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Students, Saffron and the State – Resistance at IIT Madras

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IIT Madras students staged a protest at IIT Madras Campus in Chennai on June 02, 2015. File photo: K.V. Srinivasan

*Political movements involving students have raised critical issues at crucial moments of a country's history. The student protests in June 2015 at the Indian Institute of Technology, Madras, (IITM), over the derecognition of the Ambedkar Periyar Study Centre (APSC) may have been triggered by the decision of the authorities to respond disproportionately to a letter from the Union Government, but also reflect resistance to a possible streak of intolerance towards movements that counter the saffron agenda, says **Vasundhara Sirnate**.*

I

I reached the Indian Institute of Technology, Madras campus at about 2:30 pm on a Wednesday, when an agitating group of students made the Indian academic community sit up and take notice, and entered through the back gate since no one was being allowed in through the front entrance. I walked towards the nearest bus stop and boarded a bus that ran through the massive 600-acre campus. After it was full of students with backpacks, the bus rattled to life and shuddered forward. We moved through roads lined with banyan trees under which herds of deer sat

lazily – a sight not usually seen in the middle of a city. Students got off at various academic centres and the bus finally reached the main gate.

About 20 police personnel stood under trees. Two female police personnel stood in line outside the women's rest room near the main gate talking to each other. Elsewhere on the campus, a policeman ate lunch with his fingers out of a steel plate while standing. There were no protestors, and the police personnel looked relaxed. They wore no riot gear. There were at least two buses with riot-guard windows and a couple of police vehicles.

An Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) is an unlikely place for police action, because, it is claimed, engineers do not really get political on campus. They leave that to students that read Marx, not Feynman. Yet, last month, IIT Madras was in the eye of a storm – a political one involving a student body called the Ambedkar Periyar Study Circle, the local IIT administration and the Indian government's Ministry of Human Resource Development.

I was meeting the two students who had co- founded the Ambedkar Periyar Study Circle (APCS). They told me to get off at a stop called "Gurunath", which turned out to be a small campus-shopping hub. As I took the same bus back and asked someone to tell me where Gurunath was, a man talked about the current controversy in Tamil, English, and for my benefit, also in Hindi. I missed most of the context, but he seemed to be saying that the students were only presenting debate and that someone ratted them out. Somehow, he then began discussing Japan, Obama and the Second World War. At this point, most in the bus tuned out. He was old, and therefore, said the actions of the people in the bus, irrelevant.

After about 15 minutes, I got off at the appointed stop. There was a juice stall, a tea stall and a couple of small shops where students could pick up knick-knacks. Three deer grazed nearby maintaining an admirable capacity to not be frightened by humans going to and from class.

After a 10-minute wait, Akhil Bharathan ambled up followed by Ramesh. Akhil is getting an MA in Development Studies, while Ramesh has recently finished his Ph.D in Physics and is slated to graduate next month. We started to talk.

II

To understand what happened in IIT-Madras, we need to reflect on two things. First, we need to locate activism on campus in a larger debate on political identity formation amongst the youth and the university as a space where this identity is manufactured. We also need to focus on student politics not as a deviation from some norm, but as the norm in developing societies with burgeoning younger populations that are a ready constituency for any political party. Second, as I will discuss in section III, we need to get a sense of what the political climate was like in IIT-Madras on the eve of the derecognition (not banning) of the APSC.

In India, student politics on campuses is largely seen as an extension of national or regional party politics. Student groups that operate and contest elections on campuses are usually youth wings of established national or regional political parties. Often, the issues they raise have little relevance to campus life. For instance, at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, organisations will often "resist imperialism", but sometimes have very little to say about the quality of hostel food or the lack of infrastructure or facilities. In return for this patronage of student groups, major political parties use students as muscle during elections, or as volunteers to do party work. Students, who distinguish themselves in campus politics, are likely to get a party ticket to contest elections later on as a form of reward. Often

student leaders set themselves apart by exercising some monopoly over the use of coercion on campus, in what is called *goonda gardi* (using brute force for disruptive purposes).

In India, students have surfaced at critical points to register their demands or protest against state policy. In 1974, for instance, the *Nav Nirman* (Reconstruction) Movement consisting almost entirely of Indian students was launched in Gujarat. The agenda of the movement was to rid the country of political corruption and it specifically targeted corrupt politicians like Gujarat Chief Minister, Chimanbhai Patel, who was forced to resign under popular pressure. The *Nav Nirman* (reconstruction) movement was immensely popular and quickly inspired Jai Prakash Narayan's movement for a 'total revolution' in Bihar and Eastern Uttar Pradesh, which counted many students amongst its leaders.

