

CURRICULUM AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Reflections on Student Political Activism from an Indian Public University



O currículo e seus críticos: Reflexões sobre o ativismo político estudantil de uma universidade pública indiana

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Resumo

Este trabalho é resultado de uma pesquisa de doutorado iniciada em 2015. Ele analisa as intersecções entre ideologias e política nos espaços do ensino superior. Discute um estudo de caso da Universidade de Deli e olha criticamente para as intervenções de ideologias particularistas no processo de concepção curricular e formação de programas de ensino. Baseando-se na literatura disponível e situações etnográficas do campo realizado, o artigo analisa episódios recentes de protestos e dissidências no campus frente aos programas de quatro disciplinas para argumentar principalmente que os estudantes partilham uma relação intrínseca com a política que pode dificilmente ser segregada dos debates sobre o currículo. Também tenta demonstrar e assim concluir que as tendências arbitrárias para alcançar a hegemonia ou homogeneidade acadêmica através da concepção curricular ou formação de conhecimentos podem levar à construção de um conhecimento exclusivo que suprime diversidades ou realidades sociais plurais. Um tal fenômeno mascara, altera ou dificulta antigas reivindicações pela democratização dos espaços universitários em condições pós-coloniais.

Palavras-chave

política estudantil; Universidade de Deli; identidades; ideologia; currículo; protestos por Programas.

Abstract

This paper emanates from my doctoral research initiated in 2015. It looks at the intersections between ideologies and politics in higher education spaces. It discusses a case study of Delhi University and critically understands the interventions of particularistic ideologies in the process of curriculum design and syllabi formation. Using existing literature and ethnographic snippets from the field, the paper seeks to elaborate upon recent episodes of campus protests and dissent concerning the syllabuses of four subjects to primarily argue that students share an intrinsic relationship with politics and that it is difficult to segregate the two. It also attempts to demonstrate and thereby conclude that arbitrary tendencies to achieve academic hegemony or homogeneity via curriculum design or knowledge formation can lead to the construction of exclusive knowledge which excludes diversities or plural social realities. Such a phenomenon then masks, alters or hinders longstanding quests for democratising university spaces in postcolonial conditions.

Keywords

student politics; Delhi University; identities; ideology; curriculum; syllabus protests.



Introduction

...higher education encourages inquiry and the questioning of established practices and institutions. It is not surprising, then, that critical public opinion will be expressed first among students (Philip G. Altbach, 1999:57).

This paper looks at the intersections between ideologies and politics in higher education spaces. It discusses a case study of Delhi University (DU) and critically understands the interventions of particularistic ideologies in the process of curriculum design and syllabi formation. In this regard, protests in the recent past by the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) have renewed the debate significantly.¹ It seeks to elaborate upon these episodes of protests and dissent concerning the syllabuses of four subjects – History, English, Sociology and Political Science. Using ethnographic snippets from the field, it primarily seeks to argue that the teaching-learning process is grounded on the existing socio-political milieu. Such a milieu is generally constructed along group social locations or ideological moorings. Against this background, the paper will also attempt to demonstrate and thereby argue that arbitrary tendencies to achieve academic hegemony or homogeneity via curriculum design or knowledge formation can lead to the construction of exclusive knowledge – one that excludes diversities or plural social realities. Such a phenomenon then masks, alters or hinders longstanding quests for democratising university spaces in postcolonial conditions.

¹ Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (translates as All India Students' Council) is a student outfit affiliated to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (translates as National Volunteers' Association). Other student parties active in Delhi University (DU) campus include the National Students' Union of India (affiliated to the Indian National Congress); All India Students' Association (affiliated to the Communist Party of India [Marxist-Leninist] faction); Chhatra Yuva Sangharsh Samiti (translates as Student Youth Struggle Committee – affiliated to the Aam Aadmi Party, translates as Common People's Party). The Students Federation of India (affiliated to Communist Party of India), Krantikari Yuva Sangathan (translates as Revolutionary Youth Organization) and the Indian National Students Organization (affiliated to the Indian National Lok Dal – translates as Indian National People's Party) are also present.

Taking cues from existing literature in the field of study, the paper also relies on participant observation together with in-depth interviews with student activists.² By manoeuvring into the debate on student protests and disruptions with respect to curriculum and its design, it will also attempt to throw light on issues of academic governance via reflections on such instances in the sector of higher education. It is divided into two sections. The first section lays out some of the recent debates on student politics in relation to academic governance in universities in the neoliberal era. In doing so, it demonstrates the recent protests concerning the revision of undergraduate syllabuses in DU within that framework. The second section discusses the politics of higher education to conclude that frictions have been a longstanding and continual feature in academic policy-making – largely due to interventions from pressure groups that are politically motivated – be it ideologically grounded or premised along the lines of social identities, or both.

