

Cultural Politics of Historically Marginalized Students in Indian Universities

GAURAV J. PATHANIA

ABSTRACT The university space, the most endangered zone in Indian democracy in the present, is witnessing the ideological churnings, contradictions, and emergent possibilities of affinity among radical voices contesting culturally hegemonic practices. Student activism in general and anti-caste activism in particular offer a complex interplay of caste, gender, culture, and politics in the university space, traditionally defined as neutral. Envisioning a democratic, socially just, and genuinely secular nation, historically marginalized students challenge and critique hegemonic narratives. This article argues that anti-caste activism on campuses invokes the democratic space of universities, where ideological meanings are constructed and deconstructed to unveil the suppression of historically marginalized voices in contemporary network society. The dominant culture and politics are actually rooted in the iron laws of ancient hierarchies intrinsically opposed to the self-historicizing and well-informed democratic aspirations of student activism.

KEYWORDS Ambedkar, campus politics, caste, cultural politics, dissent, Hindutva, resistance, student politics

Cultural politics and ideological struggle are the necessary conditions for forms of social and political struggle.

— Stuart Hall

In 2016, Indian universities made global headlines that have sparked widespread debates on caste discrimination, social justice, and democratic space. Emanating from an internal urge to redefine received notions and practices of freedom, these countrywide protests erupted after the suicide of a Dalit¹ student and led to the demand for real opportunities, equal representation, and

freedom of expression for historically marginalized sections of Indian society. After a month, the *Azadi* (freedom) campaign started in Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) to counter the attempts of state-sanctioned media and the central government directly labeling JNU an anti-national campus. Though both these incidents were different in their nature and immediate reasons of emergence, their outcome as nationwide agitations led to many new challenges and reconfigurations at an ideological level that are important for understanding the changing scenario of student politics in India. As of 2019, more than twelve public universities² in India continue to experience agitations centered around issues of caste-based discrimination and affirmative action policies. In these nationwide protests, historically marginalized students, Dalit and Other Backward Class (OBC)³ students (also referred as “historically marginalized” and “Dalit-Bahujan” in this article) played a central role. But the ideological message of both movements is far more profound, as it tends to expose the university as a site of cultural contestation that opposes the mainstream ideology.⁴ This dimension is also evident in caste-based struggles and leftist politics (in which Dalits and OBC students have a larger presence). Nowadays, one cannot imagine a protest without a picture of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, a sociopolitical reformer, India’s first law minister, and chief architect of the Indian constitution. Symbolizing the confluence of Ambedkarite and leftist ideologies, “Jai Bhim-Lal Salam” (Long Live Ambedkar-Long Live Revolution) has become the new slogan of contemporary Indian student politics. University walls are flooded with Ambedkar’s slogan: “Educate, Agitate, and Organize.” In the name of “social justice,” historically marginalized students’ activism has organically emerged as anti-caste activism to battle institutional inequalities.

University space is rife with counter-narratives created by historically marginalized students in response to the hegemonic narratives of caste. For the first time in the history of university politics, students from historically marginalized groups (constitutionally defined Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and OBCs) have taken the lead in raising critical questions on India’s caste culture, traditions, and religious practices and provided critiques of both leftist and right-wing ideologies. In order to remain relevant and part of the emergent and alternative narrative, student organizations of the left and right have responded by altering their ideologies to varying degrees. Whereas earlier, campus politics revolved around an ideology of class struggle, presently caste consciousness and identity politics are now center stage.⁵ Historic symbols of oppression have turned into symbols of resistance. The struggle for recognition and representation has turned into resistance around and for new cultural identity. New art forms have emerged to resist the dominant culture. Ambedkar’s image, long

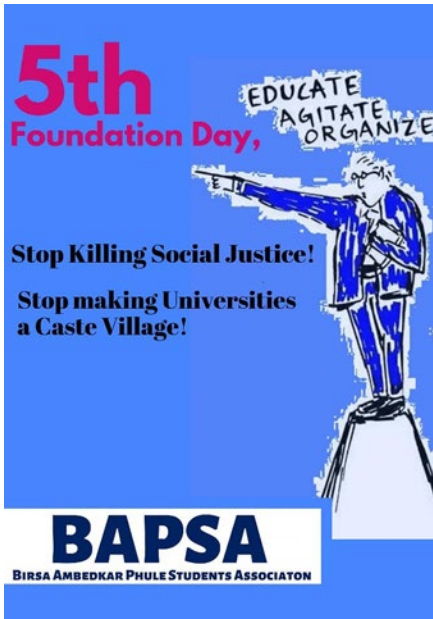


FIGURE 1. BAPSA celebrates its foundation day at Jawaharlal Nehru University, November 15, 2019. Photograph by Gaurav J. Pathania.

associated with his ingenuity in drafting the constitution, has now become associated with resistance.