Both movements influenced popular mobilisation in much of northern India. Indira Gandhi also cited these movements as a major cause of her decision to impose a national Emergency. Having been charged by the Allahabad High Court for political corruption, Indira Gandhi imposed the Emergency in 1975, which led to state-repression of many such movements and the imprisonment of movement leaders and opposition politicians. Students retreated into their campuses having been disciplined by the state. They did not play much of a role in bringing down the government in 1976, which occurred through the normal course of electoral politics.

In 1989, the V.P. Singh government implemented the recommendations of the Mandal Commission report and introduced a 27 per cent reservation for Other Backward Classes (OBC) ¹ in government jobs, raising the existing quota from 22.5 per cent (for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes) ² to 49.5 per cent for all three groups. Students from across the country launched a formidable agitation against this move.

Even though the government implemented the new policy, V.P. Singh's unpopularity with the masses brought down his government in a few months. In 2006, Arjun Singh launched another campaign to increase seats for OBCs in educational institutions by 27 per cent. The Supreme Court has since approved the policy. Initially, this was met with protest from students from many educational institutions. This period also witnessed the emergence of the group Youth For Equality that today exists as a collection of students opposed to reservations and has since gained in popularity on various campuses in the country.

How should we reflect on such developments theoretically? In the early scholarship on student politics, the university in the developing world was seen as an institution engaged in the production of political and economic elites for a grand project of national development, ³ the goal of which was ultimately to deliver the country into a condition of modernity compatible with the Western experience. The university achieved this by encouraging a progressive outlook towards culture and tradition, interrogating long-standing beliefs in society and fostering a scientific temperament.

Interestingly, the young students who founded the APSC were rebelling precisely against what they perceived as a loss of scientific temper on campus, which, they believed, was completely at odds with the philosophy that grounded the Indian Institute of Technologies to begin with.

In 1967, Seymour Lipset wrote that student political activism in the underdeveloped world signified the failure of the university as an academic community and that student political activity could be explained by the combination of adolescence and a legacy of anti-colonial nationalism ⁴. Lipset perceived students as having relative immunity from repression since they belonged to elites within their societies. He also saw them as bearers of public opinion in the absence of a fully formed and articulate middle class. However, Lipset also viewed the university as a modern

institution beleaguered by attacks from traditional forces in society. At the same time, he wrote that students were restless precisely because they were receptive to the scientific teachings of the university.

This apparent tension in his writing – explaining student activism as a result of the dual rejection of incorporation into the university and traditional norms and values of society– is highlighted in the early debate on student activism. Students were suspended between adolescence and adulthood, hung between idealism and irresponsibility, they had ‘unanchored libidos’ (pp 16), they possessed broader categories for identification, and they revolted against political attitudes as they saw those as impositions of authority.

In later literature on student politics, other theories were propounded. Student activism was seen as a consequence of liberal arts teaching, ⁵ a gap between employment generation and the production of skilled labour, and a cluster of other variables including students’ dissatisfaction with hurriedly recruited low-calibre teachers in universities, and resentment of family authority. ⁶ Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph emphasised the role of political parties in mobilising students in India but also saw that students experienced severe alienation on entering a university, ⁷ while Altbach looked at concentration in universities as contributing to activism. ⁸ Altbach’s analysis steadily increased in complexity and by 1989 in an edited volume he posed a fascinating question – why has student politics in the Third World been more successful than student politics in the industrialized countries? He proposed that the absence of proper political institutions makes it easier for students to infiltrate politics and wield political influence and that prior history of participation in national or anti-colonial movements in developing countries means students are taken seriously as political actors. Many universities tend to be located near or in capital cities that makes students more receptive to political ideas and influences their participation.

Later literature on student politics has looked at specific cases and drawn some conclusions about the role of print media in galvanising students in Ethiopia ⁹ and the university as mobilising structure as evinced in the case of Beijing University ¹⁰. Students, today, are a significant part of many social movements and anti-establishment movements. In many cases, students are the main movement actors as we can see, for instance, in northeast India.

With these reflections on student politics, we can now proceed to the events that occurred in IIT Madras.

III

As we sat under a convenient sun umbrella at Gurunath, Ramesh began to speak.

“We conceived of this idea [to start the APSC], in 2014. On April 14, 2014, the APSC was born in a hostel room with about 12-13 members”, said Ramesh. He told me that to understand why they started the group, we first needed to understand what was going on in the IIT campus.

“There has been a pro-Hindutva atmosphere inside the campus. Stay here one week and you will know”, said Ramesh.