Revisiting Student Power amid the Curriculum Protests in Delhi University

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. It must be addressed that students were and are still viewed as a powerful political agency worldwide. In recent works and commentaries much importance has been attributed to the university space and such has been emphasized upon via discussions on students' agency. However, Altbach (2007: 338-39) strongly feels that it is fair to say that the ideological

² This study is a subsequent product of ethnographic fieldwork that has been conducted in several phases between October 2017 and July 2021 as a part of my ongoing doctoral programme. It relies on participant observation, in-depth interviews and digital content from social media platforms of politically active student organizations in Delhi University. Only the interview narratives that fit into the ambit of this paper have been incorporated and of them some have been translated from Hindi to English. Names of informants have been changed in order to maintain anonymity.

orientation of student movements is less clear at the beginning of the 21st century than it has been for at least half a century. He has argued that these factors have been escalated by the failure of socialism, the rebirth of nationalism, the continuing problems of modernization and development in the Third World and new issues of the environment. In a nutshell, he feels that these have contributed to a lack of clarity concerning the ideological underpinnings of student activist movements. However, students as political actors exhibiting their agency have been tremendously influential in organizing and guiding higher education governance or even in guiding the course of nations.

Altbach and Klemenčič (2014: 2) also note that, although the era of student revolutions may have ended a half-century ago – students continue to be active in politics, and they are often a key force in political movements directed toward social change around the world. They state that, although students may no longer be at the centre of political movements their participation includes shaping the messages, ideologies, and tactics of protest movements – especially in societies where democratization, minority rights or freeing political processes and institutions from corruption remain salient and compelling issues. They further agree that the Occupy movements or protests against rising tuition fees on account of heightened measures of neoliberalism in the case of England for that matter does enable the fact that some students remain politically engaged even in ‘postmodern post-industrial societies’. Nevertheless, the potential causes for grievances may vary across specific conditions, spaces and contexts is something that they do note.

Throwing light upon the same, Della Porta et al. (2020: 29-30) have argued that with the advent of a trend of marketization since the new millennium and with students being perceived as individual consumers or targets of top-down governmental policies, a “global wave of student protests in the 2010s has attracted a significant scholarly and political interest”. They further agree that

the global contestations or the famous wave of campus protests of 1968 did materialize the collective power of students in higher education institutions, marking its politicization in many ways. Student politics thereon has been instrumental in reforming higher education as well as institutionalizing student unions that were established to represent student interests locally and nationally. They agree that such an arrangement had been cemented via representative and institutional activities at least till the end of the 20th century.

On a similar vein and discussing the case of South Asia in particular, Martelli and Garalyte (2019: 4) have stated that such student activism is characterized by individual and collective self-change; is a product of everyday intimate experiences and instrumental performances. They argue that a trial-and-error aspect of students' engagements with politics has enabled them to locate its distinctiveness in individual activists' transformations or self-change as a form of political becoming. They believe that a tension – the public-funded nature and character of (politicized) universities – further complicates the relationship of student politics with the administration or the ruling regime wherein students are expected to embody the aspirations of the state and the larger society. That, such a tension invariably attests meaning to the regional and national (political) significance of student politics is what they further contend (Martelli and Garalyte, 2019: 9).

In the case of India, recent works (Lukose, 2010; Jeffrey, 2012; Kumar, 2014) have offered a detailed reading on the liberalized youth, its aspirations and choice-making patterns as well as its role in politics at large. Over the last few years, heightened liberalization compounded with identity assertions has altered the political landscape not only of higher education, but the entire nation dramatically.³ With the Bharatiya Janata

³ The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came back to power in 2019 for a second consecutive term and such a development helped (further) strengthen the right wing ideological groups across the nation.

Party (BJP) securing an absolute majority and mandate in the 2019 General Elections, traits and tendencies of nationalistic fervour have only increased. The aforementioned moorings have had its bearings in various spheres of the society, especially the public sphere. Universities have had to witness turmoil and transition in the recent past. Protests by the ABVP in relation to the curriculum in Delhi University (DU) only go on to testify the same. As Jaffrelot (2000) argues, Delhi is one of the oldest electoral strongholds of the Hindu nationalist movement; however, he has noted that the RSS was not the first Hindu nationalist organization in Delhi. Student political activism in DU has borne these resonances over the years and such assertions continue to manifest within the contours of the Campus.

