

A Battle for India's Soul

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India's student movement is one of the main forces challenging the government of Narendra Modi. But the movement against Hindu nationalism needs to take root even deeper in civil society.

For the past couple of months, India's leading media outlets have been camped out in the vicinity of the country's leading universities, from Aligarh Muslim University to Jamia Millia Islamia or Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi. Students have been making the headlines with their raised fists and bruised bodies, inspiring many others to join protests in solidarity with their demands. But some Indians have asked why these young people, who had gone to study at the expense of taxpayers, were protesting when they should have been kept busy in the library. This article is an attempt to answer such questions from the older relatives of India's combative students.

Education as Liberation

The Humboldtian ideal of a modern university distanced it from both the state and the market. It was to be an institution that would produce better citizens, aware of their duties, responsibilities, and (crucially) rights. The idea of liberating education from a religious straitjacket, nurturing a scientific outlook and the values of secularism, had the potential to deepen democracy.

If realized, it would equip students with the necessary attributes of an engaged citizenry, able to question established forms of oppression and inequality. Universities were meant to be spaces that would allow students to develop as autonomous human beings, sharpening their ideas and critical skills in an environment of academic freedom.

In a caste society like India, education had formerly been the privilege of a few. The graded caste hierarchy ensured that knowledge was the monopoly of the so-called twice-born. Hitherto marginalized communities won a foothold in education thanks to the active interventions of Savitribai Phule, Fatima Shaikh, Jyotiba Phule, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Begum Rokeya, Ayyankali, Babasaheb Ambedkar, and other social reformers, and the efforts of communist leaders to educate the illiterate working class.

From this came the idea of a universal education system. Bold struggles for equal participation shaped the imagination of modern India, to be guided by the principles of liberty, equality, fraternity, and justice. The constitution was to prohibit exclusion based on class, caste, religion, or gender, offering minimal guarantees for a dignified life. For marginalized sections, education holds out the promise of social mobility and imparts a new consciousness to its recipients.

Looking at the nationwide protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), National Population Register (NPR), and National Register of Citizens (NRC), the role played by students from public universities in defense of constitutional values is an organic reflection of their public-spiritedness. The idea of a public university stems from the belief in universal knowledge, equal opportunity, and the breaking down of caste barriers that have endured for centuries.

When students say they want affordable education for all, they are simply echoing the constitution's

Article 21-A and reminding the state that education must be one of its core responsibilities, not a commodity. When they condemn the discriminatory nature of the CAA, they can draw support from Article 14 on equality before the law. That is why the Students' Federation of India has challenged the CAA's constitutional legitimacy in the Supreme Court.

An Injury to All

Partisans of the Hindutva right like to stress that the act will not affect the Indian-born population, merely those who come from neighboring countries. But the basic idea of citizenship in independent India developed without any grounding in religion. Unlike Pakistan, India was not a theocratic country identified with a specific creed. The Constituent Assembly of independent India rejected the idea of "racial citizenship," choosing instead the principle of modern, civilized, and democratic citizenship.

During the debate on citizenship, Vallabhbhai Patel, India's first deputy prime minister, reminded the Constituent Assembly that its provision regarding citizenship "will be scrutinized all over the world." The lawmakers of modern India made a conscious effort to define citizenship in secular, nonreligious terms. There could not be a greater contrast between their aspirations and the behavior of India's parliament today, as it passes a law discriminating against Muslims and undermining their right to become Indian citizens.

The CAA is not a freestanding measure: it comes with the NRC and NPR. If you can't prove that you are an Indian citizen, you will be thrown into a detention camp, as has already happened in the state of Assam, where approximately two million people have been branded as foreigners. If you are a Muslim, you might become an "illegal immigrant" at any moment.

The state is preparing a litmus test for everyone living in the country. The only way to pass it is by proving one's ancestry with documentation, such as voter registration lists, land ownership papers, or refugee permits.

Poor and homeless people, or members of the oppressed Dalit-Bahujan castes, will often be unable to satisfy these requirements. Traditionally, Dalits and lower castes were forbidden to own land, and the main rural workforce consisted of landless agricultural laborers. To this day, indigenous people are frequently displaced or killed trying to protect their lands. More than two million Adivasi families have been denied Forest Rights, on the pretext that they lacked proof of generations spent living in the forest.