Background

The entry of Dalit students in higher education through a reservation quota of about 17 percent was not adequate to make their fight for social justice impactful.⁶ Scheduled Tribes, with a quota of about 6 percent in public education, largely remained aloof from the Dalit struggle. Dalit students had been fighting alone. With the implementation of OBCs reservation (in higher education admissions) in 2006, for the first time 27 percent of OBC students entered into the spaces of higher education. By 2010, OBCs became conscious of their stigmatized “reserved status.” It is the sharing of the similar stigma that united Dalits and OBCs. Their activism was inspired by the same icons — Ambedkar, Phule, Periyar — and they added many regional icons to strengthen their activism. During the *Azadi* campaign, a faction of Dalit-OBC students was hesitant to give their support, as they believed that the parties on the left never helped their idea of being *Moolnivasi* (original inhabitant) and *Balijana* (Balijan tradition) of India. Similarly, their *Bahujan* and *Dalit-Bahujan* (rule of majority) thesis received little attention by the mainstream left and its student organizations. The ideological alliance of Dalit-OBCs has led to a qualitative change in campus politics, such that it is no longer limited to merely representational politics but reflects a distinct consciousness and politics of identity resistance as a structural feature (fig. 1).

Resisting Institutional Oppression and Inequality

On January 17, 2016, a lower caste PhD student at the University of Hyderabad (UoH) named Rohith Vemula ended his life by hanging in a dormitory room. Vemula, a senior activist of the Ambedkar Student Association,⁷ was expelled from the university and therefore no longer eligible for a much-needed scholarship. His death led to intense protests at UoH that gradually turned into a massive student movement in India known as “Justice for Rohith.” From Hyderabad to New Delhi, the incident spawned numerous media analyses and parliamentary debates. Rohith Vemula’s suicide revealed the discriminatory and exclusionary practices in India’s educational system,⁸ how “modern India worked on caste principles; an anachronism of sorts.”⁹ His suicide note was a searing attack on the casteist and hierarchical society where, in his words, “the value of a man was reduced to his immediate identity and nearest possibility, to a vote, to a number, to a thing” and where he described his birth as a “fatal accident.” The students’ agitation marks the beginning of a new phase of ideological exchange and networking among university students.

Azadi Campaign: Expanding the Idea of Freedom

While post-Justice for Rohith agitations were at their peak, another pivotal incident suddenly occurred in India’s capital at one of the country’s most liberal universities, attracting rampant media attention. On February 9, 2016, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) came under massive attack in mainstream media, government perceptions, and social media propaganda of Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS) outfits for allegations that it was an “anti-national” campus. Its immediate context was that a group of JNU students, while commemorating the death anniversary of Mohammad Afzal Guru,¹⁰ were demonstrating against the death penalty. Some students in the group were filmed sloganeering for a free Kashmir and criticizing the Indian state. The media were called in to film the event, which became national news overnight. The state and media mainly highlighted the selective slogans related to Kashmir and Afzal Guru. Right-wing students complained to the police, and on February 12 the police arrested JNU Student Union president and PhD student Kanhaiya Kumar, along with Umar Khalid and Anirban Bhattacharya, on charges of sedition and criminal conspiracy. The media seized upon the binary of the nationalist versus anti-nationalist sentiments, and gradually the entire campus was labeled as “anti-national” and a “den of terrorists.” Several government ministers and army personnel made derogatory remarks against JNU. Messages such as “JNU produces anti-nationals and terrorists. They should be kicked out of the country,” “Long-live India, Shut Down JNU,” and “Shoot Anti-National JNU Students & Professors” went viral on social media. Student leaders Kumar, Khalid, and Bhattacharya’s time in jail triggered a wave of student activism in India. After twenty days of imprisonment,

Kumar was released on March 2 on interim bail. A little more than two weeks later, Khalid and Bhattacharya also received bail, as the court questioned the Delhi Police's basic understanding of what sedition entailed.

