

Student Unrest in the Indian Social Context – A Study

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Abstract

Sociology is a science which deals with the promotion of the general welfare of the state and its people. Like any other science it has its rules and laws which when put to work produce specific effects. Many debate about the participation of students in politics but the truth is, there is nothing wrong in students understanding the laws that govern the prosperity of their country. However one must realize that to run one must first learn to walk.

The word sociology has acquired a reputation for being associated with all things negative. It does not help to see our members of parliament hurling abuses at one another on prime television. Where is the dignity?? Where is the respect for the constitution? Politics is generally equated with agitation-constitutional or unconstitutional. This takes on bigger proportions when all kinds of media are used to propagate it. The escalating drama then rears its ugly head in the form of Bandhs, stone throwing, and unrestricted violence. The result is almost always loss of life and loss of property. Now this is the kind of politics that students should have no part of. Constitutional agitation requires knowledge, acquaintance with the forms of government in the country and an understanding of the socio-economic dynamics of the country. It calls for educating the masses to understand their needs. It calls for pressing on those in power, the need for reform in an educated and nonviolent way. Students have no place getting involved in constitutional agitation either. This requires knowledge of the constitution, the conditions of life- something the student is yet to experience, and an understanding of the demerits of existing forms. The mind of the student is not sufficiently developed to undertake all this work. Besides youth is the age of enthusiasm. It is the time to learn, the time to soak in experiences, the time to gather information. Without experience or knowledge the youth will end only propagating the views of others. It is important that he must develop his own opinion based on the facts available.

Key words: student unrest, politics, university, agitation, youth movement.

Introduction

Youth is a stage in mans development where the mind is inexperienced hence prone to brash outrage. There is enthusiasm yes, but it needs to be channeled in the right way for it to one day turn into wisdom so that it can serve both him and his nation. However, students can prepare for their sojourn in politics. They must use the time they have at this point of their life when they are not hampered by family responsibilities to study and gain information. Political science should put before the children facts about the principles and history of government as per their capacity to understand. College students should be allowed to attend political meetings so that they gain hands on knowledge of the goings on at these meetings. They should, however, not be allowed to participate. It is the time to assimilate knowledge, harness it so that one can use it when one has the wisdom to do so. College might be treated as mock parliament and the students might be allowed to assail roles in this mock parliament.

Students will learn how to put their point across, they will learn to accept criticism, and more important, they will understand that there might be different ways of doing the same thing. They will gain perspective and valuable experience which will allow them to make educated choices when they finally decide to step into the world of politics. Students of today are the future guardians of our nation's destiny. They are the molders and builders of future India. Political consciousness is, therefore, an indispensable factor contributing to the growth and development of a nation. Students of India must cultivate a sublime sense of discipline, which is one of the essential requisites of democracy.

Should students take part in politics? It has been one of the most baffling questions before our national leaders. Those who oppose the participation of students in politics put up a strong case. They argue that politics is a dirty game. It creates groups and parties and leads to permanent enmities. It disturbs the peace of mind of the students. The primary duty of a student is to pay single-minded attention to his studies. They agree that a student cannot afford to take part in the luxury of politics.

Politics makes a great interference in their studies. Their interest gets diverted from the main aspect. Interest in politics leads a student to be an active participant in strikes, demonstrations and processions, as a result of which he loses his real purpose in life and goes astray. Participation in politics thus spoils a student's career. Those who support the participation of students in politics make out an equally strong case. They argue that education does not mean mere literacy. It means a total and all-round development of personality. Participation in politics leads to a harmonious development of personality. It makes him aware of what is happening in his country and in the world around him. It also develops in him the qualities of leadership. Instead of being a timid and shy bookworm, he grows into an aggressive, dominating and alert young man who knows how to fight the battle of life. Participation in politics trains a student to be a good citizen. It gives him training in the democratic way of life. He grows into a responsible and cultured citizen. It creates in him a sense of patriotism. He has a fair knowledge of the world. He develops a debating skill. As a leader he develops such qualities as courage, sincerity of purpose, a spirit of service, and sympathy for his fellowmen and self-discipline.

Student-life is the formative period in one's life. A student must develop all the qualities in him during this period. It helps him to lead a successful life. If he is kept totally away from politics, he is likely to grow into a lopsided personality. If we study the lives of our great leaders, we shall find that most of them did take active part in politics even during their student days.

