



## Students' Union in Institutions of Higher Education of India: A Critical Study of Needs, Significance and Roles

**Aftab Alam<sup>1</sup>**

Research Scholar

Department of Educational Studies

Faculty of Education

Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi-110025

**Mod Istyak Ali<sup>2</sup>**

Research Scholar

Department of Educational Studies

Faculty of Education

Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi-110025

### Abstract

The paper is an endeavor to discuss the needs and significance of students' union in Indian institutions of higher education as colleges and universities etc. The rational politics is integral part of human life to accomplish desired goals for the betterment of the society. There is a famous saying regarding politics "if politics decides your future then decide what your politics should be". It is clear that politics decides fortune of people in the democratic society everywhere including India to struggle for due entitlements of the citizens. Therefore, politics becomes an inseparable part of any community to sustain the life of dignity and higher order. Students are also a specific and important community in the society, who engage themselves in activities related to the inclusive nature of education system. The students' politics in India has gone through different phases as pre independence, post-independence to 21<sup>st</sup> century. The present article includes some of the major facets of students' politics in India. The introductory section broadly discusses the definition and concept of students' union. Then it highlights the history of student politics in India and it includes the students' movements of pre-independence, post-independence and emergency period to Mandal agitations and students politics in 21st Century. The paper also elaborates the needs and significance of students' politics with inclusive nature of higher education, the rights of marginalized and the reasons to not ban and crush students' politics in the country. Further, the paper enshrines the ideologies of some major students' unions like AISF, AISA, ABVP and SFI and some important recommendations of the J.M. Lyngdoh Committee in relation to students' union elections in Indian colleges and universities.

**Key Words-:** Students' union, Students' politics, J.M. Lyngdoh Committee, Charka Swaraj, Mandal Commission, Students' Movement

### Introduction

Students' union is student organizations present in many colleges, universities and higher institutions. The students' unions are often dedicated to social, organizational activities, representation, and academic support of the students. Students' Union is

known by various titles as student government, free students' union, student senate, students' association, guild of students, or government of student body etc. these organizations are to represent students both inside the institution and outside, including local and national issues. Students' unions are also responsible for providing a variety of services to students. Depending on the organization's makeup, students can get involved in the union, being active in a committee, by attending councils and general meetings, or by becoming an elected officer. Some students' unions are politicized bodies, and often serve as a training ground for aspiring politicians. Students' unions generally have similar aims irrespective of the extent of politicization, usually focusing on providing students with facilities, support, and services. Indian National Students Organization, Students Federation of India, National Students' union of India, Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha, Students Federation of India, Sunni Students' Federation, Akhil Bhartiya Vidyarthi Parishad, All India Students Association, All India Students Federation, and Muslim Students Federation are major students' organizations in India.

### **History of Students' politics in India**

Students' Politics has more than hundred and fifty years of history in India. Dadabhai Navaroji founded 'The students' scientific and historic society' in 1848 as a forum for discussion. This may be considered as the beginning of students' politics in India. In that time as the part of struggle, students questioned prevailing education system itself. The first student strike took place at King Edward Medical College Lahore regarding academic discrimination between English people and Indians and strike was completely successful. So many students emerged and engaged in politics as a part of freedom struggle. Within the period of two years (1906-1918) 184 persons were convicted in Bengal in connection with revolutionary activities and among them 68 were students. Second All India College Students Conference was held at Ahmedabad in 1912 and "Charka Swaraj first and education later" was adopted as the slogan of the conference. The students were totally committed to work for the freedom of the country. The Independence of the nation was one of the turning points of the student politics in India as well. A drastic change took place within the leadership of the students' politics. In 1947 the All India Student Congress Federation (AISCF) broken apart and it converted into National Students' union of India (NSUI). It became the student wing of the Congress party. The different students' political groups were emerged in to the different states or a specific locality. The Nav Niraman Student Movement in Gujarat (1973), Bihar Student Movement (1974), Assam Student Movement (1979), and All Jharkhand Students' union (1986) are the examples. Another phase of the student politics started with the beginning of the 1990s with the dawn of the Globalization, Privatization and Liberalization agenda, proliferation of media and emergence of post modernity etc. (Strange Beam, 2008).

