Politics Against (De)politicization: *The Basis and Crisis of Contemporary Student Movements in India*

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In recent years, student movements have once again become a visible and prominent political phenomenon.[1] These movements clearly demonstrate a double rejection of neoliberal market-rationality, functioning also as political reason of the state and of conventional channels of grievance redressal and articulations. These student movements seek to establish a parallel mechanism of articulating and channelizing grievances, independent of conventional modes of political party functioning, civil society activism, and movement organizations. Following this trend, a number of student movements emerged in different university campuses and in different political contexts throughout India. This essay is an attempt to elucidate the dynamics of student movements in contemporary India.

With contemporary student movements on the rise in India, I argue that the state—rather than the neoliberal market and its governing rationality—remains the *prime* political adversary to student agency. My contention is not that the political reasoning of the Indian state is independent of neoliberal rationality, as a cursory look at the education sector since 2000 reveals the intertwining interests of the state and the market.[2] Importantly, I do not explore student movements in direct opposition to the neoliberalization of higher education and university spaces.[3] Instead, I focus on how the state has undertaken an initiative to "sanitize" higher education institutions and university spaces through an attempt to neutralize opponents and opposing ideologies threaten neoliberal market rationalization. One aspect of this initiative and subsequent interventions is what Supriya Chaudhuri describes as "politics of control."[4] I wish to highlight another dimension of this initiative—(de)politicization. Thus, I explore student movements in contemporary India as a politics against (de)politicization.

By (de)politicization, I do not imply an erasure of political and politics. It is depoliticization to the extent that this set of interventions delegitimizes certain modes of political and politics, which may be described as progressive.[5] But such depoliticization is political to the extent that it has encouraged many students to counter-mobilize thereby giving new life to student movements in university campuses. Thus, to capture this double bind, I employ the expression (de)politicization.

In democracy, the political is about social antagonisms, conflicts and "…the cultivation of a people's needs, desires, and orientation toward power and powerlessness."[6] On the other hand, I use the term politics to denote political practices

and spaces: mobilization, organization (e.g., student organizations), and institution-alization of grievances and protests (e.g., student unions). The political and politics are not mutually exclusive, they are constitutive of each other. Thus, (de)politiciza-tion here means both delegitimization of subjective moorings and institutions and organizations as the vehicle of such subjective articulations. Hence, politics against (de)politicization is a political subjective articulation and mobilization against it.

I wish to establish my argument with the help of a case study of a radical left student-youth mass organization, active in the state of West Bengal, India. The United Students Democratic Front (USDF) is an organization committed to the ideology of armed revolutionary struggle in India. In the public domain, the or-ganization was branded as a Maoist front. Employing the USDF as a case study demonstrates the centrality of opposing the state's (de)politicizing measures in stu-dent politics today. The choice of the field is guided by another set of observations made by scholars of the contemporary student movements in India. In India, the left ideology-based organized student movements are currently in decline and are in the process of being replaced by loosely organized student movements. A case study of USDF offers us a unique opportunity to compare similar processes. The USDF succeeded when they confronted the depoliticization and resultant political "passivity" by inaugurating alternative modes of channelizing grievances for campus democracy. Alternatively, the USDF's demise may be understood as a failure to ad-dress shifting ground of political subjectivity of student-youth protesting and in-tensification of (de)politicizing university spaces. The ethnography reveals to us limits of the left radical subjectivity that was once foundational to students' partic-ipation in politics across the world, including India, especially during the 1960s-70s.

The Field

The USDF, active in the state of West Bengal, traces its lineage back to the students' participation in the Naxalite movement in the1960s and 70s. The USDF is ideolog-ically committed to a long tradition of revolutionary movements. The Communist movement in the state has a long history dating back to pre-independence. Under Communist party leadership, members of the Communist Party of India (CPI) and members from Congress formed a militant movement called the Tebhaga move-ment aimed at ensuring a three-fourth portion of the total produce for the tiller—spread across the state in 1946-1947.[7] The second phase of radicalization of communist politics began when Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) was formed, inspired by the Maoist revolution in China.

