
Student Activism as a Catalyst for Political Change in India: A Theoretical and Historical Analysis

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Abstract

Throughout Indian political history, student activism has consistently operated as a formidable force of change. This article explores how youth protests legitimise the political theories of Louis Althusser, Antonio Gramsci, and Michel Foucault regarding state apparatuses, cultural hegemony, and counter-conduct. By evaluating the anti-Hindi agitation of 1965 and the J.P. Movement of the 1970s, the paper discusses how students act as organic intellectuals to challenge dominant ideologies. It further examines the democratisation of campuses through Dalit and OBC activism, highlighting how the "Justice for Rohith" movement disrupted Brahmanical hegemony and brought about institutional reforms. The analysis of recent uprisings, including the anti-CAA protests and opposition to NEP 2020, illustrates the state's use of repressive apparatuses alongside the students' use of digital activism and artistic expression. Furthermore, this article traverses beyond the metropolitan ambit to examine student-led regional movements in Tripura, such as the demand for the Roman script for the Kokborok language. Ultimately, the paper concludes that student mobilisation remains an indispensable engine for progressive societal transformation and safeguarding India's constitutional ethos.

Keywords: Student Activism, Cultural Hegemony, Organic Intellectuals, State Apparatuses, Subaltern Resistance, Linguistic Ecology, Dalit Activism, Counter-Conduct

1. INTRODUCTION

Historically, student activism and protests have been powerful catalysts for political change. In the Indian context, student activism serves as a political baptism where the youth transition from passive observers to active political participants. During India's anti-colonial struggle, universities acted as cradles for an intellectually sound, politically aware group of people capable of protesting against the state authorities while maintaining public decorum.

The present-day university campus serves as a highly competitive, multicultural platform where different echelons of caste, class, gender, or religion collide with contemporary issues of economic instability, political unrest, and constitutional rights. The paper endeavours to critically analyse the evolutionary trajectory of youth protests in India, applying structuralist and post-structuralist theoretical frameworks to understand how the university campus operates as a primary crucible for state-society conflict and democratic emancipation.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Analysing through the lens of political theories such as Marxism and cultural hegemony, we can understand why the university campus acts as a platform for state-society conflict. In *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, Louis Althusser introduces Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), a concept that, alongside Repressive State Apparatuses, constitutes and perpetuates state power (Althusser 2014).

While Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs), which include the police, army, prisons, courts, etc., perpetuate control through coercion and physical violence, Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) refer to a cluster of institutions—encompassing educational institutions, religion, family, legal and political systems, cultural outlets, communications, and trade unions—that maintain control through ideology. The approach of RSAs is active, and that of ISAs is passive. From the perspective of structuralist Marxism, ISAs play a huge role in persuading students into accepting the dominant capitalist ideology. The educational system is considered one of the most effective yet subtle modalities of indoctrination. For instance, students are conditioned in educational institutions to obey and listen to authorities, thereby becoming subservient subjects. Any non-conformist behaviour is immediately met with disciplinary action. In India, police brutality on university campuses during the anti-Hindi agitation, the J.P. Movement, the anti-CAA protests in 2019, and the C.J.P. protests at Jantar Mantar exemplify the state resorting to coercive control when ideological conformity gets disrupted.

Coined by Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci, cultural hegemony describes a system where citizens do not just accept the dominant ideology out of fear—rather, they are brainwashed by it and blindly comply with it. This cultural hegemony is like an ideological haze which inevitably gets disrupted by the revolutionary thinking of organic intellectuals. Gramsci introduced the concept of the "organic intellectual" in his *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (1971: 5). Organic intellectuals are independent thinkers from the marginalised classes of society who question the ideology of the ruling class and articulate counter-hegemonies. Independent thinkers who emerged from Dalit and other minority backgrounds constitute the populace of organic intellectuals in India. Dr B. R. Ambedkar, Jyotiba Phule, and Periyar E. V. Ramasamy were some of the prominent frontliners. Organic intellectuals in India synthesize elite academic education with their endemic issues to counteract the dominant Brahmanical and neo-liberal hegemonies. Student activism successfully levels the playing field and closes the gap between the subaltern masses and elite academia.

Expanding upon subaltern resistance, the term "subaltern masses" refers to a marginalised populace excluded from the dominant power structures of society. In the Indian political context, student protests

against the disciplinary powers of the university—institutions aimed at creating economically productive and politically obedient bodies—demonstrate how the subaltern masses assert their stance against the punitive authority of universities. This substantiates Michel Foucault's posit in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* that where there is power, there is pushback (1995: 27).

3. HYPOTHESIS

Grounded in these theoretical postulations of ideological disruption and subaltern resistance, this paper posits that if we follow the historical trajectory of student activism in India—from the anti-Hindi agitation in 1965 to the J.P. Movement in the 1970s, to the Dalit Sangharsh Samiti, to the anti-CAA protests of 2019, and to the most recent C.J.P. protests—it can be concluded that youth protests serve as evolutionary mechanisms in bringing about profound shifts in the nation's economic and political frameworks.

4. IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS

During the freedom struggle of India, students constituted a substantial demographic of the nationalist movement, heavily mobilising during the Swadeshi and Quit India movements. The historical confrontation involving Subhas Chandra Bose and Professor E. F. Oaten is another prime example of this defiance.

Independent India also witnessed significant student movements and protests. The anti-Hindi agitation of 1965 was a massive student uprising against the use of Hindi as the official language of India. The erstwhile Madras state was the nerve centre of the protest. The violent aftermath of the protest impelled the government to assure that English would remain the official language of India alongside Hindi. This movement demonstrated the successful attempt of Indian youth acting as organic intellectuals in questioning and overthrowing the hegemony of an Indian language that does not even cover half the number of all Indian states.

After India's independence, the Congress party actively tried to separate education from politics to make students passive observers rather than active political participants. This ideological standstill was violently dismantled by the student unrest of the J.P. Movement in the 1970s. In response to massive unemployment, food shortages, and inflation, protests erupted, leading to the *Nav Nirman Andolan* in Gujarat in 1974, where students successfully forced the resignation of the state government. Similarly, the *Bhasha Andolan* in Silchar in 1961 saw students fiercely protesting to protect their linguistic rights.

The student unrest in Gujarat sparked a parallel protest in Bihar under the leadership of Jayaprakash Narayan, an escalation extensively documented by Bipan Chandra in *India Since Independence* (2008: 302). The Bihar Chhatra Sangharsh Samiti (BCSS) was formed in March 1974. The students' initial demands for affordable education escalated into a full-blown movement calling for *Sampoorna Kranti* (Total Revolution). Empirically, this saw thousands of students boycotting classes and exams, effectively shutting down universities across Bihar for nearly a year to participate in grassroots political organising.

This incident validated Gramsci's theories of cultural hegemony and organic intellectuals, where students played the latter role in questioning and overthrowing the dominant ideology by creating counter-awareness. This movement directly triggered the National Emergency of 1975. This proves that youth protests have the potential to bring about generational change and drastically transform the socio-political framework of the state. Even the highest tiers of power are not out of reach for the common masses.

A university campus acts as a melting pot for different cultures, castes, and religious groups, and a hub for continuous knowledge transfer. Higher education campuses are defined by age heterogeneity. People from different age cohorts interact with one another here for a shared educational purpose. The cultural diversity

of the campus provides differing political perspectives requisite in bringing about collective action. When different viewpoints collide, citizens get a deeper insight into whether or not the state authorities are working up to the necessary standard. On that basis, students organise demonstrations voicing their political opinions. When we look at university campuses through the theoretical framework of the "Politics of Becoming," it becomes evident that the emancipatory environment of the campus introduces students to radical democratic acts of breaking away from rigid political and social norms. Students undergo transformation and embrace their multifacetedness.

A regional movement in Tripura has brought the concept of language ecology to the forefront of student activism in the last few years, 2025 and 2026 to be specific. The Twipra Students' Federation (TSF) was the frontliner of a regional protest demanding the Roman script for the *Kokborok* language. By refusing to accept a hegemonic script pushed by the state authorities for their indigenous language, the students exemplified the role of organic intellectuals by launching a formidable counter-hegemony.

Another major incident that galvanized citizens into launching a protest against the state government of Tripura long ago in 1989 was the homicide of Kanu Dey, a teenager from Udaipur. He was fatally shot by the state police under the Congress-TUJS coalition government. Kanu Dey was one of the protesters in a student movement organised by the Students' Federation of India (SFI). They were peacefully demanding school materials to be supplied at a subsidised rate. The violent police firing at the quiet march sparked massive agitation, which reached its climax with the CPI(M) party replacing the Congress-TUJS government. This tragic event yet again corroborates Althusser's theory of ideological and repressive state apparatuses, where the RSAs of Tripura deployed gun violence to enforce control.

University campuses are rightfully categorised as "generational communities." Activism requires self-fashioning—a comprehensive and deliberate process of polishing one's self-image, core values, and public persona—because protests are not just about external policies; they are about a lived ethical commitment. Students must gain expertise in the cultural practice of "*netaizing*" by embodying the persona and moral values of an ethically sound leader.

The campus of Jawaharlal Nehru University provides the necessary academic platform for cultural production. It ensures that academic peers turn into lifelong political allies, guaranteeing that activism involves a multi-generational dissemination of counter-establishment tactics. The implementation of OBC reservations by the Mandal Commission in 1990 drastically transformed the institutional and ideological frameworks of Indian educational campuses, an evolution Christophe Jaffrelot highlights in *India's Silent Revolution* (2003: 342). The immediate empirical fallout saw violent anti-Mandal protests, including the highly publicised self-immolation attempt by student Rajiv Goswami. However, the long-term result was the democratisation of the campus. Dalit and OBC student activism in elite academic institutions questioned and disrupted the existing Brahmanical hegemony deeply ingrained in the mindsets of citizens, as well as in university administration and curricula.