The movement became known as the *Azadi* Campaign. Upon his release, Kumar spoke to a huge crowd gathered in front of JNU's administrative building and declared: "We want freedom not from India, but within India. We want freedom from hunger, freedom from poverty and freedom from the caste system."¹¹ For weeks, scholars and students questioned and debated who and what is "nationalist" and "anti-national." "Under the current regime, being liberal, being gay, being feminist, being secular is anti-national," they concluded. Indian public intellectual and Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen commented that caste itself is anti-national, as "it divides the nation."¹² Through this anti-national episode, the media provoked anti-Muslim, anti-left, and anti-liberal sentiments among the masses. Umar Khalid's Muslim identity overpowered his student identity, which he himself pointed out:

I was targeted with a special hatred because of being a "Khalid." But there was hatred for Anirban too. For simply being there and ruining a ready-made story. Now this didn't fit their narrative, the narrative of terror they began in the media. If I was a traitor to the nation because of my Muslim identity, Anirban was a traitor to his nation, religion, and caste.¹³

In the aftermath of this incident, the media continued to fan the flames of outrage and divisiveness. On social media, a large portion of the public chastised JNU students and made attempts to sermonize on nationalism. JNU students were called "parasites," female student leaders were called prostitutes, and its teachers were blamed for grooming Naxalites on campus.¹⁴ Leftist organizations such as the All India Student Association were trolled by extremists on social media and the anger of the right-wing group Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad was unleashed on all who argued against them.

Alternate Narrative: #StandwithJNU

India's liberal intellectuals and activists came forward and took the responsibility to engage with the masses in order to provide an alternate narrative to the dominant media-created narrative of nationalism. Students occupied the space in front of an administrative building at JNU and named it "Freedom Square," and for their posters a new space—"Wall of Freedom"—was created. During this three-month-long protest at the square, professors held lectures

each evening on the subject of nationalism. A prominent JNU professor raised the question,

Does your [government's] idea of nationalism and of mother India [Bharat-Mata] also include millions of those women who work all day as manual labor in the scorching heat to make their ends meet, who work in the fields untiringly to produce food for us? Does it also include those Dalits, Tribals, and Muslim women who suffer due to patriarchy in the same nation? India is in the making and nationalism is a political concept, if a nation has a language, if a nation has a territory; then India is a conglomeration of many nations.¹⁵

This critical stand and positioning of speakers against the abstract idea of “Mother India” was used strategically by the government to validate its anti-national allegations and further tarnish the image of a prestigious university. The strength of these long series of agitations lies in the fact that they were “militant but utterly non-violent.”¹⁶ This was a resistance against the dominant ideology of the Indian government’s Hindutva politics. The JNU incidents were followed by several other campus protests that occurred against the open assault on academic freedom and overall democratic space within and outside university campuses. Many of these campuses extended their support to #StandwithJNU and to its alternative narrative of nationalism and democracy.

Caste-Class Confluence

The anti-national debate and post-Rohith Vemula agitations sparked a wide-ranging debate on caste. Caste has always been an issue of debate between Dalits and Marxists in India. For academics, the debate is rather new, though the “class” discourse of the left has always been dominant. Both the Rohith and *Azadi* movements have brought together discourses of class and caste discrimination. This marked a unity among the oppressed groups in Indian society, giving them a new voice. The emergence of Birsa-Ambedkar-Phule Students’ Association (BAPSA)¹⁷ at Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi in 2014 also shows a major shift in the historical process of identity assertion. For the first time at Central University of Gujrat, BAPSA won the student union elections in alliance with Left unions.¹⁸ The range of their radical cultural perspective and politics can be seen in their inclusion of other socially marginalized groups, such as LGBTQ. This is one of many examples of identity resistance politics occurring across the country. Along with the assertion of Dalit-OBC students taking center stage on university campuses in India, Dalit activism has identified imperatives of a global alliance with Blacks to expand the horizon of their democratic struggle for social justice beyond national boundaries and nationalist discourse.

Resisting the Mainstream and Celebrating the “(D)evil”

Why should I worship the God who doesn't speak my language.

—Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd¹⁹

In recent years, as the Hindutva politics of Bhartiya Janata Party and RSS gained legitimacy in political victories across the country, religious practices and differences, and selective traditions have been reinforced in dominant popular political discourse. This overwhelming use of religion to mystify political space has also served as a sphere of critical resistance among marginalized students on Indian university campuses. Students argue that the secular space of higher education institutions should not harbor or impose any particular religious or cultural traditions. In his writings and speeches, Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd, a professor and activist from Osmania University, critiques the dominance of Sanskrit language with his distinct satirical style: “How come your God only speaks one language? My village deities speak more than three languages.” To resist the domination of Sanskrit, he started celebrating his birthday as *Dalit-Bahujan English Education Day*.²⁰ To him, English is the language of emancipation for Dalits. This has added a new dimension to the debates on the liberal and democratic ethos of a university. For example, in response to Hindu holidays celebrated on campus, students from marginalized communities at Osmania University have paid homage to a Dravidian warrior, Naraka Shooru, traditionally considered an “evil” character in Hindu mythology. Dalit-OBC students from the English & Foreign Language University (EFLU), Osmania, UoH, and JNU campuses started opposing Hindu festivals celebrated within the secular space of the university. Starting in 2011, the All-India Backward Students' Forum has been organizing a Mahisasur Martyrdom Day (*Mahisasur Shahadat Diwas*) at JNU to counter the highly popular Hindu festival of Durga Puja. In 2012, for the first time in the history of Indian student activism, the harvest festival of Onam was boycotted by marginalized students in Hyderabad. A pamphlet issued by a number of student organizations questions the cultural hold of age-old hierarchies:

Dalits and Adivasis work from dawn till dusk to fill your granary. Why should we celebrate your harvest festivals when it always left us landless, poor and deprived?

Why is Rama [the protagonist of the Hindu epic Ramayana], who killed a lower caste saint, Shambhook, and doubted his wife's character, worshipped as a God? . . . Krishna, the role model god of Hindus who propagated Varna system in Bhagavad Gita was an Eve-teaser, womanizer, and the symbol of patriarchy. Therefore, “celebrating Janmashtami [Krishna's birthday] is the celebration of patriarchy and Varna system.”²¹

In October 2013, Dalit Adivasi Bahujan Minority Students' Association at EFLU celebrated what they coined as Asura Week, a festival dedicated to demons (*asuras*) to counter the mainstream Hindu festivals. They argued in their publicity that "one who looks dark and ugly is called *asura*, *rakshasa*, *jungli*, and devil in our history, as they were the lower caste people who were not allowed to be part of mainstream society."²² Students also question why nearly all Hindu gods and goddesses brandish weapons. They have challenged and redefined many mythical characters commonly projected as symbols of morality, humility, sacrifice, dedication, and peace in the Indian school textbooks.²³ This decoding of mythical, religious, and cultural symbols with this new perspective owes immensely to the critical discourse of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's writings.²⁴ Ambedkar inherits from Rousseau, Feuerbach, and Marx the idea of religion as always immanent, and consequently he regards the immanent-transcendent distinction as itself an ideological mystification.²⁵

For the past decade, Dalit-OBC students have challenged the roots of existing historical narratives, instead defining themselves based on their own histories and ideologies. They share a common ideology and revere icons such as social reformer Jyotirao Phule as the Father of the Nation, rather than Mahatma Gandhi. They refer to Phule's wife, Savitribai Phule, as *Krantijyoti*, the "flame of revolution," and commemorate her birth anniversary on January 3 as Women's Liberation Day and also as National Teachers' Day (as opposed to the country's official Teacher's Day on September 5). Similarly, Dalit-OBC students have challenged many cultural practices taken for granted. For instance, the majority of Dalit students at Osmania have taken a lead in transforming ritual practices concerning marriage. Forgoing Hindu rituals or priests, activists sanctify their union by simply exchanging garlands on a marriage stage in front of their professors and fellow activists. Even the design and content of wedding invitations, with images of Ambedkar or Buddha in place of the traditional Hindu god Vinayak or Ganesha, symbolizes resistance against the dominant culture. Rejecting lavish traditional Hindu wedding ceremonies is now common practice among Dalit students of Osmania, EFLU, and the University of Hyderabad. Their new rituals are also a crucial site of resistance that are fundamentally opposed to social mores. With the spread of Rohith agitations and the *Azadi* campaign, the popular left students' unions²⁶ also joined hands with Dalit-OBC cultural politics and started celebrating their icons.