Even before the formation of the CPI (ML) in 1967, an armed resistance of the landless peasantry and *adivasis* (indigenous) broke out in the Northern part of the state, an event now referred to as the Naxalbari resistance. Inspired by the Naxalbari struggle, the Naxalite movement spread across the country under the leaderhip of CPI (ML) and made headlines.[8] However, by 1972, subjected to heavy state repression, the movement started to dissipate and a clarion call for revolution

lost its appeal. During the same period, the Communist Party of India (Marxist)—formed by dissidents inside the CPI—consolidated itself as a major political party in the state of West Bengal. As the Naxalite movement was dying down, CPI(M) rose and formed a government in 1977 and ruled for 34 years. It is significant to note that communist discourse persisted throughout the state, Naxalite politics, art, culture, and as the counter-point to CPI(M)'s parliamentary politics. Interestingly, breakaway factions of the CPI (ML), composed of radical mass organizations and underground Maoist parties, would keep the political discourse of the Naxalbari and the Naxalite movement alive.

The USDF rose to prominence during 2006, when a struggle in Singur was launched against the land acquisition strategy of the CPI(M) led government for a proposed car factory (TATA Motors).[9] The resistance drew support and widespread solidarity from civil society and the state. The state witnessed two more massive mobilizations during this decade. In Nandigram, in 2007, mostly the landless section of the peasantry blocked roads and resisted the entry of police while protesting a chemical hub. The militancy was quelled by police action which resulted in the death of 14 villagers. Similarly, in 2009, an Adivasi resistance in an area called Jungle Mahal intensified the momentum of the Nandigram movement to a more militant scale. In this struggle, the radical section of civil and political society perceived the history of the Naxalbari uprising repeating with the landless, Adivasi people revolting against their continued oppression. The Communist Party of India (Maoist), an underground banned outfit committed to armed resistance, was rumored to be present in Nandigram and leading an uprising in Lalgarh.[10] It is in this context that the USDF would find opportunities as a mass student organization to mobilize around their militant political beliefs.

The fieldwork for this project was carried out during the period of 2013 to 2014. The research is comprised of in-depth oral interviews with 15 respondents who were active in USDF and later in Maoist politics. The interviews help construct biographies of these individuals as political activists. Throughout these interviews, I have tried to weave a social history of the USDF from the information gathered from focused group discussions, interviews with sympathizers, interviews with members of other organizations, periodicals, magazines, and finally participatory notes and observations.

Contemporary Student Movements in a Global Context

In the era of neoliberalism, Wendy Brown, a distinguished political theorist, compellingly demonstrates a process of collapse as the result of restructuration of every sphere of life—especially higher education in the form of neoliberal subjectivity and rationality. Moving away from an understanding of neoliberalism as a set of state practices or a stage of capitalist ideology, she describes it "as an order of normative reason that, when it becomes ascendant, takes shape as a governing rationality extending a specific formulation of economic values, practices, and metrics

to every dimension of human life."[11] This pervasive economic rationality, leading to the privatization of all spheres of life and the devaluation of all existing modes of articulation and channelization of grievances, have been the targets of students movements across the world since the 2000s. For example, two countries—Chile and the United Kingdom—have significantly different trajectories of politico-economic development. Nonetheless, both countries have witnessed a younger generation rise up against the same 'enemy'—neoliberal rationality and restructuring of higher-education under neoliberal economic programs.[12] The crisis of state and society relationships after the 2008 financial crisis, and austerity responses to the crisis by governments, have also enraged a younger generation from diverse regions such as Greece, Spain, Sweden, Latvia, and Ukraine.[13] In the USA, the Occupy Wall Street movement raised questions about growing inequality, the unaccountability of financial institutions, and corporations and government's complicity in allowing it to continue.