The suicide of Rohith Vemula, a Dalit Research Scholar at the University of Hyderabad in January 2016, marked the crescendo of this cultural and ideological conflict within the Ambedkar Students' Association (ASA). Vemula and four other Dalit students had been systematically suspended and barred from university spaces following clashes with the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP). As Gaurav J. Pathania argues in *The University as a Site of Resistance*, Vemula's protest—and his tragic final letter detailing how his "birth is his fatal accident"—was not just about anti-discrimination; it was a Gramscian attempt at creating an egalitarian counter-hegemony (2018: 45–47). The resulting "Justice for Rohith" protests across Indian campuses actively demanded that marginalised students not just be passive recipients of education, but active participants with the intellectual potential to challenge and emancipate

educational institutions from colonial clutches.

One of the positive aspects of the progressive trajectory of student activism is the implementation of tangible public policies and institutional reforms. For instance, following widespread campus unrest and increased awareness of student elections, the Supreme Court of India commissioned the Lyngdoh Committee in 2006. The purpose of appointing this committee was to ensure the seamless operation of student union elections devoid of all the lavishness and extravaganza. Many students protested against this committee for imposing restrictions on the democratic operation of the student unions. Not only did the "Justice for Rohith" movement disrupt cultural hegemony, but it also led to a political awakening. Citizens throughout India demanded the implementation of the Thorat Committee recommendations and persuaded the University Grants Commission (UGC) to reexamine its anti-discrimination regulations and conflict resolution operations. This incident proved that student activism has the potential to change the administrative framework of higher education.

In 2019, the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) was enforced alongside the proposed National Register of Citizens (NRC). As a result, India witnessed another student protest against what scholars framed as a "dual crisis": (i) legislative threats to the secular-democratic citizenship of India, and (ii) financial and economic instability. University campuses became ground zero for student uprisings. The turning point occurred on 15 December 2019, when police and paramilitary forces forcibly entered the library of Jamia Millia Islamia (JMI), using tear gas and physically assaulting students. Following this brutal police crackdown on the campuses of JMI, Aligarh Muslim University, and other government universities, the protests rapidly fizzled out.

What started as a peaceful protest by unarmed students demanding educational reforms and constitutional adherence escalated into full-blown police brutality. The protest seemingly subsided with the resignation of the former education minister Dharmendra Pradhan. In the instances of both the anti-CAA protests and student-led initiatives at Jantar Mantar in New Delhi, the severity of the police crackdowns validates Althusser's political theory: when Ideological State Apparatuses forfeit control, the state resorts to Repressive State Apparatuses to regain ideological hegemony.

This trajectory of resistance continued with the student mobilisation against the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. Framed through Althusser's theories, student unions critically analysed the NEP as a systemic move toward the commercialisation and privatisation of the educational Ideological State Apparatus. Protesters argued that the policy's structural changes would inherently exclude subaltern and marginalised masses from affordable higher education, thereby reinforcing existing class divides. The protests against the NEP illustrate how students continuously monitor and challenge state policies that threaten to transform the university from an egalitarian space into a neoliberal enterprise.

However, technology has fundamentally optimised how student movements organise, communicate, and scale their efforts. Memes, viral short videos, and coordinated social media campaigns have become vital tools for political expression, simplifying complex political and institutional issues for the common masses. Merging digital activism with grassroots movements has fostered alliances among minority and feminist groups—such as the *Pinjra Tod* (Break the Hostel Locks) movement—and accommodated anti-austerity demands, thereby organising a powerful counter-hegemonic narrative.

Student protests and artistic expression have gone hand in hand throughout history. Campuses touched by student protests have become art galleries. The walls of JNU and Jadavpur University, among others, serve as living canvases of political and social rebellion. During the CAA protests, mass public readings of the Preamble to the Indian Constitution and the singing of Faiz Ahmad Faiz's poetry (*Hum Dekhenge*) became empirical tools of subaltern defiance. Through Foucault's theoretical lens, these performative acts of

reading, singing, and painting are textbook examples of "counter-conduct"—a strategic micro-resistance against the state's disciplinary biopower. Art and aesthetics become prominent tools of everlasting persuasion, as well as visual memories of student mobilisation, allowing the marginalised to reclaim spatial authority within the university.

5. CONCLUSION

Student unrest in India is a comprehensively organised political phenomenon that validates almost all the core tenets of these political theories. Student activism acts as a yardstick of the socio-political vigour of the nation. The collective concern of young adults culminates in mass uprisings when the political, economic, social, or ideological integrity of the state is compromised. From the anti-Hindi agitation to the J.P. Movement and the C.J.P. protests, Indian students have operated as Antonio Gramsci's organic intellectuals, by analysing the legitimacy of the dominant ideology and replacing it with counter-hegemony. Ultimately, the university campus is not merely an educational institution but a microcosm of the larger democratic struggle. By continuously questioning systemic inequalities and authoritarian tendencies, student movements act as a crucial safeguard for India's constitutional ethos. As long as ideological state apparatuses attempt to enforce conformity, the intellectual and physical pushback from the youth will remain an indispensable engine for progressive societal transformation.

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