Why Are Indian Students So Angry?

Abstract

A recent wave of student resistance is spreading across Indian campuses, as universities, with their liberal orientation, and the priorities of the Modi government, with its majoritarian and neoliberal agenda, clash against each other. The reaction of the government to university unrest is a cause for serious concern.

Indian universities and colleges have been witnessing vehement protests in recent months, extending across the country from major cities like Chennai, Delhi, Kolkata, and Mumbai, to many smaller towns. Students, youth, and academics turned to the streets in unprecedented numbers. In many places, marches and demonstrations turned violent when police used brute force to quell the protests. Many institutions were temporarily closed and examinations had to be rescheduled. In towns like Aligarh, where Aligarh Muslim University, one of the oldest public universities in the country, is located, Internet services were suspended ahead of student protests.

Protests triggered by student and social issues amplified students' messages far beyond campuses. The specific locus of a recent protest that attracted national and international attention was the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in New Delhi. But students in campuses that are considered quiet and apolitical, like the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Bombay, IIT Madras, or the Indian Institute of Science in Bangalore, also organized gatherings and marches in support of the issues raised by students at JNU and other campuses. This was probably the first time that students from these campuses demonstrated in such large numbers against the state.

Compounding Challenges

To a great extent, these protests are based on the discontent of Indian students regarding many issues compounded over recent years. They are just the tip of the iceberg of a deeper crisis that Indian society and its institutions have been undergoing, and the worst phase since independence.

In December 2019, the Delhi police force, which is under the jurisdiction of the central government of prime minister Modi, beat up students protesting at Jamia Millia Islamia University (JMI), a public institution in Delhi. JMI students were protesting against the government's controversial Citizenship Amendment Act. This act offers citizenship to immigrants belonging to Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Jain, Parsi, and Sikh communities from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, but does not include Muslims. It is a clear violation of the right to equality enshrined in the Indian constitution and the secular foundations of the country.

This episode was followed by violence unleashed by masked miscreants, allegedly associated with the student organization affiliated with the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) at JNU. Armed with sticks, the mob attacked students and faculty in January 2020. The stand taken by the JNU administration and the police after this attack provoked sharp criticism and demonstrations across the country.

These events at JNU could be viewed as an example of the contradiction between the traditionally liberal orientation of universities and the rapid changes currently taking place under Modi's Hindu nationalist administration. Student politics at JNU have been known mainly for their orientation on national and international politics. However, the ongoing agitation is mainly the result of an administrative decision to increase fees and introduce new utility charges, making it harder for students from marginalized backgrounds to access higher education. Students also opposed new hostel rules including a dress code for students and the implementation of curfew schedules.

Penetration of Intolerant Majoritarianism

To understand these violent, country-wide developments, one must look into several issues related to the growth and influence of right-wing politics over the past six years. During Prime Minister Modi's first tenure (2014–2019), government interfered in prominent academic institutions such as the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII), where, in 2015, students went on an indefinite strike after the government appointed

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television actor-turned-politician Gajendra Chauhan as chairman of the institute. In 2016, the president of the JNU Students' Union was arrested on sedition charges, a politically motivated move. That same year, the suicide of Rohith Vemula, a research scholar at the University of Hyderabad, triggered protests in that city and in other parts of the country. Vemula committed suicide as a result of caste discrimination on campus, and there were allegations that university officials were under pressure to act against students, including him.

During the same period, prominent intellectuals, scholars, and journalists (such as Narendra Dabholkar, Govind Pansare, M.M. Kalburgi, and Gauri Lankesh) were murdered by right-wing terrorists in Maharashtra and Karnataka. The government's decision to impose Central Civil Services (Conduct) Rules on faculty at central universities provoked heavy criticism. These rules restrict academic freedom, promote politically motivated historiography and chauvinistic claims about ancient India's scientific and technological contributions, and dilute the credibility of national statistical organizations.

The return of Modi as prime minister with a colossal majority in 2019 has further emboldened rightist elements in Indian politics and society. The policies of many top university officials, often beneficiaries of political appointments, are inspired by these politics. As a result, many institutions, especially those under the central government and state institutions under BJP-ruled states (such as Uttar Pradesh) are notorious in suppressing dissent, which has resulted in an undeclared state of emergency across many campuses and cities.

In December 2019, it was reported that the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, a prominent public university in Mumbai, issued a directive to its students and faculty prohibiting them from joining "any form of protest" while on duty. Similarly, the dean of students at IIT Bombay recently issued a directive warning students against taking part in antigovernment protests. Other Indian universities also introduced restrictive policies. Violations of academic freedom have become widespread.

Silencing of Dissent in the Age of Neoliberalism

Government policies favoring religious majoritarianism, combined with the implementation of a neoliberal economic agenda, are at the root of the ongoing crisis. Unlike student movements in the recent past, which mainly focussed on student issues and were led by students, current protests are also focussing on broader, national issues concerning the existence of democratic institutions and constitutional values.

Most public institutions are affected by a lack of resources. The nondisbursal of full salaries to staff of prestigious institutions, such as at the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research in 2019, is a telling example. In addition, in an attempt to make them more self-sufficient, the government promotes income diversification among public institutions—the JNU administration's decision to increase fees and introduce new charges to students is an example. This is compounded by the worst slowdown faced by the Indian economy in recent decades, coupled with rising unemployment.

Students and faculty are the most affected by these policies, especially by fund cuts and attacks against science and public institutions. All these developments are leading to a crackdown on dissent in higher education institutions and an increase of state control through various means. The response of government and university officials is a cause for serious concern. What is at stake is not only the existence of India's public higher education system, but also the very idea of educational institutions as spaces to generate creativity and critical thinking. ◢

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