Now, it is difficult to pronounce any verdict in favour of one or the other point of view. A student should take part in politics but it should not be an active participation. All activities are good if one remains within reasonable limits. Students should, therefore, pay primary attention to their studies. They should, at the same time, keep themselves informed about what is happening around them.

Objective:

This paper seeks understand student unrest and outline social causes that trigger it.

Certain events of civil unrest in India — violent crowds, protests and riots — put a serious strain on the secular foundation of the society. Be it the Swadeshi Movement of 1905 or Satyagrah in 1930, movements have shaped the history of the nation. As Tamil Nadu witnesses protests and shutdowns demanding constitution of the Cauvery Management Board, ET Magazine checks some of the powerful protests of modern India.

Nirbhaya Movement, 2012

The 2012 Delhi gang rape incident saw one of the most angry reactions from people who were very clear on expressing that they have had enough. After the incident, thousands came out on streets to protest in several parts of the country. The movement also created a stir in social media. Taking the movement into consideration, the government at the centre and various states announced several steps to ensure the safety of women.

Pro-Jallikattu Protests, Tamil Nadu, 2017

As the Supreme Court put a ban on the traditional bull-taming sport Jallikattu after years of complaints about animal cruelty by PETA, the ban was not accepted by the people of Tamil Nadu. The protestors said the sport is central to their cultural identity. The protest turned violent when police tried to evict the protestors. Around 2,00,000 people came out on the street near Chennai's Marina beach to show solidarity.

On January 23, the Tamil Nadu Government legalised Jallikattu and passed a bill to amend the PCA (Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act) 1960 Act

FTII Agitation, 2015

When in June 2015, Gajendra Chauhan was appointed the chairman of the Film and Television Institute of India, it was seen as problematic by the students because not only did Chauhan lack the requisite credentials, but he had also been a right-wing hardliner for 20 years. Students went on an indefinite strike protesting against the appointment, with protests in places like Delhi erupting into a clash of the students with the police. Directors Anand Patwardhan, Diwakar Banerjee and more returned their national awards in solidarity with the students of FTII. After more than 150 days of agitation, the students discontinued their protest

Jan Lokpal Bill: Anti Corruption Movement by Anna Hazare, 2011

When anti-corruption activist Anna Hazare began a hunger strike at Jantar Mantar in New Delhi on April 5, 2011, the movement led to the resignation of Agriculture Minister Sharad Pawar from the group of ministers that had been charged with reviewing the draft Jan Lokpal bill. The initiative brought together a huge number of people, making it a one-of-its-kind event in decades. The movement was named among the “Top 10 News Stories of 2011” by Time Magazine.

The Assam movement, 1979-1985

This was a movement against undocumented immigrants in Assam — a revolution of the indigenous people of the state to protect their rights, their homeland against the illegal migrants who were penetrating into the state for years. The movement, led by All Assam Students Union and the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad, developed a programme of protests and demonstration to compel the government to identify and expel illegal immigrants.

Anti-reservation protests, 2006

The 2006 Indian anti-reservation protests was in opposition to the decision of the Union government of India, led by the Congress to implement reservations for the other backward classes (OBCs) in central and private institutes of higher education

Jadavpur University Protests, 2014

On September 16, 2014, demonstrations by students in front of the administrative building, demanded an investigation into the molestation of a female student in campus. Students went on a hunger strike, and subsequent police brutality in the early hours of September 17 triggered a wave of protests. It culminated with nearly a 100 students refusing to take their degrees during the Convocation and effigies of the VC being burnt. Demonstrations showing solidarity with the students started across India. After four months of continued agitation, in January 2015, the VC Abhijit Chakrabarti resigned from his post

Here are some popular non-violent protest

Gandhi's Salt March is one of the most well-known silent protest. Here are some other similar ones from around the world:

* *The Singing Revolution (1986-1991)*

Method of Protest: Protesters gathered in the streets where they sang songs of national pride, which had been outlawed by the Soviet occupiers

With the growing student unrest in the country, everybody has started asking a question about whether students and politics can and should go together. Students were made to take part in politics long before the independence of the country. They were the vanguard (front leader) of the national struggle for independence. Gandhiji often gave a call for civil disobedience movements and the students took an active part in them.