The academic session commences with the odd semester around the middle of July in DU. It continues till the month of November, following which examinations are conducted. The even semester commences in January and continues till April, with examinations generally held in the first fortnight of May. New admissions are conducted in the months of June and early July. The nature of this schedule and the onset of the month of June activates the student activists and student organizations in the campus – they overtly look forward to helping new students with admission-related matters or other matters on the University. They also devote much time and energy towards helping prospective or newly admitted candidates with the entrance examinations, admission cut-off lists or other admission-accommodation related processes. This time-frame generally serves as a ‘breeding point’ for campus based activism. With the Lyngdoh Commission recommendations in effect, it is mandatory for the University administration to hold elections to the student unions within forty days into the new academic session. Hence, the much coveted Delhi University Students’ Union (DUSU) elections are held in the second week of September. Hence, first year students become primary actors within such a network. By the time students’ graduate into second and third years, many get

disillusioned with campus politics; hence it becomes imperative for the student organizations to gather first year students' votes as well as membership into their party fold.

Just as the admission-related matters get over (closure of merit 'cut-off' lists), student political organizations that have done their bit to offer help and assistance during the admission session seek to secure support from new entrants into the University as well as mobilize and gather them for rallies and protests. Such is the relevance of the new admission season for the student parties – recruitment is initiated as well as political support is gathered. These months generally enable for maximum activity as well as activism with regard to student politics on campus. This is generally that time of the year when new students look forward to appreciate as well as enjoy or experience 'college life' or 'campus life' wholesomely for the first time. For many of these newcomers, ideas of campus life in general or campus politics in particular emanates from shared experiences of family members or from popular media. At this juncture, they look forward to experiencing the same personally.

After independence, the Government of India instituted the University Grants Commission (UGC) in 1948–49 to examine the development of higher education and make proposals for its future expansion and improvement (Jayaram, 2007: 748-49).⁴ As a part of this regulatory function, the UGC had directed universities to revise their undergraduate syllabuses according to the 'Learning Outcome Based Framework' (LOCF) in March 2019. Such a model has oftentimes been critiqued as a neoliberal model, one that would force universities to offer 'market oriented self-financing courses' and pave the pathway for marketization or privatization of a public

⁴ Jayaram (2007: 754) has argued that although the UGC has been expected to play a leading role in this regard, it is endowed with little to now power and moreover the rapid expansion of the sector has virtually reduced it to merely a fund-disbursing agency.

good.⁵ However, the DU administration decided to go ahead with the process of revision via consultations with concerned stakeholders.⁶ A couple of months later once the draft curriculum was formulated, major oppositions to the University's revision policy were witnessed. It was duly contested by the right-leaning teachers' association as well as their student wing ABVP as they contended certain sections of the syllabus to be "anti-RSS"⁷. The syllabi of four subjects in particular – History, English, Sociology and Political Science were demanded to be re-revised. Around the middle of July 2019, these outfits protested in front of the *Viceregal Lodge* (Vice-Chancellor's Office) during the Academic Council Meeting and expressed their grievances.⁸

Table 1: Contested Topics in the Proposed DU Undergraduate Syllabus (July 2019)

Subject	Topics (for inclusion in the syllabus)	Subject	Topics (against inclusion in the syllabus)
Sociology	<i>Indian environmental consciousness and nature worship;</i> <i>Gram Swaraj;</i>	English	<i>Maniben alias Bibijaan by Shilpa Paralkar</i> (against inclusion as it is on Gujarat riots); <i>Papers like 'Literature in caste'</i>

⁵ A news report discussing the case of South Africa states that the President (Cyril Ramaphosa) advocated the inclusion of coding and robotics in the basic education curriculum as it would assist pupils to align their skills with the knowledge of the rapidly changing world (Sunday Times, 2021).

⁶ Jayaram (2007: 750-51) further outlines that Delhi University (DU) is a 'mixed type' of university – its territorial jurisdiction includes the colleges it manages as well as the affiliated colleges, dispersed within the city of Delhi and a major task of such a university is to determine and oversee the academic standards of these affiliated colleges and conduct centralized examinations for the candidates enrolled in them.

⁷ See: The Wire. 2019. "ABVP Calls DU's Revised Syllabus 'Anti-RSS', Protests outside VC's Office", 17 July 2019.

⁸ Jayaram (2007: 752) states that in both central and state universities, the vice chancellor is the administrative and academic head of the university and statutory bodies such as the academic council (academic matters), the senate or court (statutes and budget), and the syndicate or executive council (executive actions or general management of the university) govern the universities.

	<i>Indian joint family; Vedic society and culture.</i>		<i>and 'Interrogating Queerness' (against inclusion as it talks about LGBTQ in Indian mythology).</i>
History	<i>Rajput History; Icons such as B.R Ambedkar, Sher Shah Suri and Amir Khusro.</i>	History	<i>Paper titled 'Democracy at Work' (against inclusion, as it talks about Naxalism).</i>
–	–	Political Science	<i>'Maoist Movement' in the Social Movements Paper.</i>

Source: Data collated from The Times of India, 18 July 2019

Further, in order to reach out to the general University populace the ABVP organized a *Satyagraha* – a protest rally at the Arts Faculty which is the demarcated site for hosting protest rallies or similar activities.⁹ Such a method of protest has been popular across ideological groups and organizations in the Campus. For instance, Sunny is a student of DU as well as a student activist. He is associated with the National Students' Union of India (NSUI), the student wing of the (left of centre leaning) Congress Party. He ideates that,

In student politics, ideology is the most important factor for mobilization. We follow the ideology of (Mohandas Karamchand) Gandhi and (Jawaharlal) Nehru. We consider Gandhiji's method of *satyagraha* that was used to drive away the colonial regime as an ideal model of protest. Such a method remains very vital in student protest even today.