Alternatively, these movements, in their resistance to the delegitimization of the political and the de-democratization—as neoliberal reason seizes culture and institutions, structuring them in the imagination of contemporary firms—have adopted a strategy to distance themselves from any form of ideological mobilization, traditional principles of social movement organization (SMO), and political parties. Their horizontal, non-ideological, leaderless, and participatory democratic functioning are the alternative model, not only to neoliberalism, but also to the existing political system of grievance channelization.[14] In Spain, for example, members of the Spanish Indignados movement insisted on being identified as apolitical. During protests, they prohibited all organizational flags and banners, and were strategically eclectic with their goals and movement-identities.[15] In most cases, the movements began with the opposition to the nexus of neoliberal capital and the state. However, the movements also spread to include—as the 2013 protests in Brazil shows—various issues with respect to the specificities of neighborhoods.[16] The same may be said about the Occupy movement. Keeping the fluidity and eclecticism in perspective, these movements have been labelled as "moments" by the scholars of social movement studies, as opposed to social "movements."[17]

This essay does not claim that student movements have sought to break away from conventional contentious politics altogether. It is also not the contention that these movements, as mentioned above, are not about confronting the state and its apparatuses.[18] Any such sweeping generalization will be hurried as these are results of complex interconnected histories of capital, state, and society at local and global stages. However, by emphasizing the delegitimization of political and existing modes of politics through de-democratization and its impact on student protests and movements worldwide, I will show that this dimension of delegitimization of political and politics—in other words, (de)politicization—requires detailed examination to fully understand student movements in India. In the Indian context, such depoliticizing processes are spearheaded by the state and its apparatuses. Undeniably,

as Brown describes, it is the preface of neoliberal reason taking hold of higher education.

Contemporary Student Movements in India

In the last five years, student movements in India have gained widespread attention and drawn support nationally and internationally. At present, the intensity of protests has grown manifold. Students mainly oppose the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP)-led right wing government of India. Since 2014, under BJP-rule Indian society has witnessed the communalization of politics, violence against minority communities, and state-repression curbing democratic spaces, including university campuses. Thus, student movements have spilled over from campuses to become battles for democracy.[19] However, to uncritically celebrate these student movements as a manifestation of one, singular movement—with students as one unique political actor—is to risk homogenizing the phenomena. These are important trends that require closer attention.

First and foremost, is the slow decay of left organizations and the hegemony of left ideology. Gaurav Pathania has identified this trend in his study of student movements in Osmania University, Telangana. He argues that there is a decay in what he called an "ideology-based movement" and that there is a new emergence of "identity-based movements" across campuses. The chief among them is the mobilization surrounding the question of Dalit and Bahujan marginalization.[20] There is also increasing disenchantment with organized politics, with many in favor of loose consolidation and issue-specific solidarity. For example, the two most prominent movement sites in recent years: Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi and Hyderabad Central University (HCU), Hyderabad.

The left politics in JNU thrived over decades from 1970 to late 2000 due to the political culture of ideological debates among organized left outfits, ranging from parliamentary left to the radical left opposing parliamentary politics.[21] This type of ideological mobilization has taken a step back in recent years. The rise of the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) in campus politics forced left organizations to forge electoral alliances—leaving behind ideological differences—to consolidate progressive votes for the campus against ABVP's success. Similarly, the HCU movement demonstrates limitations of organized mobilization today. With few in favour of student union or any *one* organization and its agenda, the HCU movement was consolidated under an independent, loosely connected network of individuals and student organizations, called Joint Action Committee (JAC).[22]

Debate surrounding another student movement from the state of West Bengal which predates the movement in JNU and HCU also demonstrates this argument. In 2014, a student protest erupted at Jadavpur University in response to the university administration's callous and insensitive mishandling of a sexual harassment case and subsequent use of police-brutality on protesting students. Known as *#Hokkolorob* (let there be clamor), the student protest grew into a full-blown

movement, resulting in a massive protest march through the heart of Kolkata. In the context of this essay, the public debate surrounding this mobilization is rather illustrative. Eminent personalities and intellectual stalwarts spoke about the nature and character of the movement. There were those who dismissed the movement as noise. Rajarshi Dasgupta eloquently sums up their concern:

> What commitment do they feel to economic equality, social justice, and political democracy? What understanding do they have about the hard questions: poverty, caste and crony capitalism? Until they address these macro issues, some will insist, call them old-fashioned, such freedom means nothing but the license to undermine authority, escape discipline and indulge in immoral habits of consumption.[23]

Disagreeing with this "old fashioned" political criticism, Dasgupta defends the newness of the movement and argues in favour of a politics of noise:

> I think the distinctiveness of the new movements is their agenda of radicalizing democracy. It is linked to but not overshadowed by socialist imagination, secular thinking, rights discourse or nation building. While drawing on these concerns, the new movements are additionally alert to the intimate everyday sources of marginalization, experienced in public spaces, especially by the women and social pariahs.[24]

Dasgupta is not alone. Supriya Chaudhuri writes:

> Hokkolorob, 'let there be clamour', the name of the 2014 student agitation, was all about making a noise, whether or not that noise was recognised as a properly political discourse. The fact that such agitations, however much they might engage with contemporary political forces and state power are often dismissed as instances of indiscipline, unruliness or immaturity bears out Rancière's perception regarding the 'category' of the political… The lack of cohesion in recent campus protests, their relatively short-lived character and their failure to project a single ideology —or even a set of ideologies—has been an argument for viewing university spaces today as merely anarchic, populated by a few troublemakers with dangerous or even 'seditious' affiliations, and a 'herd-like' mass of followers.[25]
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> I agree with Dasgupta and Chaudhuri's perceptive observations. I also find

Pathania's argument regarding the decay of ideological movements and the rise of

identity politics—despite certain discomfort with the nomenclature—valid. At the same time, it may be useful to revisit the binaries implicitly operational here (traditional politics versus new imagination of politics; and ideology-based movements versus identity-based movements). In other words, is there a complete break between the historical trajectory of Indian student movements until the 1980s and contemporary student movements? Rajarshi Dasgupta's observation, that contemporary movements are linked to but not overshadowed by old concerns suggests a possible continuity, despite moments of rupture.[26] I believe, to explore this continuity and divergence, a historical investigation of Indian student movements is necessary here.

Indian Student Movements in Historical Perspective: A Conceptual Scheme

The context of colonialism gave a unique direction to student movements in India. The vast number of students who joined the Indian freedom struggle were inspired to counter the inferior status that a subjugated population is assigned by the "superior" colonial power. As Altbach observed, the students—equipped with academic training—deployed their intellectual prowess in representing a people who were condemned to a pre-modern stage, a European past.[27] Even post-independence, in the 1970s and 80s, India witnessed widespread discontent among students and youth. The incidence of agitation among university students is recorded to be 45 agitations per 10,000 students per year. Out of this 45, 14% were reported to be violent.[28]

Before independence, students were motivated to participate in the nationalist struggle and to become a voice for the nation. Post-independence, the nation remained concerned about/for the state of democracy, with the failing Nehruvian model of nation-building and the development became the battleground.[29] In 1973, after 25 years of Independence, Jayaprakash Narayan, one of the most iconic political leaders asked students participating in the Bihar agitations to leave their studies and save democracy. Another leader, K.V. Sahay, reminded students that as youth they must assume their political responsibility.[30] The students' participation in the Naxalite movement was deeply embedded in the ideal of "true" independence for the masses. They declared "*yeh azadi jootha hai!*" (this independence is false).[31] Around the same time, borrowing elements from the Black Panther movement in America and the Naxalite movement, the Dalit Panther movement in Maharashtra weaved another political narrative.[32] They articulated Dalits as the Other of the country; and in search of independence in an "independent", "democratic" India. In this context, T.K. Oommen rightly argues that university students were simultaneously involved in two societal roles: as students and as young citizens.[33]