He said that a series of lectures had been organised on campus, which dealt with subjects ranging from Hindu religion, to the vedas. There had been readings from the Ramayana and *bhajan* (prayer song) singing in a temple on campus was routine.

Akhil and Ramesh pointed to two groups on campus in particular called Santulan (balance) and Vande Mataram. Santulan, said Akhil with a chuckle, once organised a lecture where the speaker(s) argued against evolution and talked about intelligent design. Then a group organised a panel discussion on “Science versus God”. They said that almost everyone on the panel was in favour of god.

Vande Mataram is a group recognised by IIT Madras’ administration.

On the other hand, they said, Teesta Setalvad was invited to campus a year and a half ago, but the right-wingers did not allow her to speak. She was constantly interrupted. The sense that the students got last year was that since most students on their campus were upper castes, a natural alliance seemed to be building between such students and the forces of Hindutva.

“The Ambedkar Periyar Study Circle was a reaction to such groups. We decided to have a group of our own and question them”, said Ramesh.

“We picked Ambedkar and Periyar because both offered a logical and scientific critique of Hinduism”, they said.

About four months later, the APSC undertook their first event on language politics. They had noticed that the signs on the IIT campus had altered. Signage in Hindi came first, then signage in English. Also, they said, the words used in Hindi were heavily drawn from Sanskrit. They conducted a small informal experiment and asked students from Hindi speaking States to translate the signage in Hindi. They couldn’t understand the words. Some of the APSC’s other events included a discussion on the beef ban, labour laws, and land acquisition. They also organised a discussion on March 7, 2015, on “Understanding Bhagat Singh”, more specifically his atheism, in a lecture by Prof. Chaman Lal from the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

The APSC’s members believe that there is currently a direct link between changes in policy and the ideology and practitioners of Hindutva. All they want, they say, is a rational discussion on every topic including religion.

“Everyone subscribes to religion blindly”, said Ramesh. “We want a discussion into religion itself.”

Keeping to their theme of interrogating everything, on April 14, 2015, the group organised a talk by Prof. Vivekananda Gopal from Dravidian University, Kuppam, Andhra Pradesh, on the “Contemporary Relevance of Dr. Ambedkar”. The APSC’s Facebook page currently has a heated online debate in the comments section of the event, with someone saying that Ambedkar was not anti-Hindu and others offering to Google Ambedkar’s views on Hinduism for him.

According to the APSC leaders, there is a link between the pushers of Hindutva and corporates. They think that the Hindutva agenda is brought forward so that if everyone accepts Hindutva it is easier to attain silence on key issues like poverty, or landlessness, etc.

The APSC may be on to something. Consider the Indian government’s behaviour with respect to Priya Pillai, a Greenpeace activist, who was offloaded from a plane and stopped from giving her testimony to a group of British Parliamentarians. What the Pillai case reveals is a strong desire to see people opposing certain policies as anti-national (which was what they were called on a widely televised debate). By pushing Hindutva to the fore, anyone who opposes it becomes a part of the non-consensus.

The need to build a consensus is important to any project of nationalism. However, increasingly in India even having a democratic discussion on certain issues, like caste, crony capitalism or gendered violence, is seen as being anti-national. Instead of engaging with the parameters of the debate it is becoming convenient to blame the debaters for not showing solidarity with the project of nationalism, rendering such critical viewpoints on the fringes of political discussion.

“What is seen as anti-Hindu is a discussion on caste?” asks Ramesh.

According to an RTI application filed on 29 December 2014, IIT Madras has only 22 SC Ph.D, 2 ST Ph.D students across all departments for the year 2014-2015. This can be compared with 294 general category students and 150 OBC students. In Masters programmes across the campus there are only 4 SC students and no ST students. In response to another RTI filed by Akhil Bharathan, the IIT Madras administration revealed that there are only 4 SC Associate Professors and 4 SC Assistant Professors on campus. There are 152 general category Assistant Professors and 99 general category Associate Professors.

Given these statistics, the APSC leaders did have some cause to worry about majoritarian anti-lower caste ideology on campus. But they were in for a rude shock on May 22, 2015, when they received the following email from the Dean of Students.

“This is to inform you that because of the misuse of the privileges given to your study circle (Ambedkar-Periyar study circle) as an independent student body, your student body is de-recognized by the institute. You are welcome to come and explain your stand and actions.”