On a similar vein, Shivam, a student activist associated with the ABVP argues that their *satyagraha*

⁹ *Satyagraha*, a term that roughly translates as the 'path of truth' is a policy of passive political resistance that was advocated by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, popularly referred to as *Mahatma* (father of the nation) against the British colonial rule in India.

(protest) on the issue of the *pathyakram* (syllabus) was necessitated as there were many subjects in the syllabus which leaned towards one particular ideology (referring to the left). He comments that “people of a particular ideology” have been there from the very beginning – in deciding the courses, designing the programmes as it lies in their interest somewhere. Hence, he contends that such aspects needed to be removed and that such matters required deep-scrutiny. As per his experience on the matter he elaborates and states that,

We have had a rich history and the contributions of great personalities; but instead of teaching about them we are taught about the entire Mughal rule and such similar things. Hence there should be some scrutiny. Teach about everyone! It should not happen that one side remains neglected and people do not get to know at all. As a consequence, we did the *satyagraha* and our demand was very genuine that there should be a team constituted and that team should evaluate the entire curriculum. My personal suggestion is that there should be a systematic revision of the curriculum in the interest of *Hind-ta-bodh*¹⁰. So many tales of slavery, one way or the other! We have had a glorious past, hence that should be taught too.

The following demands were raised – the syllabuses proposed for the four subjects are revoked; that a fast track external review committee be set up in order to look into the contentions on existing curriculum; and, that a democratic system to include all stakeholders in academic matters is incorporated. As the aforementioned narrative outlined and the following image underlines, the foremost task of the ABVP lay in “freeing” the University curriculum from left propaganda in order to enable freedom of thought in social sciences. Protesting students demanded that – *representation*, *review* and *rational debate* are taken up. These activists claimed that they too are primary stakeholders in designing syllabi and that the process can only be a successful one via a review of existing syllabi through rational debates. A couple of days later, the protests escalated further – this time in the respective (subjects’) departments.

¹⁰ *Hind-ta-bodh* loosely translates as feeling of Indianness.



Image 1: The poster or the “call for protest”. Source:

Facebook/ABVPDelhi

Activists of the ABVP assembled in the Arts Faculty, mobilized themselves into smaller units and therein rallied to submit memorandums to the Heads of Department (HoD) of the four (humanities and social sciences) departments. Ravindra, an activist of the ABVP and a vocal participant of the protest recalls the episode and tells me that their organization generally dissents along two broad factors – one, on matters of national unity; and two, matters concerning student welfare. He further recounts that,

During the protest against the curriculum we had protested by going to all the departments in small groups. The result of that protest was that all the wrong things that was added inside the syllabus against our *sanatan* culture, was affecting us and we ensured that those elements are removed. There are certain things that we can solve simply - by giving a memorandum and the work gets done, then it is okay. But if it stems from the

administration that they are not ready to listen to us, then a situation of protest arises.¹¹

While group meetings were conducted by the more experienced leadership at the Arts Faculty premises, young activists were seen huddling together and getting ready for the (department-level) protest. The senior rung was tasked the responsibility of mobilising the rank and file and leading them. A former General Secretary of the Delhi University Students' Union (DUSU) was given the charge of leading the protestors to the Department of Sociology. Upon reaching (the Department), one could witness activists attempting to break the door and entering into scuffles with the policemen or security personnel in-charge. Their next move was to engage in sloganeering, demanding the Head of Department (HoD) be present and acknowledge their dissent. As it was the lunch break, a few hurried telephone calls by the office and security personnel got the Head returning back to the office.



Image 2: A glimpse of the syllabus protest. Source: Author

A brief dialogue ensued thereafter between the HoD and the activists wherein it was emphasised by the

¹¹ *Sanatan* culture is one way of articulating/referring to Hinduism as many Hindus prefer to use the term *Sanātana Dharma*.

former that an expert committee had already been set up and was looking into the grievances of all stakeholders. Upon persuasion, their memorandum was acknowledged and signed and assurances were given with regard to the syllabus. Thereafter, the activists left the Department and appeared satisfied – there were minimalist confrontations and it appeared as if members of the ABVP had attained a moral, ideological victory. By the end of day, images of the protest rally as well as of ‘submitting memorandums to respective HoD’s were displayed (uploaded) on their social media platforms that included Facebook Pages and Twitter Handles. All in all, it was about attaining political capital – one form of symbolic capital as per the Bourdieusian theoretical armoury (Bourdieu, 1991). When asked about the protests, Praveen, a member of the ABVP did mention that there was a change (revision) after that and whatever was reflected about the particular religion was revised. Bringing to my attention that despite an open portal being instituted by the University and even with suggestions sought from all the stakeholders – he believed that the revisions ought to have been made only on the basis of those suggestions. He further attests,