I do not intend to argue that this type of solidarity was not present in the Western context. In fact, in the 1960s, similar types of solidarity were evident between students and workers in France in which students declared that "student" is an outdated concept.[34] The famous speech of Mario Savo declaring students as raw

material and universities as machines was equally grounded in an understanding of solidarity between students and the working class.[35] The concept of student-power, that emerged from such declarations cannot be separated from working class struggles or civil rights movement. In contrast, Ranabir Samaddar argues that students and youth never conceptualized themselves as "student power" during the Naxalbari movement.[36] For Samaddar, students were clear of their role in the revolutionary movement as secondary and only acted in solidarity. Student and youth participated in workers' strikes and protests; but did not attempt to lead those. As 'red guard' they divided themselves in groups of twenty to thirty and carried out political campaigns among the peasantries in rural Bengal. Following principles of Maoism, their attempt was to mobilize a revolutionary class within the rural society. They were clear that the new democratic revolution was to be carried out by the armed peasant struggle in the countryside and ultimately spearheaded by the proletariat. This difference between the Naxalite and the New Left may be subtle, but indicative of Indian student movements' continuity since anti-colonial struggles. I argue that this continuity is based on subjective grounds of the political articulation of student movements in India.

Recent anthropological scholarship considers subjectivity as "…the agonistic and practical activity of engaging identity and fate, patterned and felt in historically contingent settings and mediated by institutional processes and cultural forms."[37] Subjectivity is determined by discursive regimes, institutions, and structures such as state, family, or political economy. At the same time "subjectivity is not just the outcome of social control or the unconscious; it also provides the ground for subjects to think through their circumstances and to feel through their contradictions…"[38] In line with these observations, it may be said that the subjectivity of Indian student movements is anchored in their relationship with the people. As an extension, it is also based on an ambivalent relationship with the state-nation—nation-building as a project of the state.[39] It has emerged, time and again, at the intersections of the institutional discourses of university, state, nation, and the subject positions of student, youth, citizen, and people. Indeed, subjectivity has been the ground for a "historical consciousness" as students, how they are influenced by their circumstances, and how they come to belong to the set of socially interrelated networks and actors.[40]

If such is the site of subjectivity undergirding the student movements in India, what is specifically political about this subjectivity? Inspired by Wendy Brown's analysis of neoliberal reason, I draw attention to the fact that a newly Independent Indian state subsumed political reason (or questions of democracy and justice) to economic reason—the Nehruvian model of development and nation-building.[41] Thus, when students were asked to take up political responsibility or stand in solidarity with marginalized classes, they were imagined to be the democratizing force, subjecting the state's economistic, political rationality to critical questioning. In other words, students were to be the "vanguard", as young citizens of

the "people", the excluded subject.[42]

The terms citizens and subject should be given close attention here. Following the french philosopher Étienne Balibar, I understand these categories as connected in a permanent dialectical oscillation. At the risk of simplifying Balibar's complex formulation, he deploys the term subject in three forms: subject by compulsion (a slave); subject who pledges obedience and "…has no need of *knowing*, much less *understanding*, why what is prescribed to him is in the interest of his own happiness." And, lastly, the citizen subject, who subject himself to the laws he legislates.[43] Thus Balibar argues, "[t]he citizen (defined by his rights and duties) is that "nonsubject" who comes after the subject, and whose constitution and recognition put an end (in principle) to the subjection of the subject."[44]

Another distinction that Balibar introduces is between symbolic and real citizenship:

> Either equality is "symbolic," which means that each individual, whatever his strengths, his power, and his property, is *reputed* to be equivalent to every individual in his capacity as citizen…Or equality is "real," which means that citizenship will not exist unless the conditions of all individuals are equal, or at least equivalent…Whereas symbolic equality is all the better affirmed, its ideality all the better preserved and recognized as unconditional when conditions are unequal, real equality supposes a classless society, and thus works to produce it.[45]

In the context of this set of observations, I am referring to the people as subjects by obedience. Though they were full citizens of the independent nation, their citizenship was symbolic so long as Nehruvian nation-building assumed the state knew what was good for their happiness as its subject. On the other hand, I consider students as a special group of citizens who posed the critical question to the economistic political reasoning of the state from the political premise of "real" citizenship. I believe it is this questioning which rendered students a political subject. Then, it is not surprising that until the 1980s, Indian student movements were invested in "ideology-based" politics and concerned with "old fashioned questions" about equality or right based mobilization.