In a country where natural calamities like flooding and cyclones drive countless people from their homes every year, it is inhuman to ask them to show ancestral papers in order to retain their status as citizens. After all, Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#) and many of his [political cronies](#) cannot even produce their degree certificates!

Many other groups of people will be affected: orphans who were deserted by their biological parents and could not find a new family; children born and raised in red-light districts; transgender people, many of whom are abandoned and left with little evidence of their parentage. If the combined NPR-NRC-CAA package is enacted, people across the margins of Indian society will have to undergo the test of citizenship. The CAA is not only directed against Muslims but against the working class in general, indigenous people, and backward communities.

Hindutva's Attack on Indian Universities

Students are protesting for three main reasons. Firstly, as conscious citizens, they understand that it is their duty to struggle in defense of the constitution — a document that has given them the right to

education, to free debate, and to protest against every form of injustice.

The student leaders also act as part of a wider community. They might be the first generation of their family able to attend school thanks to publicly funded education, or the first person from their village to go to university, or the first woman to have emerged from the confines of the family home and dreamt of doing a PhD. They all understand that to change the fate of the people and society they care about, equal opportunity and the existence of a secular democracy are indispensable.

Finally, the aggressive Hindutva political agenda and neoliberal economics promoted by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have had profound consequences for Indian students and youth. The Hindutva assault on higher education is twofold. On the one hand, education budgets have been slashed, while the privatization and commercialization of the education sector are pushed forward. On the other hand, students and campuses have faced an aggressive, fascistic onslaught against their democratic right to dissent.

By the end of Narendra Modi's first term as prime minister, the share of education in the Union budget had already fallen significantly, from 4.6 to 3.5 percent. Since then it has dropped even further, to 3.26 percent.

Not only is the funding for education inadequate, it is not being spent properly, either. The 2017-18 report of India's Comptroller and Auditor General [found](#) that Rs 94,036 crore — approximately US\$13 billion — collected under a special tax for secondary and higher education had not been spent properly. The entire budget allocated for education in 2020-21 is only slightly higher: Rs 99,300 crore!

The government has also reengineered the system for allocating funds to institutions of higher education. The shift in emphasis, from grants provided by the University Grants Commission, to loans made available by the Higher Education Financing Agency, is an open declaration by the neoliberal-Hindutva regime that education is no longer considered a right; rather, it is a commodity to be purchased through the free market.

The National Education Policy of 2019 set out a new, centralized system for performance-based funding and monitoring of research under the supervision of the prime minister. The first of these measures will exacerbate structural inequalities in the sector by promoting a graded hierarchy of higher-education institutions instead of quality mass education. The second will subordinate Indian higher education and research activities to the disciplinary constraints of Hindutva.

A Struggle for India's Future

The Students' Federation of India has demanded that at least 10 percent of the Union budget and 6 percent of GDP be reserved for education. The attempts to centralize control of universities and undermine independent research must be withdrawn.

Students have taken to the streets in opposition to the National Education Policy and its drive toward greater privatization and communalization of the education sector. Students at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), Andhra Pradesh University, Pondicherry University, and several other institutions launched the "fees must fall" movement primarily in response to the new doctrine of loans to publicly funded institutions, with the burden of repayment to be shouldered by students.

In the case of JNU, students protesting against a huge hike in fees have been [confronted](#) by the iron fist of Hindutva, with a mob of masked criminals given free rein to unleash terror against the students and their professors, while the police force and university administration looked the other way. At Aligarh Muslim University, police used rubber bullets, tear gas, and stun grenades against

anti-CAA [protesters](#) , leaving many seriously injured.

The brutal state repression let loose upon students at these and other universities is unprecedented. It reflects the scale of the challenge they pose to the Modi government's policies and its efforts to polarize the country along communal lines. Along with demands that are specific to higher education, the Students' Federation has also called for the repeal of the CAA and the scrapping of the population and citizenship registers.

Students understand that their very existence depends on the struggle to sustain a democratic ethos against the twin dangers of Hindutva and neoliberal capitalism. Students are fighting for their survival, fearlessly speaking truth in the face of brute power. They are also fighting for the soul of modern India, to fulfill the unfinished dreams of Bhagat Singh and Ashfaqulla Khan.

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