### **Students' Movements**

Like other social movements, students' movements in India have emerged in critical junctures responding to issues and challenge faced by them and society at large. There

can be three broad periods such as Pre- Independence Period, Post Independent Period and in 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**Pre- Independence Period:**

Various important struggles for freedom were led by student community. Swadesi Movement (1905) which gave students a revolutionary outlook which asked them to boycott colleges as well as British goods. It encouraged students for active politics. 'Charka Swaraj first and Education after' was the main motto of students at that time as mentioned (Altbach, 1966). The All India College Students Conference held at Nagpur in 1920 as a part of 1<sup>st</sup> Non Cooperation Movement (1919), the resolution on non-co-operation and to boycott of schools, colleges and other educational institutions of British government was passed with an overwhelming majority. Boycotting of schools and colleges became an integral part of the non-cooperation movement. 2nd Non Cooperation Movement (1930) was another call to students. Students led processions, organized agitations and marches as well as were arrested in large numbers in Punjab, Bengal, Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra. This was one of the most active periods of political agitation by students of the country. First time, in the history of India's freedom, there was such a large majority of students involved in a struggle is Quit India Movement (1942). The students successfully managed to shut down most of the schools and colleges and involved most of leadership responsibilities and provided the link between the underground leaders and the movement (Altbach, 1966).

**Post-Independence Period:**

Perspectives and ideas within the leadership of the students' movements in the post independent era exceptionally changed. Still, students are responding to the critical issues of each period and agitating in the forefront. They are actively involved in Anti Emergency Movement, Mandal Agitations and Naxalite movement. The Naxalite movement was powerful in the states like West Bengal, Kerala, AP and Bihar. In 1967 the Naxalite movement in West Bengal drew the best of students from Calcutta and elsewhere in to the struggle. Large number of youths from student community joined the campaign against landlordism, feudal exploitation and social humiliation of the tribal people, landless peasants and agricultural laborers at the hand of moneylenders. They supported the village peasant communities in maintaining discipline as well as in activities such as seizure of corps. Severe repression in West Bengal and Kerala led to a large number of students getting killed or arrested for their involvement in Maoist-activities and Chipko movement. Chipko movement encouraged students to organize educational padayatras to villages during three vacations, which becomes the most important means of mass education (Jayaram, 1979).

Dalit movements: Republic Yuvak Sangatan (1961) is the first dalit student movement in Indian history. It was formed to fight the disease of casteism, to provide protection to scheduled casts and to survey cast atrocities. Another movement founded by B.R. Ambedkar was 'All India Scheduled Caste Students Federation.' With the formation of the Republican Party Republican Students Federation' was also

formed' later it was changed as Vidharaba Republican Students Federation (VRSF). The first VRSF conference was held at Pulgaon in 1967, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> conventions were held at Amravati (1970), Dhamangaon (1971) and Akola (1974) respectively. The main objective of VRSF is to follow the path initiated by Lord Buddha and adopted by Ambedkar. With the emergence of VRSF, various small organized units of students have got merged with it. VRSF has been actively involved in college and university union elections as well as organizing rallies and dharnas against social discriminations (Ross, 1969; Ray, 1977; Dasgupta, 1974).

**Anti-Mandal Student Agitations:** In 1990, the VP Singh Government declared in the Rajya Sabha to implement the Mandal Commission report. Spontaneously well organized student agitations against the implementation of the Commission's report, spread in Delhi and various parts of the country. High Cast Students from St. Steephen College and Delhi School of Economics lead the agitation. The agitation in Rajstan continues for the 5th day. In Jaipur the students block traffic in several places (Pachauri, 1990). In Bihar some students open fire at the L.N.Missra Institute of Economic Development and Social Change. Students continued boycotting classes in Delhi, UP, and Rajstan. Three office-bearers of JNU students' union resign from their posts in protest against the Mandal Commission. Students of Calcutta University boycotted classes. Students were demanding reservation should be given on the basis of economic conditions of the family, not on the basis of caste (India Today, 1990).