A New Wave of Online Resistance: Aspiring for a Race-Caste Alliance

The World Conference Against Racism held in Durban, South Africa, in 2001 reopened debates linking caste to racial discrimination. As a result, casteism, like racism, was recognized as a global issue, establishing additional international

protections against caste. Globally, over 300 million people face caste-based discrimination, which is now recognized as a human-rights abuse by the United Nations. After Durban, Dalits began studying the legacy of Black activism. Since then, dialogue between Dalit and Black activists gradually gained strength and prevalence. However, caste discrimination differs from racial discrimination; in the former, the oppressor is of the same skin color and religion but existing in the sociocultural form of Brahmanism.²⁷

Social media has been instrumental in linking Dalit activism to Black movements and networks in the United States. Along with their “Messiah” Dr. Ambedkar, Steve Biko, W. E. B. Du Bois, Frederick Douglass, Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Langston Hughes, and many others who fought against oppressions of Black individuals have also become icons among Dalit youth.²⁸ There are significant parallels between the Black population in the United States and Dalits in India. Inspired by the radicalism and militant approach of the Black Panthers, Dalits in India formed the Dalit Panthers in 1972. The emergence of Black feminism later encouraged the development of Dalit feminism in India.²⁹ Similarly, autobiographies by Black authors inspired Dalit activists to write their personal histories and gave birth to Dalit literature.³⁰ Again, Dalit literature renders issues of identity formation with a marked focus on experience over abstractions of class struggle in Marxist or progressive literature. Black studies, as an academic discipline born from the cultural resistance against white supremacy and capitalism spawned Dalit studies, which has also evolved into a discipline on select university campuses in India. Recently, Dalit activists started Dalit History Month in the United States and India, inspired by the model of Black History Month. Following the success of the National Black Chamber of Commerce, Dalits in India have established the Dalit Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industries. Art and music have also proven to be influential forces. In recent years, Dalit youth have formed various hip-hop and jazz groups to spread their message of resistance, bringing about unprecedented counter-cultural elements in India.³¹ Some universities in India have added Dalit literature as part of their curriculum, and such campuses happen to be more active in Dalit-OBC student politics.

There is a vortex of online groups (primarily Facebook and WhatsApp) that are named after Dr. Ambedkar. New terms such as “caste apartheid,” “Black Indians,” and “Afro-Dalit” are used to mobilize Dalits to become activists. The Black Lives Matter movement has influenced the advent of Dalit Lives Matter. African Americans created spheres such as “Black Twitter,” which have become platforms for youth and students to discuss racial inequality in the workplace and on university campuses. Instead of a hashtag, they refer to it as “blacktag.” Similarly, following #BlackLivesMatter, Dalit activists created #dalitlivesmatter. Black media has been

influencing Black causes in the United States. In bringing this alliance together, left activists in the United States play a pivotal role and extend their solidarity with Blacks and Dalit alliances as part of their social justice movements.

Dalit students, with the cultural and intellectual resources and skills acquired through university education and sociopolitical activism, venture to construct sub-altern history, cultural memory, and identities by using the resources not only from what is assumed to be their unique cultural tradition of “suffering,” but also from Hindu traditions and prevailing nationalist discourses. Their activism has expanded the horizon of democratic struggle by questioning religious traditions and cultural practices. In other words, through their activism, Dalit-OBC students have changed the traditionally known face and substance of India’s public sphere (which was only dominated by the upper castes). Their activism, in Jeffrey Alexander’s words, is an act of “civil repair.”³² They see it as an ideological strategy of appropriating the radical promise and historical obligations of these movements and social groups.

“Justice for Rohith” agitations and the *Azadi* campaign brought scattered student movements together and succeeded to a certain extent in touching public consciousness. As a result, public anger was witnessed by mass demonstrations in the streets of Delhi and Hyderabad. Both movements also emerged as prime examples of university-society linkages. Student politics challenged the commonsense notion that students are supposed to study and not participate in political action. Another dividend of this was that a section among left parties realized further the intersectionality of caste and class categories. On the other hand, a segment of Dalits and OBC groups also came to understand caste-class-race intersectionality and to understand global forms of discrimination. Already, debates in this direction have opened up a new scope for historically marginalized people in India to connect with other oppressed identities and Black struggles in the United States, the United Kingdom, and South Africa. This is a sort of universalization of a particular discrimination for highlighting it as a violation of human rights. In this process, one oppressed group or identity connects with another marginalized identity. The groundwork for this worldwide exchange derives its optimism partially from contemporary student politics in India. Emerging from this confluence of ideologies, “*Jai Bhim-Lal Salam*” these contemporary movements are remaking “hybrid” ideological frames without sacrificing internal debates, dissensions, and mutual grounds of consensus necessary for joint political actions. To some extent, this togetherness resolves as well as complicates issues on identity and hence necessitates creative use of art forms to develop these movements as “melting pots” of hitherto segregated ideologies, identities, and cultural practices.