When do we talk about a particular religion? For example, during the time of the syllabus revision, the main factor was that by changing the syllabus and an attempt was made to intervene against such a particular religion. Teachers were involved in it, researchers as well as committee members were too. So wherever we conceive and counter something with truth, then we can believe that thing. But otherwise, we say it is just not possible. That is why it was not right to change the syllabus directly without taking any decision, without consulting any drafting committee.

Thereafter, the University authorities and the respective departments reviewed the existing syllabus and decided against including the topics under contention. These protests also witnessed counter-protests from other groups, especially the left leaning All India Students’ Association (AISA) which called for a protest march to condemn the “syllabi debacle” and to save academic freedom against such interferences; the ABVP labelled the same as “unfortunate” (Edex Live, 2019). Ragini, a

student activist of AISA claims that competing parties like the ABVP reflect what is happening in national politics as well as the society outside. Pointing out that they still come to power in the University year after year, she attests that

...these student parties are neither concerned about student representation nor do they themselves represent what a student would be or what a student's aspirations are when they come to the University.

Issues of discontent on matters and policies of academic governance are common to universities worldwide. Although, there are serious contentions regarding whether students are significant stakeholders or not in matters of academic importance such as that of curriculum – the reality is that student activists use such issues to garner political capital and seek representations in decision-making bodies such as an academic council, senate or executive council. This section has demonstrated that interventions in higher education and questions of academic governance not only carry traits of identity-based nationalistic fervour but also a strong ideological grounding that is premised along the lines of such identities. In a nutshell, the syllabus protests also 'set the stage' for the then forthcoming Student Union Elections and many commentators felt that it was undertaken in order to draw attention for such a purpose. Incidentally, the ABVP went on to win three out of four central panel seats in the DUSU Elections that were held in September 2019.

Discussion: Ideology, Identities and Politics of Higher Education

The last few decades have been tumultuous for university campuses worldwide due to another 'global wave' of student protests, akin to the one of 1960s and 1970s. With the advent of globalization and neoliberalism, students' agency has become even more important for deeper analyses as they are neither apathetic nor inactive agents of change. Students are an enlightened and informed class of political agents, and its political agency and patterns of activism needs further documentation or

introspection. However, not all has been well with student movements of late. In fact, one can fairly and squarely attest that student movements have received mixed responses – both from governmental regimes and the general public. Nevertheless, campus upheavals and protests have remained a constant feature in the contemporary context, one that is defined by global threats and risks of the Pandemic. Amid such a scenario, whether student political activism has rejuvenated itself in alignment with identity based politics – and is also ideologically grounded or not at the same time, is a question that needs to be deeply reflected upon as well as problematized.¹²

According to Habermas and Blazek (1987: 3), it becomes difficult for a university to continue as ‘a whole once the unifying bond of its corporative consciousness dissolves’. It becomes imperative for it then to fulfil certain societal functions (training of future students, the preparation for academic careers, the participation in general education, cultural self-understanding and public opinion formation) in order to preserve an inner connection with the goals, motives and actions of its members. Hence, they attest that ‘it should institutionally embody’ as well as ‘motivationally anchor a life form which is intersubjectively shared by its members’, bearing an exemplary character. They further state that,

The universities are still rooted in the life world through this interpenetration of functions. So long as this connection is not completely torn asunder, the idea of the university is still not wholly dead (Habermas and Blazek, 1987: 8).

However, with the transformation of the nation state into a network state in the Information Age, Castells (2010: 421) highlights the importance of cultural, religious and national identities as a defining principle of

¹² Identity politics signifies political activity and theorizing that is premised on shared experiences of members of social groups. Belief systems, programmatic manifestos or party affiliation are not primary determinants for mobilization in this case. Rather, the aim lies in securing political freedom of specific marginalized sections that assert or reclaim their distinctiveness challenging dominant sections, with the larger goal of self-determination (Heyes, 2020).

social organization or mobilization. Talking about one particular form of identity which he labels as ‘resistance identities’ – he ideates that such a type ‘retrenches in communal heavens’ and remains constant despite global transitions or the advent of radical individualism; it organizes itself around the ‘traditional values of God, nation, and the family’ which are further secured via ethnic emblems and territorial defenses. While there have been debates over the end of ideology and the mushrooming of identity politics for over half a century now, it can be firmly attested that universities have been a mirror image of such a phenomenon too.