#### **Students' Movements in 21st Century:**

In 21<sup>st</sup> century, few big incidents happened where students participated in large number, are the anticorruption movement led by social activist Anna Hazare, the horrible gang rape of 23 year old paramedical student in moving bus in 2012, HCU's case ( Rohit Verma's suicide and fight between two students' group etc.) and JNU's case (Anti-national slogan, Kanahiya Kumar's arrest, police raid in JNU-campus and warrant against some students and resignations of some students etc.). All the incidents had nationwide outreach and mobilized all sections of society to pressurize government for larger social cause. However, the nature and character of these movements were very different from those of pre-independence and emergency period both in numbers and dedication. Nowadays students' politics has acquired larger platform in protesting against government policies. Most of the Students' unions in India are politicized and the mob of students is being used to agitate against opposite parties in many states. Many students' groups in Indian campuses are sponsored by colleges or universities and elections are held under the sponsorship and supervision of university administration keeping aside some universities like JNU where entire election process is being accomplished by student community itself. The depoliticization of Indian campus has took place due to Semester examination system which only increases the extra burden of appearing for the exam twice in a year without gaining any extra knowledge as compared to previous system. The students' unions are using social networking platform to mobilize students in their favour resulting in large number of registration. And the interest of student community has transformed from the political realm to cultural and social activities like organizing

fresher parties, cultural and hostel nights without engaging themselves in the issues of national importance. The interest of the student community has shifted from the political realm to cultural and social activities (Jagdish Sonrish, 2009).

### **Major Student Organizations and Their Ideologies**

#### **All India Student Federation (AISF):**

The All India Student's Federation (AISF) is first student organization of India formed on the background of Civil Disobedience Movement on 12, August 1936. The organization draws its ideological base from freedom fighters and revolutionaries of that time and participated in the Indian freedom struggle with a slogan Peace, Progress and Freedom. However, after independence the organization replaced the slogan in Peace, Progress and Scientific socialism. The organization has strong belief that only socialism can bring the revolutionary changes in society. The organization accepts that students are the proponents of social change in the country and can bring scientific and technological socialism on the ideals of Marx, Lenin, and Engels. The organization has its strong base in West Bengal, Kerala and Rajasthan (Information retrieved from <http://aisf.in/> ).

#### **All India Students' Association (AISA):**

The organization was formed on 9 August 1990 by the student wing of CPI (Marxist-Leninist) to give platform to the revolutionary and democratic students' movements of country. Since its inception AISA has been fighting for the democratic, pro-people and scientific education system through various ways as organizing revolutionary, left, democratic and liberal student community. The organization fights against fee hikes, privatization and communalization of educational institutions in order to make higher education affordable and accessible for the students coming from the deprived sections of the society. The organization has strong base in the north Indian Universities (Information retrieved from <http://www.aisa.in/> ).

#### **Akhil Bhartiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP):**

Akhil Bhartiya Vidyarthi Parishad was formed in 1949 to counter anti-national sentiments being spread by communist movement in the country after Chinese Revolution. The organization draws its ideology from RSS and tries to maintain the tradition Indian knowledge into the education system. The organization is against the westernization of Indian books and opposed English medium in the education system of India. The ABVP strongly put the idea of nation above everything in all aspects of student life. For the past years of its formal existence, has consistently directed all its programmes, movements, demands and every sort of constructive activity towards the goal of National Reconstruction based on traditional knowledge and culture ( <http://www.abvp.org/> ). The organization has strong base in north Indian colleges and universities and weak support in South India due its agendas as to impose Hindi across the country.

#### **Student Federation of India (SFI):**

It is one the important and active students' organizations of India formed in 1970 and affiliated with Communist Party of India. Since beginning the organization has been striving for the formation of progressive, democratic and egalitarian education system



in order to achieve social justice and intellectual self-reliance. SFI has vision of transforming India into socialist pattern of society and to ensure social and economic equality and a life of dignity and prosperity to all citizens. SFI regularly participates in the students' union elections in colleges, universities and other educational institutions across the country and has been leading Students' unions in various states of India as Tripura, Assam, Orissa, Himachal Pradesh, Delhi, Rajasthan, West Bengal, Maharashtra, Tamilnadu, Kerala, Telengana and Andhrapradesh (Jagdish Sonrish, 2009).