A brief example will help illustrate how music, as a core element of culture and as an art form, can foster the politics of identity resistance. Traditionally, the

“identities of folk musicians are bound up with music, symbols, caste, and culture.”³³ In the last few decades, Dalit student activists have changed their strategies and resisted their historically stigmatized identity. In Osmania University, the longest student movement of the country (the Telangana movement) was led by lower-caste students. The Telangana movement adopted and practiced strategies that produced long-term cultural capital in public figures, artists, singers, and writers. In particular, Osmania University produced many Dalit and OBC revolutionary singers and writers. Bheem-Drum is a musical group formed by Dalit students at Osmania University to raise anti-caste awareness and train more groups of resistance singers. The first Dalit rapper,³⁴ a student at JNU, emerged as a powerful voice of the Dalit-Bahujan resistance, and his rap focuses on the harsh realities of caste narratives that are missing from mainstream Indian academia. Such protest music can help activists to escape “predominant forms of representation” and exercise their own agency.³⁵ Through such efforts, anti-caste activists are invoking historical consciousness and collective memory of earlier forms of resistance. The organizers of these events set out to challenge Brahmanical hegemony and the forced degrading of particular cultural expressions.³⁶ These reverberations of their unified anti-caste counterculture in slogans can be felt on social media with the vast expansion of unappropriated *Jai Bhim* groups. Through their activism, Dalit students are trying to challenge the historical stigmatization of individual and community and identity. The cultural affirmation arising out of the life-worlds and everyday practices of Dalits deftly combines the imperatives of social justice with the processes of *cultural* transformation.³⁷

These new identities were constructed through their historic anti-caste resistance that occurred in various parts of the country in different time periods. The emergence of Dalit literature has gained prominence in past decades. Icons such as Dr. Ambedkar, Preiyar, Phule, Birsa Munda, Shahuji Maharaj, Jhalkari Bai, B. P. Mandal, Ramswaroop Verma, Jagadev Prasad, and many others are the founding figures of their ideological orientation and dignified consciousness about identity. Young Dalit authors revere them as Leaders of the Majority—“Bahujan Nayak.”³⁸ It is noteworthy that much popular Dalit literature emerged from the university campuses and as a direct challenge to the complacent realism of Marxist or progressive writers and organizations. Since Dalit and OBCs had no place in the established canonical literature of India, Dalit writers in their writings challenge the cultural hegemony of “Brahmanical” literature, which never highlighted the contribution of the lower castes in nation building. This cultural contestation gave birth to Dalit literature, which continues to proliferate with a variety of perspectives and experiences. The principal philosophy of Dalit literature is to bring about “total revolution” to society.³⁹ Influenced by Ambedkar’s slogan “Educate, Agitate, and Orga-



FIGURE 2. BAPSA's second consecutive victory in the student union elections, Central University of Gujarat. January 25, 2020. Photograph by Hawaldar Bharti.

nize,” Yogesh Maitreya, a doctoral student at TISS-Mumbai took pride in the glorious history of Dalit struggle and started his own publication called *Panther's Paw*, which features literary writings from socially marginalized scholars. Like him, many young Dalit scholars are instrumental in the making of a global literary movement.

To complete the story of the anti-caste movement, the role of gender intersecting with caste needs to be infused into the historical anti-caste narrative. The Dalit-OBC female students made history by playing a significant role as founding members of BAPSA at JNU. The Central University of Gujarat also formed the BAPSA unit and won the student union elections in an alliance with left-wing student groups (fig. 2). Contrary to the dominant notion that “women are less political,” the formation of BAPSA is axiomatic of the strength of female leadership in Dalit politics. Similarly, campuses like Punjab University and Allahabad University have female students contesting union elections and challenging the long existing caste and patriarchy in campus politics.