Reflecting on the Indian case, Deshpande (2016: 38) has attested that in the context of higher education, the last two decades have been most eventful since Independence with the advent of global categories such as ‘knowledge based economy and society’; a ‘silent social revolution’ involving contestations and assertions between (the excluded and privileged) caste groups thereby introducing heterogeneity within relatively homogeneous spaces of colleges and universities; rise of privatization of higher education together with greater state control via acts of ‘omission’ and ‘commission’, and a major expansion programme that witnessed the collusion between the state, private entrepreneurs, politicians, and academic administrators. Pointing out that education is the key to equity in developing countries such as ours, he emphasises that higher education then becomes the most potent conservative force as well as effective change maker, further serving as a means for social mobility. It is for these reasons, he concludes, that higher education has become a site of conflict in the present-day context.

In this light, Pathania (2018: 6) has argued that within such a site, students’ activism has mushroomed for over a century and thereby compels one to contemplate upon why they become sites of resistance paving the pathway for the makings of a society of liberal and free ideas via radical change – challenging as well as further

posing challenges to forms of authority.¹³ He further argues that in the Indian case, student politics reveals

...that class politics has been on the decline while identity politics or identity resistance politics has been on the rise. Leftist parties have long simplified the complexities of caste by projecting them as class politics. They have not yet honed a clear-cut strategy to understand these social complexities unique to India. Moreover, projecting the class notion undermines the anti-caste agenda that democracy demands to create an egalitarian society. On the other hand, Centrist forces and the right wing use cultural politics as a tool to address these issues, which appeal to the masses (Pathania, 2018: 18).

Against this background, it must be addressed that ideology and curriculum share a symbiotic relationship. Issues regarding the curriculum or syllabi have always been a matter of great debate. In the university settings in the Indian context, curriculum has been a site for doing politics too – politics that is ideologically grounded; that reflects identity embeddings and is vocal about nation-building.¹⁴ Within such a context, the interplay of ideologies and identities vis-à-vis the category of *rashtra-hith* (in the best interests of the nation) has attained greater significance in recent times especially with rapid neo-liberalisation and burgeoning religious nationalism. In Delhi University (DU) alone, there have been numerous occasions concerning the debates on curriculum wherein student organizations have pressurized the administrative authorities to intervene or terminate revisions to the same. Many textbooks have had to be removed from the teaching syllabi as they were apparently against the ideological moorings of particular organizations.

¹³ Pathania (2018: 34) adds that the scholarship of Alan Touraine, Alberto Melucci, Jürgen Habermas and Manuel Castells explains the emergence and character of new social movements and locates contemporary student movements as New Social Movements. He further contends that contrary to the class base and ideology of old social movements, the new social movements of the 1970s drew its support from a range of registers such as gender, age, race, sexuality, ethnicity and region (Pathania, 2018: 34).

¹⁴ The ABVP prefers the term *rashtriya punarnirman* (nation re-building) instead of nation-building which encompasses their philosophical goal of first un-doing and then re-doing.

Table 2: Contentions on DU Undergraduate Syllabus in the Past

Year	Subject	Texts under contestation
2008	History	<i>Three Hundred Ramayanas</i> by A K Ramanujan
2010	History	<i>Sachchi Ramayan</i> by Periyar
2012	History	<i>Three Hundred Ramayanas</i> by A K Ramanujan
2017	Sociology	<i>The Burning Forest: India's War in Bastar</i> by Nandini Sundar
2018	History	<i>Against Ecological Romanticism</i> by Verrier Elwin; <i>The Making of an Anti-Modern Tribal Identity</i> by Archana Prasad

Source: Data collated from The Times of India, 18 July 2019

Using the analogy of 9/11 as an event and that (teaching) it can have serious ramifications for questions or ideals of democracy at large, Apple (2019) has argued that, educators (whether teaching in the university classroom or participating in school board decision making processes) must first recognize their 'contradictory responses' to the particular event or its aftermath. He states that such responses can have long-lasting ramifications and that,

...many of these consequences may themselves undercut the very democracy we believe that we are upholding and defending. This more complicated political understanding may well be a first step in finding appropriate and socially critical pedagogic strategies to work within our classes and communities to interrupt the larger hegemonic projects - including the redefinition of democracy as "patriotic fervor" - that we will continue to face in the future (Apple, 2019: 187-188).