As a matter of fact the game of politics is not at all beneficial to the student community. So they should keep aloof from active politics as far as possible. There were strong reasons for it.

The student life is very precious and students have to devote themselves heart and soul to their studies. True education means the harmonious development of body, mind and soul. There has been a recent spurt in incidences of violence, strikes, protest movements in our educational institutions like Jawaharlal Nehru University, Film and Television Institute Of India, Hyderabad University etc. albeit for different reasons. Regardless of how genuine or not-so-genuine their reasons are, the situation raises some very important questions. Do we need politics in our institutions? If it is allowed, how much politicisation is desirable, for a line has to be drawn somewhere? And more importantly, what kind of politics do we want?

The apathetic response, the action or inaction by those in charge, to such protests raises even more serious questions. Do our institutions of higher learning enjoy the requisite autonomy, so that they reflect the democratic ideals that our nation espouses? What factors affect this autonomy? How can we guarantee this cherished autonomy of our institutions

given the realities of their administration? And why do only a handful of our institutions enjoy a monopoly of producing political leaders? These questions are not only important for universities but for the entire society.

To understand the need for politics in our institutions, the realities of society we live in need to be understood. Politics today, whether desirable or not, has become totalitarian in nature all around the world, varying only in terms of degree. It has become so pervasive that there exists no social institution that is not affected by politics or is devoid of internal politics. Our economic development – industries, corporates, social welfare schemes, health, education, infrastructure development is all guided by political policies and practices. Political patronage determines the benefits the people of a particular religious community enjoy. Politics controls the creativity of our singers, filmmakers and actors and what they can or cannot say. It even impacts, or often controls, our personal lives – the number of children we can have (in China for example), the food that we can eat, the dress we can wear etc.

If politics is so deeply entrenched in our system, how can universities be an exception. If the goal of a university is not myopically defined to train students only in a particular subject, but is to prepare students for unforeseen and unimagined things that life has to offer, then politics is very important, as a part and parcel of college activities, for the overall development of an individual's personality and character. It must be remembered that character building is the first step to nation building.

Also, politics is needed in institutions not only because it is present everywhere but to produce better leaders instead of having leaders foisted upon us because of their money/muscle power, or by virtue of their lineage. Since college politics has direct links with national and state level politics, it becomes a good launching pad for new faces that otherwise would not have had a chance to enter the political arena. Therefore, student politics institutionalises the merit-based search for future leaders.

It is disheartening to note that premier institutions of our country like the Indian Institutes of Technology, Indian Institutes of Management, National Institutes Of Technology or St. Stephen's College (Delhi) do not allow student politics because of which some of the best of minds in India do not get to enter the political arena, excepting a few who make it against all odds. Juxtapose this reality with the ways in which politics is described – like politics being the playground of criminals, the domain of the uneducated, uncouth etc. – and the need to allow politics in our educational institutions would seem even more pressing. Ironically, non-political peers of successful politicians, or other people in public life, take pride and sometimes even credit for their success stories.

Those who argue against the politicisation of institutions give innumerable examples of entire academic sessions going to waste. Even students willing to attend classes are bound by peer pressure to take part in protests, strikes etc. they assert. They condemn political violence entering the 'temples' of modern India. The answer to all these lies not in disallowing any form of politics in campuses but changing the kind of politics we practice.

Political theorists argue that democratic politics is not only about the ritual of elections, political canvassing etc. but refers to the dialectical environment of debate, discussion, dialogue and dissent in a peaceful setting. The intention is not to bulldoze opposing ideas but recognising the right of others to have differing thoughts or ideologies than yours. The same should be the case for politics in the universities. Currently, only a politics of disruption and destruction is

practiced both in the national parliament and in college campuses. This adversely affects the legislative process and academics respectively.

The need of the hour is that the leaders of tomorrow must rise to the occasion and devise new and innovative ways of dissenting and protesting through their writings, movies, plays, songs, using the power of social media and the internet without disrupting the academic discipline of the institution. Also, they must not deprive others of their right to study in a peaceful environment.