An interesting fact that emerges from the Dalit-OBC coalition is the creation of a generic identity that ideologically helps the movement and its actors. Among Dalit and OBCs, there has been a shared history of caste discrimination and collective memories and common concerns. They created a common ideological identity in the form of “Dalit-Bahujan” and “Moolnivasi” to strengthen their cultural-political resources. Their collective action not only strengthened the social justice debate on university campuses but also harbored an ideological balance among left- and right-wing student parties. Contemporary campus politics is the reflection of these ideological ambiguities and cultural contestations.

The anti-caste activism of Dalit-OBC students opens up an alternative to the mainstream left and Dalit politics. It also highlights the existing caste complexities in the sacred spaces of higher education. Their activism demonstrates how culture

can be a sphere of symbolic reproduction and entails contentious issues across ideologies by breaking and reconfiguring the cultural autonomy over the mainstream historical narratives. They are engaged in a critique of the contemporary culture industry that presents the dominant historical narrative through media and social media. By highlighting these cultural differences, this new generation of activists invokes the democratic space of the university, where social relations manifest in liberating as well as stagnant conservative forms. They “deconstruct” the social meaning of their identity (within the same structure of caste hierarchy) to unveil the suppression of historically marginalized voices. Such deconstruction makes possible “a politics of coalition building, a cultural politics of social tolerance and difference, a critical politics of knowledge, and an affirmation of particular local struggles without disavowing possibilities of broader forms of social solidarity and political mobilization.”⁴⁰ This is what Melucci calls the “democratic expansion of differentiated public spaces.”⁴¹ To him, the democratizing role of collective actions derives ultimately from the claim that these conflicts are challenges to the production and distribution of “codes,” that is, to the symbolic manipulation of identity and meaning.⁴²

A democratic struggle is essentially a matter of rearticulating identity and meaning in the discontinuous and fluid public spaces, leading to a new identification and new social relations and thereby enlarging an “authentic public space.”⁴³ No democratic struggle functions only in the known domains of “public sphere” and confronts or resists its merely apparent discriminatory dysfunctionality in addressing issues from within. In order to achieve the immediate goal of gaining democratic space and rights, activism of historically marginalized students develops counter-narratives and counter-culture in opposition to the dominant one. The cultural narratives that were at the margins became the central structural contradictions of campus politics. Both the movements referred to here in the context of university space have displayed this transformation of popular iconic figures like Jyotiba Phule, Savitribai Phule, and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar into symbols of new cultural resistance. Such transformation is possible without reducing the core sociopolitical ideology of these founding thinkers of social justice and “social democracy” in India or elsewhere in the world.

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Notes

1. Dalit is a popular term referring to the former untouchables or outcastes.
2. Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar University, Lucknow; Indian Institute of Technology–Chennai; Indian Institute of Technology–Ahmedabad; Central University of Gujarat; Central University of Haryana; Indian Institute of Fashion Technology; Jadavpur University; Jawaharlal Nehru University; Osmania University; English and Foreign Languages University; University of Allahabad; University of Delhi; University of Hyderabad; University of Lucknow; and Tata Institute of Social Sciences–Mumbai.
3. OBCs constitute almost 50 percent of the total population and are the lowest in the four-fold hierarchy of Hindu religion. They received a caste-based reservation in higher education admissions in 2006.
4. Mainstream ideology is based on casteist and Brahminic politics to maintain religious sanctity through Hindutva, the political agenda of Hinduism that is presented in the form of religio-cultural nationalism.
5. Scholars (Christopher Jeffrelet, Eleanor Zelliott, Jangam Chinnaiah, Gail Omvedt, Hugo Gorringer, Vivek Kumar) have highlighted the role of education in the formation of various cultural and literary organizations. From fighting for representation to claiming Adi identity (see Jangam, *Dalits*; Gundimeda, *Dalit Politics*, 264); to challenging institutional practices such as discrimination (see Garalyte, “Subaltern Autonomy”; Pathania, “Food Politics”; Rinker, *Identity*) and facing caste based stigma and prejudices (Pathania and Tierney, “Ethnography”; Rathod, “Caste Conflicts”), and creating their own art and literature of resistance (R. Kumar, *Narratives*; Brueck *Resistance*), Dalit student activism centers on social justice (Pathania, *University*; Sinha, “Dalit Leadership”).
6. Pathania, *University*, and Pathania and Tierney, “Ethnography,” highlight that Dalit students who join in higher education are largely first generation learners and for them higher education is the only means to get a job, thus they remain isolated from social activism. Those who join social sciences are socially more conscious.
7. ASA formed in 1993 at University of Hyderabad and is named after Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, the constitution maker of India and a crusader of anti-caste movements and women’s rights. Dalits (former untouchables) revered him as their messiah. Scholars also compared him with Martin Luther King Jr. (see Namishray, *Caste*).
8. *Times of India*, “26,500 Students.”
9. Henry, “Rohith Vemula’s Death.”
10. A Kashmiri who was executed by the Indian government in 2013 for his involvement in a terrorist attack at the Indian Parliament.
11. Translation from the Hindi speech of Kanhaiya Kumar after his release on March 3, 2016. NDTV, “Out of Jail.”
12. *Hindustan Times*, “Caste.”
13. Daniyal, “We Faced.”