In the Indian case, while school textbooks and its curriculum have perennially attracted contestations and thereby widespread interest (for instance the NCERT Textbooks); such a phenomenon has generally been under-represented inasmuch as higher education is

concerned.¹⁵ Most of the contentions in the recent protests related to the syllabuses were weighed in favour of this category as the protestors believed that their larger project of nation-(re)building can be successful only when their voices are appropriately heard as well as ‘their kind of literature is rightfully represented’ in the teaching curriculum. Discussing the case of Britain, Ball (1993) has argued that such a phenomenon of ‘glorifying the past’ has led to the emergence of ‘restorationist history’ which is “the reconstruction of the past for its own sake” not a “prelude to current affairs”. He calls it value-free history, one that divorces fact from interpretation and interpretation from interest. He further attests that,

The ‘past glories’ approach serves the ideology of empire and nationalism. The blood, struggle, pain and mess of history is reworked into a litany of glories and victories, a retrospective and sentimental adjustment of the actual. This is part of what Foucault calls “the struggle over popular memory”. In restorationist history Britain is to be at the centre of history, a benign and progressive influence upon the world, bearer of justice and civilisation. The focus, taken up in the National Curriculum documentation, is upon political, constitutional and military history rather than social or cultural (Ball, 1993: 203-04).

On a similar vein, Sarkar (2019) has stated that, RSS history is driven by political needs, popular beliefs and myths together with construction of memory-work. She further argues that such an imperative asserts privileges against investigative history inasmuch that questions of academic evaluation or cross-checking, of ascertaining the validity of narrative claims or even of its methods and purposes do not arise. In her opinion, history then becomes a flat field where all kinds of memories have an equally interesting status. She further states that,

Given that Hindutva challenges academic historical methods and narratives, why should their accounts of the cultural past become more popular and successful than the scholarly ones?

¹⁵ NCERT or the National Council of Educational Research and Training is an autonomous organization of the Government of India to assist and advise the Central and State Governments on policies and programmes for qualitative improvement in school education.

Left-secular historians - making up the bulk of Indian historians - have a complex and nuanced understanding of history and, needless to say, also an immeasurably more scholarly one. But they have, with few exceptions, confined their work to the realm of the properly academic: as, indeed, they should do, since their legitimate brief is to write honest, well researched and interesting histories. That realm, however, inevitably belongs to metropolitan centres and to highly educated middle class academic circles (Sarkar, 2019: 172).

Talking about the case of DU, Chaudhuri (2018: 346) has stated that, activism has been rampant in the last few years and students have been vocal in referendums against the politically imposed Four Year Undergraduate Programme (FYUP) and Choice Based Credit System (CBCS), policy-interventions that were perceived as detrimental to the quality of education. Moreover, with the rising clout of religious nationalism in the Indian context, Gupta (2019) contends that the recent protests in spaces of higher education that have emerged since 2016 offer a case for analysis and engagement with the critical issue of our time – the character of exclusionary nationalism; the consanguinity of neoliberal and nationalist governance, and the global neoliberal takeover of the academy. She further states that political power operates inasmuch similarly in academic campuses as well as in the world outside of it. In this light, she harps upon the fact that the role members of the ABVP play is representative of the fact that they appear as “guardians of nationalist ideology”, serving as the “BJP’s *Blackshirts* in the academy” or the ruling party’s main cadre base via the RSS (Gupta, 2019: 5-6). That, drives to transform pedagogy and scholarship in the direction of authoritarian nationalism that have generally been ‘sold’ by using the neoliberal tactics of citing metrics, target setting, and cost-accounting rationals is what she contends. She further attests that,

...the dumbing down of curricula and programmes for skills-training, hikes in fees and the cost of education for students, close-to-the-grain surveillance, discouragement of union activities, disinvestments from student support and educational infrastructures and so forth have all motivated protests alongside or through the rise of authoritarian nationalism.

These are all moves evidenced widely in neoliberal regimes elsewhere, and have been inspired by examples or imported from practices elsewhere into India (Gupta, 2019: 7).

In a much recent development, the DU administration passed the Undergraduate Curriculum Framework (UGCF) for re-instituting the four-year undergraduate programme (FYUP) formulated according to the National Education Policy (NEP) for its forthcoming academic session, notwithstanding dissent from some academic council members who felt that it must be sent for discussion to all statutory bodies such as the committees of courses, staff councils and faculties before taking it to the Academic Council (Outlook, 2022).¹⁶ To highlight Jayaram's (2007) position on this aspect,

The Indian university system is extraordinarily rigid and pronouncedly resistant to change: the impetus for change does not come from within the system. When experiments or innovations are introduced from outside, they are resisted; if enforced, they are ritualized. The fate of such innovations as the merit promotion scheme, faculty improvement program, vocationalization of courses, semesterization of courses, curriculum development center, annual report, college development council, academic staff college and refresher and orientation courses, are too well known to warrant elaboration. It is indeed ironic that higher education, which is expected to function as an agency of change, should itself be resistant to it (Jayaram, 2007: 765).