Explaining their stand and actions is exactly what the students did on May 25. But they proceed to the Dean of Students with some caution and puzzlement – they didn’t know what they had done to be de-recognized. In the meeting, reported Ramesh and Akhil, the Dean said they had violated the code of conduct. The students were even more puzzled. They said that there was no code of conduct for groups on campus, only guidelines. After some debate, they were finally reluctantly shown the letter from the Ministry of Human Resource Development dated May 15, 2015, signed by undersecretary Prisca Mathews and an undated anonymous letter. Prisca Mathews, the in-charge for IITs, could not be reached for comment.

The Dean of Students allegedly said he didn’t want to discuss the content of the letter and the message to the students was clear – there is no need to unnecessarily criticize the government. Ramesh and Akhil further stated that they were asked to write a letter that was not controversial and had no criticism of the government. Next time they were asked to send pamphlets to the Dean of Students, which he would then approve. If such a letter, apparently, a letter of apology were given, then the group would be re-recognized. The group was de-recognized, they were told, because they used the IIT logo which is against the “code of conduct” for an independent student body.

The students refused to apologise and instead took the battle to social media. They posted strongly about what had been done to their group and got copies of the documents from MHRD and the anonymous letter, which accuses them of creating caste tensions on campus and dividing students on the lines of caste and tribe. They said the MHRD had nothing on them, no evidence. They had been more than transparent in their functioning.

Here is what they wrote to the administration

"We resent the fact that the Dean has de-recognized our study circle unilaterally without giving us a fair hearing and an opportunity to represent ourselves. In our face to face interaction with the Dean of Students, we have been told that our study circle engages in "controversial activities" and violated the code of conduct of independent student bodies. We are clear on the stand that we have not misuse any privileges given by the institute. So far our activities are engaged with the healthy discussion on socio-economic issues on scientific basis to promote the scientific temper among the student which is allowed by the Indian constitution. We have not been given a satisfactory definition of what entails "controversial". Further, we were asked to give assurances that we shall desist from such activities in the future before the Dean (Students) can allow us to restart our activities. We have also been asked to route all our activities through the Dean's office rather than the usual practice of routing all our discussions, plan of activities and pamphlets through our faculty adviser. This excessive scrutiny is unprecedented and does not apply to any other students' organization. Vis-à-vis this move of DoS clearly shows, only opinions put forth by the right wing group will get the consent to see the light of the day, while the voices and opinion of the democratic students like us will be curtailed hereafter. Since DoS chaired this position, two times he warned us to change the name "Ambedkar-Periyar" stating that it is polarizing the student. This shows the aversion of DoS towards the the name "Ambedkar-Periyar."

Further, their response stated:

"We have been accused of spreading hatred between SC-ST and the Hindus and vitiating the atmosphere of the institute. We are surprised and slightly amused. Are SC, ST not part of the so called 'Hindus'? How MHRD and IITM is perceiving such a venomous anonymous mail with full of hatred towards the SC, ST and Ambedkar? Are we the one who polarise the students or they are the one who think IITM is their own base to propagate against the interest of SC, ST, OBC who are the majority in our society? Rather our organization is engaged in propagating Ambedkar and Periyar thoughts, in helping depressed castes and the caste Hindus to realize the evilness of caste based discrimination taking place in modern India and expose the ideology functioning behind such discrimination." They argued that the complaint was invalid. Interestingly, it seems to be the case that the Central Vigilance Commission in its [guidelines](#) says the following under the section titled "action on anonymous/pseudonymous complaints"

"3.8.1 The Commission has issued instructions that no action is to be taken by the administrative authorities, as a general rule, on anonymous/pseudonymous complaints received by them. When in doubt, the pseudonymous character of a complaint may be verified by enquiring from the signatory of the complaint whether it had actually been sent by him. If he cannot be contacted at the address given in the complaint, or if no reply is received from him within a reasonable time, it should be presumed that the complaint is pseudonymous and should accordingly be ignored."

There is a small loophole that does allow a government functionary to act on a pseudonymous complaint and issue a show-cause notice to get more information. This is what the letter from MHRD signed by Prisca Mathews presumes to do. The MHRD letter does not direct the IIT administration to take action against the student group. It is unclear why a general letter from the MHRD caused the Dean of Students to take such action against the APSC. It seems at every level enthusiastic functionaries worked to please the state and its ideology.

Why did the MHRD act on an anonymous/undated complaint that threw accusations at a student body that was relatively unheard of until the controversy snowballed? Why did the IIT administration react with such a strong step?

The only positive aspect to the whole episode after its eventual snowballing was that the MHRD washed its hands of the episode and the IIT administration reinstated the APSC, thereby closing the debate for most news channels.