After the 1990s, there was a new emergence of identity-based politics and a new mode of politics. Theoretically, it is possible to argue that there was no radical discontinuity during this period; rather, there was a rupture in this political subjectivity. Any project based on the formation of a society on the premise of real equality has its own aporia. Balibar argues that there was an antinomy between equality and society "…for, even when it is not defined in "cultural," "national," or "historical" terms, a *society* is necessarily *a* society, defined by some particularity, by some exclusion, if only by a *name*."[46] An ideology-based movement with its various forms

of imagined equality inevitably excluded identities such as caste, gender, and sexualities. It may be hypothesized that it is this exclusion—alongside questioning the state—that has now been added to the list of critical questions posed by the student movements in contemporary times. Thus, while there are ruptures in Indian student movements, there is continuity as the political subjectivity remains historically grounded in oscillations between subject and citizen; obedience and freedom; symbolic equality and real equality in democracy.

Evidently, this historically grounded political subjectivity stands in radical opposition to neoliberal reason which measures higher education and universities strictly through economic values, practices, and metrics. Thus, if advances are to be made, this political subjectivity must be uncoupled and restructured as a subject more amenable to neoliberal rationality. The Indian state has taken the responsibility on behalf of the economy and is taking steps to reconfigure historically developed political relationship between students as "citizen subject" and the excluded subject on various registers of class, caste, gender, sexualities. This is the political reasoning of the Indian state while dealing with the universities—a state of siege by taking control and cutting them off from the society and social groups. Over the last decade, with the right-wing BJP-led Indian state in power, (de)politicization measures have become obvious and intense. As my ethnographic evidence demonstrates, the process has been unfolding for the last two decades in even unlikely places such as the state of West Bengal, governed by a Communist Party for over three decades.

Situating (De)politicization in State and Society Relationship in West Bengal

First and foremost, the (de)politicization of campuses in West Bengal must be situated within the historical trajectory of state and society's relationship in West Bengal since the late 1970s. This movement is part of a larger trend of (de)politicization across the state. Since its ascent to power in 1977, the CPI (M) hegemonized the political by monopolizing the social realm. The influence and hegemony of CPI (M) in the state has led scholars to coin terms like "party society", where the party became the sole arbitrator in political matters, socio-cultural, and even familial affairs of the people.[47]

The mandate that CPI(M) enjoyed during 1980s-1990s was a result of its social democratic practices. It arguably opened new possibilities of distributive justice, especially for non-propertied classes.[48] By the second half of 1990s, the situation in West Bengal started changing rapidly. There were several incidents where the CPI (M) and other opposition parties, such as the Trinamool Congress (TMC) and BJP, clashed. The public and media attention now shifted to widespread political violence that had been a characteristic feature of the state's politics under CPI (M)'s rule. In the past, the CPI (M) championed their programs for decentralizing power and land-reform. However, it was becoming evident to the scholars studying economic and socio-political transformations of the state that the land reforms either

had failed to change rural structure or at best had created a middle-section of peasantry as party-loyalist.[49] A new-kulak had emerged in the form of middle peasantry as a dominant force, in alliance with land-owning sections. Patronized by the party, certain groups "…cornered most of the benefits and have today developed into a powerful new rural CPI (M) sub-elite of panchayat pradhans, rich farmers, traders, and contractors in some district."[50] In this politics of middleness, forces like TMC and the BJP started cashing in on the lower strata of rural society's grievances. Such consolidation resulted in violent turf wars in the late 1990s and early 2000s.[51]

