change have gone through much turmoil e.g. civil war, civil unrest, and various movement intended to change the static or status quo social relations. Student politics has been regarded as a crucible for student protest as well as social movement activism across the globe for five-decade and more. The University campus has been providing an important space for enabling and engaging various student groups in student politics and their participation in the larger social movement. In addition, at the same time, it provides space for the non-political student to be familiar with various political ideas and debates, which later on help them to engage in many civic activities and nation-building processes. Crossley (2008) ^[6] has suggested that, though university campus provides many opportunities for students e.g. share of interest, courses, and halls of residence, it is the "Students' Union" that is a foremost mechanism for political socialization and networking. Further, Crossley and Ibrahim (2012) ^[7] argue that a university campus is an ideal location for those 'masses' who were previously isolated and deprived, share a common interest, and formed a range of social networks. The development of social networks according to Crossley and Ibrahim (ibid), the university provides a significant site for the politicization of students by enabling 'like-minded actors to find one another and form bonds that will support collective action; that is to say, to form a' dense and multiplex networks. Further, these social networks strengthen their struggle against unjust done to them by the privileged ones.

There is a growing literature connoting student politics with various terms like reflexive individualism (Giddens, 1991 ^[9]; Beck, 1992) ^[2], self-actualizing (Bennett, 1998) ^[3], expert

citizens (Norris, 1999) ^[11], or everyday makers (Bang, 2004) ^[1], all of which giving a signal for departing from the traditional norms of citizenship (Dalton, 2008) ^[8]. There are other sets of literature associated with the late modernist theorist, they have given an important view on campus politics and student activism. Moreover, student politics enable the student to develop what in Bourdieunian terms "habitus of the young citizen" (Bourdieu, 1977) ^[4].

It has already seen the role of student politics in 'The Kathmandu spring' in 2006, 'The Arab Spring uprising and anti-austerity movement. In India, also, the role of student activism can be felt on three occasions in the last two and half decades. The first one is soon after the implementation of the Mandal Commission Report in 1992, whereas the latter two students' uprising is the most recent one. The second one is the aftermath of December 16th, 2012 culminated with Verma Committee Report (VCR), and the third one is, after the death of Rohith Vemula (a research scholar at the University of Hyderabad, and the incident largely known as institutional murder) and somehow in Unna incident. Though the first one is different from the last two, the role played by the student communities in these cases is important. The first unrest or protest ended with a positive outcome, but the end of the second one was as pathetic as the death of Rohith Vemula itself. The uprising started soon after 16th January 2016 and symbolically ends on 9th February 2016 because of the ultra-adventures of the "Left" student outfit and the standing comedy played by the JNUSU President. They invented various terminology like Stand with JNU, Fightback JNU, Blue Bowl & Red Bowl, and Red Sun in Blue Sky and organized a series of lectures on "Nation and Nationalism". As a result, the student unrest which arose because of Rohith's death ended in the shadow of the debate between "national

and anti-national". The University of Hyderabad (UoH) also known as HCU and Jawaharlal Nehru University known as JNU are the two epicenters of the growing 'Ambedkarites consciousness'. In the former case, they (Ambedkarites student activists) have already a vibrant voice, whereas in the latter case Ambedkarites are fighting tooth and nail for their establishment led by BAPSA and other marginalized student communities against the hegemony and hype created by the "Left political wing in general and AISA-SFI in particular" and the decisive politics playing by their brothers i.e. ABVP. In JNU, since its inception, it is a "Left" student organization dominating campus politics with some exceptions. First, one was its very formative years when 'free thinkers' led by Anand Kumar broke the shackles. However, they failed to sustain their influence and again it is an old story repeated. In recent times, AVBP breaks the shackle once again. After that, it is only the 'Left' who is occupying the Union. Because of its undefeatable business it also talks by many people that "JNU ke mati Lal hai, aur Lal rahega", in English the same will be "the soil of JNU is Red and always it will be Red" which exposes a very dictatorship nature of the "Left" student politics, which refused to accept changes. Their forty-odd years of dominating campus can be summarised in two important words, i.e. on one hand various religious festivals especially "HOLY" and "DURGA POOJA" establish a solid ground¹. And the other hand, self-proclaimed progressive intellectuals opposed reservation first in the recruitment of SC/STs faculties in higher than the post of assistant professor and delaying the implementation of the Mandal commission report².

In this context, it is necessary to visit JNU's student politics and its nature of functioning. If I used the term used by Norris (1999) [11] as an 'expert citizen' or Bang (2004) [1] as an everyday maker, then JNU students' politics has failed to live up to the role of either expert citizens or everyday makers of the campus. Though the campus is known for its "Left" lineage, there are many other emerging voices knocking on the door of the student community rather very effectively. It is in this context, one of the major explorations in this paper is to understand the emergence of new political norms within the student societies and their politicization, and the role played by student communities in the early or formative stage of political norms with the help of their everyday lived experiences in JNU and elsewhere campuses in India.