IV

However, there are several points of concern in this story and the hope here is to flag them for future reference. First, there is no doubt that political culture is transforming in India. Recent events and the series of bans suggest that India is fast turning into a democracy where liberal democratic speech has its limits. Second, there is much discussion on creeping Hindutva into school textbooks and on campuses. The APSC controversy also suggests that the actors of the state are willing to shut down reactions to Hindutva groups.

We can see this as an attack on democratic dissent or just bureaucratic bungling and overreach. Either way, there is no denying the fact that something has shifted in the collective democratic spirit in India. The government and the trolls that play in the shadows of the state have targeted everyone from individual liberal activists, to NGOs, to journalists to student groups on campuses.

The APSC may have its privileges back, but how many such groups engaging in democratic dissent has this incident deterred?

References :

1.^ The Other Backward Classes (OBC) is an economically defined category in the Indian constitution. It includes a set of castes and sub-castes in the Hindu hierarchy identified as backward due to low levels of income, education, etc. Due to their backward status, OBC's can avail themselves of quotas in government jobs and now in educational institutions also. In a recent judgment, the Supreme Court of India has excluded the 'creamy layer' of OBC's, i.e., those OBC groups that have actually benefited from past reservation and are no longer economically backward, cannot claim reservation in educational institutions.

2.^ Scheduled Castes includes people from the former category of "untouchables" who were at the very bottom of the Hindu caste hierarchy. To make up for past discrimination the Indian Constitution provides them with reservation up to 22.5 per cent in the public sector and in educational institutions. Scheduled Tribes are animist groups (sometimes also called *adivasis*) who have also been included in the reservations policy along with Scheduled Castes. They are called 'scheduled' because they are listed in specific schedules of the Indian constitution.

3.^ See Lipset's "University Students and Student Politics in Underdeveloped Countries" in Lipset, S.M. (ed.) *Student Politics*, Basic Books, 1967.

4.^ The logic was that adolescents were mobilised during anti-colonial struggles in many countries and thus was forged an activist attitude amongst the youth that persisted.

5.^ See Spencer, Metta., "Professional, Scientific and Intellectual Students in India", in Lipset, S.M. (ed.), *Student Politics*, Basic Books, 1967.

6.^ See diBona, Joseph., "Indiscipline and Student Leadership in an Indian University", in Lipset, S.M. (ed.) *Student Politics*, Basic Books, 1967.

7.^ See See Rudolph, Lloyd., and Rudolph, Susanne., In *Pursuit of Lakshmi: The Political Economy of the Indian State*, University of Chicago Press, 1987, pp 294. The Rudolphs treat students as a demand group and a political class. However, they do not give reasons for why students can be treated as a political class. They compare students to industrial workers and argue that like industrial workers students too belong to an institutionalised setting, with one important difference - students are not economically dependent on their universities. The democratisation of Indian higher education since 1947, led to the incorporation of students from rural areas and economically weak backgrounds into mainstream universities. In the same way, rural recruits were incorporated into the industrial work force. However, for the Rudolphs, students did not adapt to their institutional environment as easily as the workers did. This was because, unlike the workers, no kinship-based recruitment network facilitated the entry of rural students into mainstream universities. The severe alienation that a lot of students experienced as a consequence of being uprooted from their traditional lives, led to increasing levels of frustration with their

education. The scholars say, “Students, struck, demonstrated, and agitated as much against academic rules, tests and fees as against government policies.”

8.^ See Altbach, Philip., “Students and Politics” in Lipset, S.M. (ed.) *Student Politics*, Basic Books 1967. Also, see Altbach’s introductory essay “Perspectives on *Student Political Activism*” in his edited volume *Student Political Activism*, Greenwood Press, 1989. Upon observing student politics in Bombay, he said that such politics was no longer a primitive expression of a people trying to find or model their own politics, but was in fact a function of rapid social change at high stages of development. Altbach found that the vigorous student activism seen during the Indian national movement had degenerated into chaos or indiscipline. In 1971, a reviewer criticised Altbach for not figuring in ‘Indian culture and values’ into explaining this degeneration.

9.^ Balsvik, R., *Haile Selassie’s Students: The Intellectual and Social Background to Revolution, 1952-1977*, Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 1985.

10.^ See Wright, Teresa., “State Repression and Student Protest in Contemporary China” in *The China Quarterly*, March, No. 157, pp 142-172, 1999. Also see Zhao, Dingxing “Ecologies of Social Movements: Student Mobilization during the 1989 Pro-democracy Movement in Beijing.” *American Journal of Sociology*, 103: 1493-529, 1998.

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