To bring about this holistic change in the nature of politics in our institutions, the most important thing is to guarantee the complete autonomy of these institutions. This includes management, appointment (of professors, staff, Heads of Departments, Vice-Chancellors etc.), financial autonomy, student selection procedure, course, curriculum and syllabus selection. The need of the hour is to democratise our educational institutions.

Student protests questioning the future

We have too many people crying foul over appointments of V-Cs, heads of departments or institutes due to the political leanings of the person concerned. It is required that the appointment process be made more transparent and should involve all stakeholders, even the student community and civil society. With regard to financial autonomy, it is very difficult to make any educational institution self-sustaining. In the current 'socialistic' set up, the government subsidises the education of students. What can be done is that the government should hand over the money to these institutions to spend it as they deem fit based on their requirement. It's better to do away with the straitjacket approach being followed now. In the current system, money is given under heads of infrastructure development, hiring or salaries staff, electricity, water supply etc. The money gets spent on unrequired white-washes rather than on laboratory facilities or on research funding for students!

One other model that can be tried in the long run is an open market education system based for education as a market commodity offered at market prices for education seekers. It might seem that the cost of education would rise significantly, but in the long run, as more and more profit-seeking private institutions enter this sector and compete, the costs of education would decrease and the quality would spiral upwards.

Students have to be physically strong, mentally alert and morally upright. If the dirty game of politics is played by the students inside or outside the campus, much of their valuable time will be wasted and their studies would remain incomplete and their careers would be ruined. Students are generally too immature to understand the ins and outs of politics. They have not yet gained that worldly wisdom and tact which are so essential for a politician.

Another reason why students should not take part in politics is that they are more emotional than rational with the result that they have not as yet acquired that stable and balanced mind that the game of politics requires. It is a well-known fact that politics is a dirty and dangerous game. Without a balanced and rational mind, it is very risky for students to jump into politics. During the pre-independence days students took an active part in politics because there was an urgency. Our motherland was groaning under the iron heels of the Britishers. Naturally our first and foremost duty was to free her from the foreign domination.

Education was a secondary consideration then. Now that India has won freedom, the first and foremost duty of students is to acquire knowledge. Politics should not be their chief concern. They might indulge in politics after completing their studies. Now let us look at the other side of the picture. Students are the cream of society, the pillars of their nation and the future hope of their country. The students of today are the citizens of tomorrow. Political consciousness is, therefore, very necessary for the future citizens of the nation. There is no harm if the students go on acquainting themselves with the political affairs of their country. But having knowledge about politics is quite different from indulging in politics. The syllabus of various subjects taught in schools and colleges demands such knowledge from the students. For this purpose, the students must devote some time daily in studying newspapers and understanding the current political developments in the country and abroad.

Conclusion

The recent outcry against police action in universities and application of stringent laws is necessary, but it isn't the only issue we need to be focussing on. There is another, related but more pressing issue at hand. According to Louis Althusser, a state exercises hegemony over its subjects through the repressive state apparatus (police) and ideological state apparatus (like school, family, colleges). The misuse of police and the law is evident and is there for all to see. But what we have to be wary of and concerned about are attempts at rewriting and reinterpretation of history based not on facts but on a particular ideology, and the narrow redefinition of 'Indianness' to fulfil political interests and agendas. The police is akin to a hammer in the hand of a blacksmith. It can only do so much damage without completely breaking the iron plate being worked upon. But the re-written textbooks are like the fire that the blacksmith uses making us completely pliable like a hot iron plate in hands of the ruling dispensation to mould and shape us as they wish. Currently, we see both the hammer and fire being used simultaneously by master craftsmen.

Today, our country is facing a crisis of character. The crisis of rising prices and consequent misery and distress for the lower sections of society and the crisis born of corruption and inefficiency in administration, especially at the higher level, have attained serious proportions. It is high time that our students should come forward to rid the country of corruption and inefficiency and pull her safely out of the crises. In the prevailing circumstances, it is useless to prevent students from taking part in politics. Moreover, in a democratic set up every citizen must be aware of the political conditions prevailing in the country. The students form a vital part of society. Our conclusion is that students cannot remain separate from politics. They should take theoretical but intelligent interest in politics so long as their studies are not complete. Afterwards they can take an active part in the political affairs of their country. It is not proper for them to join politics at the cost of their academic interests.

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