The Emergence of Birsa Ambedkar Phule Student Association (BAPSA)

One could closely observe, that JNU politics has national political imagination. In other words, the university is a miniature of Indian politics, society, and culture. JNU has been valorized for its distinct political culture³. Though there is a diverse group of students coming from all corners of the country, still in terms of political views it is only in binary of

¹ JNU is also, among other things known for these two festivals among the other campuses across the country.

² This report is largely known as OBC reservations that secure an entry point to Higher Educational institutions at both student and faculty recruitment levels.

³ It has been argued by many people that, JNU's politics allowed all sorts of debate but unfortunately, in reality, things here are visualized in binary i.e. if you are not with them then you are sitting with their opposition. Hence, there is no place for other(s) views than the binary of "Left" and "Right".

you or me or one ideology versus another ideology of left and right. In another word, there is no place for alternate political views or standpoints. However, the last couple of years are quite different from the earlier scenario. Precisely the end of 2014 and the years that follow, mark a significant change in its environment both political as well academic. I am not saying that there were no voices of the underprivileged, it was there but somehow got stuck up by "Left" hegemony (which is by nature/was an upper caste phenomenon).

The last forty years of student politics at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), which is dominated by the "Left" outfit created hype that they are the sole beacon for the voice of the oppressed. In the mask of progressive politics, the language, and political vocabulary spoken and written by the "Left" does not fit to secure a theoretical space. In another word, the Left and Right have many similarities and differences in terms of their cultural upbringing, and religious-cultural practices, and more importantly both of them are conservative in terms of holding power in hand and their political belief and understanding.

With this scenario, on the day of Birsa Munda's death anniversary, that is Nov. 14, 2014, some group of students who thinks beyond the binary created by the "Left" and professed the idea profound by Ambedkar and others formed a student organization with the name of Birsa Ambedkar-Phule Students Association (BAPSA). BAPSA's most important aim and objective are to initiate a battle to fight tirelessly against the Brahminical Hindutva forces and self-proclaim progressive "Savarna Left" (totalitarian), to make politics of unity of the oppressed. BAPSA as a student organization propagates a discourse to challenge the hegemonic dominant discourse of Left and Right, not only to fight in the JNUSU election but, tries to bring a critical emancipatory philosophical discourse which is in opposition to both "Right" and "Left" political imagination.

In 2016, the JNUSU election witnessed a historical benchmark for the visible 'politics of the oppressed in an organized, autonomous, and assertive way. This assertion is a struggle of the past years where the oppressed were in search of an autonomous platform to express their political democratic voices. The political imagination of unity of the oppressed is to have democratic voices of political representatives, inclusiveness, and political fraternity with self-respect and dignity, which manifests a substantial ground to articulate its political agency. Coming from a similar social location i.e. self-experiences of humiliation, rejection, stigmatization, and oppression gives the much-needed anecdote to the foundation of the platform from which they can carry forward their struggle.

For the left intellectuals, the politics of the oppressed is based on identity politics and sectarianism. To put it another way, when the oppressed assert themselves to speak for political emancipation the self-proclaim progressive "left" intellectuals call it sectarian politics. Hence their position on social justice resembles the understanding and political practices of rights.

Politics Post-BAPSA⁴

The politics after the emergence of BAPSA in general and just 'before and after the 2016 SU election, in particular, moved to a drastic change. Now one can see how casteist the "Left (ist)" could be. Let's summarise how it goes. It started

⁴ The reason behind discussing post-BAPSA politics is that the formation of BAPSA added altogether different political narratives of JNU politics.

with an election campaign, first they vilify BAPSA by saying they were out of Save JNU⁵ movement for that they are both factually and practically wrong. Secondly, with their election campaign, they did a negative campaign against BAPSA they can with their "binary" narration. Their blame game has continued and every chance they are getting, throwing mud at BAPSA. The dubious nature of the "Left" student community can be seen in the latest development, where nine Bahujan students were suspended. The reason behind their suspension is that just because they opposed fee hikes, reduction of viva voice, and demand proper implementation of reservation policies, etc. In addition, the silence maintained by SU exposed their sympathy and apathy towards the causes.

This conflict can be understood in terms of the clash between the three ideas and their approaches to social change. On one-hand student communities, professing "Left" ideology is stick to their ideas and understanding and not ready to up the front to those for whom they are claiming for fighting. Moreover, student groups from the "right/centrist" stick to their tradition or religious code of conduct and are not ready for any significant change in societal relations. On the other hand, students coming from marginalized communities are asserting themselves through education, socializing politically as well as culturally to resist their oppression. They profess the ideology given by many anti-caste thinkers prominently led by Ambedkar and Phule and look forward to changing the course of time along with their state of affairs.