### **Lyngdoh Committee Recommendation**

The committee was formed in response to Kerala High Court decision to give autonomy to the college principles of Kerala University regarding students' union elections. In order to challenge the judgment of Kerala High Court, the University of Kerala filed a Special Leave Petition in Supreme Court of India. The Supreme Court of India in 2005 directed Ministry of Human Resource Development to constitute a committee to review the situation of students' union elections and set guidelines for the same. Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) formed a committee under the chairmanship of J.M. Lyngdoh, Former Chief Election Commissioner of India. The committee submitted its report of recommendations to MHRD on May 23, 2006. The following are some of the important recommendations given by the Lyngdoh Committee: 1. Maximum limit on election expenditure would be Rs. 5000. 2. No printed posters, pamphlets or any other material will be allowed during election campaign. 3. Students Contesting Election Should not have Academic Arrears. 4. The 75 per cent attendance is compulsory for candidates to contest elections. 5. Upper age limit of the candidate is fixed at 28 years for research students (Das, 2014 & Lyngdoh Committee Report, 2006).

### **Need of Students' Unions in Educational Institutions**

Lyngdoh Committee report, in spite had left nothing in ruining the students' politics in Indian colleges and universities as mentioned above, accepted the needs and importance of students' politics and needs of union in Indian colleges and universities by this statement: "Universities and colleges across the country must ordinarily conduct elections for the appointment of students to student representative bodies. These elections may be conducted in the manner prescribed herein, or in a manner that conforms to the standards prescribed herein." The above statement is clearly accepting the needs and significance of students' union. That is why the commission orders all the colleges and universities of the country to conduct students' election and consider students' representation though through selection procedure, if election is not possible, because of unfavorable circumstances in colleges and universities. Being a country with a high youth population, there are several people who believe that students should participate in politics. Students' unions are important as they act as a mediator between the administration and the student population and because they have the power to work for the welfare of the students. For instance, Madras Christian College's students' union does not only address students' concerns but also provides students with opportunities to exhibit their talents. They conduct activities such as

recycling plastic bottles, creating a waste management system and providing scholarships and concessions to needy students (Sajjad, 2012).

Time comes when students need to take bigger actions in the form of mass movements for the welfare of the people. For example, after the suicide of Rohith Vemula in Central University of Hyderabad, students protested and there was a movement observed in colleges and universities across India, which resulted in the cancellation of the suspension of Rohith Vemula's friends. In 2014, when a female student was molested in boys' hostel of Jadavpur University, a movement called 'Hokkolorob'(make some noise) in Bengali, was started. The movement comprised hunger strikes by the students and boycotting of classes and ultimately resulted in the resignation of the Vice Chancellor, Abhijit Chakrabarti. Indian campuses are expected to be apolitical because most middle-class families want their children to study well, and get a good job rather than engage in politics as that would invite trouble. However, in my opinion, the presence of students' union is essential since they act as a link between students and the administration, help organize events and address grievances. But, at the same time, students' unions should not exploit or harass students in the name of politics. It will be better if these students' unions to work independently of the affiliations with political parties. The affiliations of the students' organizations with political parties are caused unnecessary clash among the various groups of students (Abimita, 2017).

#### **Fulfillment of Necessity of Educated Leaders**

There no iota of doubt that Indian politics has been the hub of illiterate and less-educated people and goons. If the present trend and situation continues, our country never can achieve and execute long cherished dream to become super-power. Therefore, there is a need and demand of time for educated citizens to enter into the politics of the country. This demand can be fulfilled through colleges and universities, because these are centers of literacy, education, intelligence, socialization moreover these institutions prepare the future of the country. The students' unions are the working platform for the creation of good and educated leaders from among the students to the nation. Most of our political leaders and their leadership qualities are the direct contribution of the students' organizations. Quality leaders from the educated elite of colleges and universities can lead our country to progress. Only educated leaders can bring our country to the way of achieving the aim of being super power. India needs only good leadership to get this, because it has second largest manpower and human recourse with other required natural and human made recourses ([www.youthkiawaaz.com](http://www.youthkiawaaz.com)).