With the backdrop of such political economic development in rural West Bengal, the CPI (M) shifted its attention to industrialization.[52] The government opened the state-economy for several industrial projects and showed an eagerness to cooperate with corporate capital as the first step towards the liberalization of state-economy. CPI (M) officially recognized Special Economic Zone (SEZ) by 2003; whereas the then Central government passed the Bill in 2005. CPI (M) supported the Bill in the parliament.[53] In Lalgarh, Jindal Steel was given land under the provisions of SEZ. CPI (M) took such a step despite the severe criticism that SEZs drew from several quarters as an economic policy. Two most important points of contentions were cheap labor exploitation in the name of "competitive wages" and displacement of the local populations.[54] In Singur, although not under the provision of SEZ, land was given to TATA with specific terms and conditions, which made exceptional relaxations for the corporation. 643 acres of lands were leased out to the TATAs without levying a single rupee as taxes. [55]

The industrial policy led to further volatility in rural West Bengal as it was a predominantly agrarian-based economy. Under the new economic policy, the landless and small holding sections of peasantry were directly affected. In the past, the CPI (M) ensured that there was an extra-legal economy and polity in rural Bengal to distribute resources and quell discontent.[56] However, with the land-grab, especially in Singur or Nandigram, the extra-legal structure was destabilized and while land-owing sections of the peasantry with legal documents could claim compensation, the landless peasantry lost their livelihood without any right to compensation. This is the context of the militant protests from 2006 to 2009 in West Bengal.[57] In the case of Lalgarh, the resistance took an armed militant form against repression unleashed by police, *harmad*s, and forest mafias in rural Bengal.[58]

In urban areas, the CPI (M) followed a similar path. Namely, the CPI (M) promoted a section of party loyalists, who increasingly took the form of "lumpen-bourgeois", consisting of real estate agents and their musclemen. A black market was in circulation. Added to this economic destabilization was the complete (de)politicization of West Bengal's polity with CPI (M)'s repressive cadre-based politics devaluing all forms of democratic mechanisms to channelize grievances. It is only when resistance broke out in Singur that intellectuals, civil society, and civil rights groups supported the protesting peasantry. Debates over issues, such as neo-liberal development, the SEZ, and the colonial land-acquisition Act, came to the

forefront of public discourse.[59]

For the purpose of this article, the most important development was a fresh motivation for student politics. Protests across different campuses threatened to rearticulate the historically grounded political subjectivity of the student movements. In the case of West Bengal, it was specifically the long shadow of the Naxalite movement and students' participation in the movement. During my oral interviews, students trying to explore alternate forms of student politics—irrespective of their agreement or disagreement—would often choose the Naxalite movement as the point of reference. As the resistances in rural Bengal intensified against state-repression, police brutality, and cadre-based violence, students' solidarity with the movements were more organic in comparison to the civil society's discontent. For these students, the line between campus and wider society was blurred as the structure of domination sustaining all pervasive (de)politicization "*ek rokomi lagchilo*"[60]

Nonetheless, such articulation was stunted by the rise of TMC and Trinamool Congress Chattra Parishad (TMCP), TMC's student wing. TMC was riding the wave of movements and posed itself as credible opposition to channelize grievances in and through existing democratic institutions. After three decades the CPI (M)'s hegemony was in crisis. The hegemony of Student Federation of India (SFI) in campuses—the student wing of CPI (M)—was contested by the TMCP and the violence spread across campuses akin to rural Bengal in the late 1990s. However, what is noteworthy is that the TMCP did not intend to institute an alternate mode of student politics. Instead, it sought to take control over the campuses and replace SFI. A politicized student body posed a threat to the emergent ruling party as well.