At this juncture, Indian higher education is at a paradoxical crossroad – of rapid neoliberalism and burgeoning religious nationalism. While there arise tendencies to 'keep up' with the rapidly changing global economic demands, clinging onto the 'glorious past' is also championed at the same time. Amid such a scenario, it would be worthwhile to reflect on several perceptions towards student political activism. Both, in earlier as well

¹⁶ The dissent note stated that the university gave only 10 days for the stakeholders to respond to a restructuring which will change the landscape of undergraduate education and have major consequences for teachers and students, especially women students as well as others from marginalized and underprivileged sections as they would have to wait an extra year compared to students from other universities before entering the job market (Outlook, 2022).

as contemporary periods, it cannot be discounted that such a form of politics has shared and continues to share an organic link with the fold of higher education. In fact, one can attest that constructive activism has been a necessary requirement for democratic and organized functioning of higher education. Therein, this section has attempted to throw light into the centrality of this debate – that students and politics share an intrinsic relationship and that it is a difficult task to segregate students from the ‘political’. The role played by student organizations or student wings of political parties and institutionalized mechanisms that govern such processes only strengthens such a relationship.

Conclusion

Democratization of higher education in several postcolonial nations has been driven via the goal of emancipation. But, it has also transformed these ‘fields’ into spaces of competition. In this respect, student activism serves as a catalyst in achieving such ideals and programmes. Major changes have occurred in the character and composition of Indian universities in the last three decades or so due to its changing demographic composition induced via policy interventions of affirmative action. Further, with the onset of policies of economic liberalization and growing tendencies of religious nationalism, these sites have become significant spaces of contestations. With the *Mandal-Mandir* moment emerging in the early nineties, students’ engagement in activism or politics invoked a duality – while on one hand, many commentators have argued that apathetic or apolitical attitudes had become the norm; others have lauded the young populace as the driving force in contemporary global uprisings or local political matters of importance.¹⁷ One needs to then understand how student

¹⁷ The *Mandal-Mandir* moment has been definitive for Indian politics. Protests initiated in the early 1990s in India following the backlash by upper castes and middle classes on account of extending reservations to the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) via the Mandal Commission recommendations was witnessed in simultaneity with a growing communal atmosphere

politics resonates with national politics and draws upon traits of identity politics, ideological alignments or other issues of national importance. In this sense, student politics in Delhi University (DU) appears to be more aligned to external political forces in comparison to the other Indian universities.

Students have been seen as a class of individuals possessing strong agency – largely asserting their positions for or against matters of importance related to higher education and employment, strongly reflecting and exhibiting their class backgrounds or capital prowess, as well as significantly linking multiple identities with political activism with the motive of attaining larger goals. Even though a substantial section of students remain strongly apathetic and apolitical towards the aforementioned concerns, a position which can largely be attributed to the core values of liberalizing tendencies of the economy as well as higher levels of competition in the educational as well as employment sectors – a significant section of students have attained greater voice and agency via these aforementioned structural adjustment programmes as well as interventions, together with policies of affirmative action or reservations.

It must be addressed that students have been and are still viewed as a powerful political agency worldwide and this paper has made attempts to unfold the salient vectors of students' political agency, in relation to questions of academic governance. It has addressed the vacuum underlining the intersections between academic policy-making, student politics and its dissent to such policies manifesting from a public university in India. When the curriculum protests escalated, many of the commentators who witnessed the curriculum protests closely felt that it was a mere attempt to secure victory for the Students' Union Elections. In their opinion, such matters (of curriculum) would fizzle out thereafter. Their contentions did appear to hold much ground as there

following the *Rath Yatra* (chariot rally) for the construction of the Ram Mandir (Ram Temple) in Ayodhya, which consequentially led to the demolition of the Babri Masjid (Babri Mosque) in 1992.

have been little talk or protest regarding curriculum thereafter. However, it must be argued that this process is intertwined and reciprocal. To be in power at the Students' Union did enable student parties to express dissent against the University policies and decisions. Further, when backed by the ruling regime, such power does amount to the construction of political capital – one that becomes essential for effecting (or resisting) to change not only in the university, but outside of it as well.

The specific attempt of this paper has been to highlight the everyday operation of politics or activism in the university space. To conclude, students' contribution to social change – whether it is about solving micro campus issues as well as to participating in macro projects of nation-building continues to be championed and documented by scholars and commentators globally. One cannot discount the fact that diverse social locations have designed the political agency of students; as well as their participation in everyday forms of political activism. Even amidst recent turbulences as well as vilified attacks on the agency of students, their role in nation-building continues to be as relevant as ever. Such manifestations of politics do exhibit a vibrant political ecology – the syllabus related protests offer a case for the same among many others. Nevertheless, and to conclude, such visions of nation-building as visualised by pro-statist groups such as the ABVP is exclusivist; detrimental to democratising the space of the university; not all-encompassing and masks or alters existing social realities. Inasmuch then, the question of what kind of student politics is acceptable and appropriate and what is not needs further reflection and this paper seeks to open up the scope for further debates in this regard.

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