Oppressed Unity Leads Emancipatory Discourse of Self-Assertion

Markandey Katju in his piece "The Way to Poona" which appeared in Outlook writes extensively on the politics of BAPSA. Let us first paraphrase what Katju means for BAPSA's nature of politics. According to him, the nature of politics and demands by BAPSA like reduction of viva-voce, minority deprivation point, and hostel accommodation for all, are such that it will lead to the separatist movement. He justified his formulation by drawing an analogy from the Black Nationalist movement in the United States.

However, the inherent problem of the article is that it is full of flaws, misinterpretation, and misjudgment from the first sentence to the last. As a retired Supreme Court Judge, he should verify his fact before interpreting or judging something. If an analogy is drawn from his analysis of BAPSA then his competence of being a Judge and his hope for fair trial or judgment will be in question. Everybody both on and off campuses of universities and educational institutions is now talking about Baba Saheb and this is possible because of emerging forces inspired by Ambedkar's ideas of liberty, equality, and fraternity.

Prof Abhijit Pathak in his article "JNU's enemy without, within" which appeared in Indian Express (7 Nov 2016), expresses his views on the changing contours within and outside of JNU. Though he did not focus on any specific student organization, rather he chooses to analyze the changing space in JNU and give a way forward for it very diplomatically. However, I may agree with some of his observations like the mode of protest taking place in the last couple of years, the degenerate politics of the "Left" and so on. However, I will contest a couple of his arguments. The first one is the very title of the essay, what prompted him to give this title, and who the enemy inside JNU is. For me, surely it is neither "Left" nor "Right" because they are there

since the very inception of JNU. Then who is, is he silently referred to as the "voice of oppressed" or Ambedkarites politics? The second problem is the solution he is offering to adopt the Gandhian way of dealing enemy. Why there is an urgency among Indian intelligentsia to bring Gandhi whenever there is a talk on Dr. Ambedkar and the assertion of democratic ideas of him by Ambedkarites?

To sum up the political vocabulary of both "Left" and Right, in the words of Scott (1992) ^[12],

"Those who deny the existence of these problems and who would suppress discussion of them are not without their politics; they simply promote their orthodoxy in the name of an unquestioned and unquestionable tradition, universality, or history. They attack challenges to their ideas as dangerous and subversive, antithetical to the academic enterprise. They offer themselves as apostles of timeless truths, when in fact they are enemies of change. The cry that politics has recently invaded the university, imported by sixties radicals, is an example of the defence of orthodoxy; it is itself a political attempt to distract attention from the fact that there are serious issues at stake and more than one valid side to the story in the current debates about knowledge".

What happened in JNU for the last 40 years with the students from deprived sections is nothing less than Fascism irrespective of government at the center (fascism does not descend from the sky, it comes from an already existing unjust material ground which some don't want to change or discuss). The debates regarding 'merit' are constructed and manifest themselves in the way the students from the deprived sections are marked. They are given low marks in interviews than other students despite scoring higher marks in written exams. Once they get admission, they are given low grades in semester exams as a result they are forced to drop out of the university.

Every year students from deprived sections are forced to drop out because of low CGPA in semester exams across schools/centers. It's a shame that the constitutional social justice provision like Reservation for SC/ST/OBC/PWD is not fulfilled at both student and teacher levels. The campus to date has very few SC/ST/OBC professors. For instance the sanctioned strength of the faculties in the year 2016 was as follows: Professor under the category of SC: 27, ST: 13 and OBC: NA, PH: 8 but whereas the existing faculty strength as of 19.01.2016 was SC: 9, ST: 0, OBC: NA, PH: 2. It clearly indicates that there was gross under-representation of SC/ST faculties and not even a single OBC professor was present. The very seat cut that we see today is the result of the continuation of caste privileges. This also stands true for other forms of oppression which we are witnessing today, like mob lynching of Dalits and Muslims outside the campus. And still students' outfits from left lineage ideology, refuge to accept the introspect and ready to change themselves. It is in this context the emergence and politics of BAPSA have an important role in students' politics on the JNU campus. BAPSA is an independent Ambedkarites student organization, neither backed by any parental party nor funded by "landlords" or parental parties like other organizations on campus.

However, it has never lagged or compromised in the struggle for social justice and on issues concerning students' interests. Rather it has surpassed all the old established parties on campus in terms of struggle against Brahminical fascism, discrimination, or inequalities on campus and emerged as a strong force within five years.

⁵ Save JNU movement is nothing but a JANEU

Conclusion

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