#### **Students' Politics in Democracy**

Students' unions are an associational and institutional interest group, essentially like trade unions. All liberal democracies have such organized groups to represent the collective

interests of concerned groups of citizens. Since democracy is a system of government by discussion, persuasion, accommodation and consensus, hence, such pressure groups like students' unions have to be relatively radical in emancipatory ideas and

mobilization. They have to organize agitations and demonstrations to protest against policies and actions that are against the larger collective interests of the student community and unemployed youth. They should play important roles in national reconstruction. They should come forward to build enlightened public opinion, by promoting consensus, by enlisting sympathy, support and participation by appealing to human reason, good sense and compassion. They should influence the decision making bodies and institutions through intellectual inputs. The State and its organs like the university (administration) along with the students' union should encourage and promote public debate and discussion, and ensure students' participation in policy formulation and in running the affairs of the university. The students' unions have also to provide meaningful information, critical perspectives and theoretical reflection on various issues. They have to analyze the socio-economic problems that students confront at various levels (Sajjad, 2012).

Political theorists say that democratic politics refers to the dialectical environment of debate, discussion, dialogue and dissent in a peaceful manner. The intention is not to reject and destroy opposing ideas but to recognize the right of others to have differing ideologies or thoughts. Such should be the case for politics in the colleges and universities. 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, and curriculum and syllabus selection. The need of present time is to democratize our educational institutions (Simran Nandrajog, 2017).

### **Students' Politics and Rights of Marginalized**

In present scenario we can directly find strong and harmonious relationship between student politics, higher education and rights of marginalized. Many times, it happens that academicians bring seismic changes in the higher education system without consulting student community. The privatization and corporatization of higher educational institutions often make inaccessible for the students coming from lower strata of the society. At that time, students' politics is needed to raise voice against such undemocratic and social exclusionary measures of concern authorities. For example, few years back in Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) the university authorities started setting up electric meters in hostel rooms to collect electric bills from students residing but the fast unto death hunger strikes of students forced the university administration to remove all the electric meters in the interest of students. Jawaharlal Nehru University Students' Union (JNUSU) also demanded from the university administration to recognize Madarsa Certificates at the university level as measure of social inclusion. Another example of students' politics in favour of inclusive higher education is the movement of Delhi University Students' Union (DUSU) against Four Year Undergraduate Programme (FYUP) in Delhi University. Under this system, all bachelor degrees including arts and commerce were extended from three years to four years. The implication of this system would have caused



extra burden on the students who were poor and not in a position to handle the cost of living for one extra year. And mostly, there is always pressure on poor students to get job early. So, this extra one year would have certainly increased the pressure on the students. In this way, the FYUP system was clearly not in tandem with the ethos of inclusive higher education. However, the long standing struggle of the student community forced the government to scrape the system with immediately (Jagdish Sonrish, 2009).

### **Conclusion**

The approach of Indian political leaders toward student movements has gone through many tenets. The involvement of the students in the freedom struggle was welcomed by many tall leaders like Gandhi, Nehru and Bose. However, after independence the student movements were seen as a threat for the smooth functioning of government. Later the students were asked to play their role in reconstructing the national economy by providing best human resources. The careerism was given more importance instead of political activism. The government set up many codes of discipline for university students like University Grant Commission's guidelines on discipline. The report of Lyngdoh Committee is another move to restrict student community from involving themselves in political activities in universities. Many people believe that students must be given say in the formulation of educational policies for inclusive higher education in India. It would not be wise idea to set four wall boundaries for student community to perform only academic activities. They should be given an atmosphere where they can ask for their rights without any fear of getting rusticated or expelled from university. At last, it would only be said that education and agitation for the rights must go together. Strong administrative measures have often succeeded in crushing student agitations. Students' politics is a need of present time to produce educated leaders for the country and for the fair politics in the country. Since, our country lacks educated leaders in each and every field especially in politics. To lead any country, always educated and experienced personalities are needed and that could be fulfilled through students' politics of the country. Inclusive education and inclusive society are the matter of discussion since independence but inclusive politics is equally important and students' politics is one of the best ways to get inclusion into the politics of our country.

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