14. Naxalites believe in the revolutionary ideology of Marxism-Leninism and Maoism and are supported by the radical factions of Communist parties of India.
15. Kumar, "Professor Vivek Kumar Speaking with Students."
16. Menon, "Why Our Universities."
17. An organization formed in 2014 at India's premier institution Jawaharlal Nehru University by the members of "United Dalit Students' Forum."
18. *Indian Express*, "Left-Dalit Unity."
19. An OBC (Shudra) intellectual who changed his name to Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd and urged people to add their occupation title with their names to honor themselves as "productive caste." Many students and faculty members have changed their names as a form of resistance.
20. This is part of his critical pedagogy which is a form of cultural politics and is also concerned with constructing a language that empowers teachers to take seriously the role of schooling in joining knowledge (Giroux, *Theory/Pedagogy/Politics*, 160).
21. See, also, Pathania, "Food Politics."
22. Pathania, "Food Politics," 268.
23. Taken from a pamphlet published by the New Materialists, posted on Facebook (New Materialists, "Why Beef and Pork"). The group is largely formed by the students from Northeastern states where meat is part of their daily diet. The New Materialists also question how, in JNU, a "secular campus," where even the *bhang* (a drink prepared from the leaves of the cannabis plant, which is banned in many countries) is allowed in mess during the Holi festival. But why is no beef and pork available in any single *dhaba* on campus?
24. Ambedkar, *Castes in India*.
25. Skaria, "Buddhist Question," 455.
26. Student Federation of India, All Indian Student Association, Democratic Student Union, and several others.
27. V. Kumar, "Dalit Movement."
28. In the middle of the twentieth century, Ambedkar contacted African American scholar and public intellectual W. E. B. Du Bois, who also wrote a letter to the United Nations on the elimination of caste and racial attitudes. Scholars since the 1930s have explored linkages between Dalits and Blacks. Social activists such as V. T. Rajshekar also began their "historic collaboration" with African Americans in 1987 to internationalize the Dalit problem and invite the attention of the "whole Black world" (see Rajshekar, *Dalit*).
29. Rege, *Against the Madness*.
30. Joothan, *Harry Kab Aayega*, *Weave of My Life*, *Mera Bachpan Mere Kandhon Par*, and *Murdahiya* are popular Dalit autobiographies (in Hindi) that set the base of Dalit literature. *Black Boy*, *Roots*, *Soul on Ice*, and many other autobiographies have added a radical tone to the Black movement.
31. See *Business Standard*, "'The-Lit' Rapper."
32. Alexander, "Nine Theses."
33. Gorringer, "Drumming Out Oppression," 4.
34. Sumeet Samos, an activist of BAPSA, launched his popular album *Ladai Seekh Le (Learn to Fight)*. Mohan, "Ladai Seekh."
35. Melucci, *Challenging Codes*, 357.
36. Larbeer and Alexander, *Colours of Liberation*, xi-xvi.
37. Larbeer and Alexander, *Colours of Liberation*, 10.
38. Das and Rai, *Bahujan*.

39. R. Kumar, *Dalit Personal Narratives*, 147.
40. Nicholson and Seidman, *Social Post-Modernism*, 35.
41. Melucci, *Challenging Codes*, 172.
42. Melucci, *Challenging Codes*, 10.
43. Melucci, *Challenging Codes*, 228.

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