Politics of (de)politicization

In the context of local cadre's participation in the underground militia of CPI (Maoist), Shah argues, "the potential revolutionary may be unsure about his/her ideological commitments in their decision to join the armed squads…And, that a crucial component of their decision may be an uncertainty about the social relations in which they find themselves and the hope that revolutionary engagement will come with more guarantees."[61] Shah does not deny the ontological component—a decision to join may be inspired by ontological uncertainty or doubt about what is and what ought to be. However, she proposes a parallel investigation of the movement of consciousness from epistemological uncertainty to epistemological certainty as well. One implication of her argument, she hints at it but does not focus on, is that joining a politics (i.e., an organization such as the Maoist Party) may be an anti-political moment. Chotu Roy—whose alleged participation in the Maoist party Shah is reflected on here—joined the highly structured organization for "preventative neutralization or abolition of socio-political antagonism."[62] Politics could be a potent weapon to devalue the political. I will illustrate this process of negating the political, by delegitimizing politics, with the help of two ethnographic snippets.

Let me begin with the experience of a student interviewee, Shomit. At the time of the interview, he was a student at a law institute which he joined in 2009. Located in the district of Kolkata, it is one of the eminent institutions for pursuing degrees in Legal studies in the state of West Bengal. According to him, as soon as he enrolled at the institution, he realized there was a one-party rule on the campus. There was no real distinction between student politics inside the campus and politics beyond the campus boundary. Shomit explained, "these unions are mostly seized by the student organization of the ruling party of the state. And their rival is inevitably the largest opposition party of the state at that time. In West Bengal, that accurately translates into the binary between CPI (M) and TMC for more than two decades now."[63]

In 2009, it was the SFI that dominated the student unions across colleges in the state. However, even if it was a one-party rule, it did not mean that SFI-rule was uninterrupted and peaceful. Often in the absence of any opposition organization, organizations like SFI would split in half.[64] And, both factions would have their internal battle to settle which would turn into events of open campus violence. In this case, within SFI itself, there were two factions: hostel lobby and college lobby. The hostel lobby consisted of "intellectually-committed" student-members; while the college lobby consisted of students who provided "muscle-power." The leader of the college lobby was Romit. Given his stature as a senior student and his command over the muscle-power inside SFI, he was the supremo (or 'dada' as Shomit called him) of the college. In this role, he dictated the terms of student politics on the campus.

By 2011, the State Election took place and TMC won the election with an emphatic mandate. One morning, upon entering the college, Shomit noticed that a wall for student poster once monopolized by SFI had exercised monopoly was covered in posters exclusively for the TMCP's political propaganda. In fact, the entire wall was filled with only TMCP propaganda. Just like the wall, Romit was now a TMCP activist and so were his followers. Swiftly and smoothly, SFI was replaced with TMCP in the college. Shomit described the situation, "No real change happened. Just that color on the wall changed. From SFI's red to TMCP's green."

Figures, such as Romit, monopolized students' unions. Crucially, the monopolization is not the mere assertion of brute power. The unions, as institutionalized channel of grievance redressal mechanisms is reorganized as a *social* space—with "politically active" students as loyalists, followers, and even beneficiaries of close ties with the dadas. The elections are used to select a group of students as office bearers, who pledge their obedience. Shomit added:

> the relationship here is deeply feudal…it is neither allegiance to any ideology nor reflection of one's own political position…It is about who is close to whom, who is willing to spend time in the union room, a space always occupied by these students and

> their dadas…used for the party activities of local TMC unit.
> Frankly, I wonder how many of my peers even entered the
> room.[65]

It may come across as trivial observation that these student activists are constantly present in the union room and perhaps indulge in "timepass."[66] However, my ethnography contains several instances where the respondents reiterated the very symbolic value of having access to a physical space, which is supposed to belong to every student. We have learned from Henri Lefebvre that space is always political; therefore, a union room is not an "innocent space". In fact, if it is a container—to pursue Lefebvre's analogy—campus democracy (and students being the demos) is its content.[67] Thus, by obstructing access, one also strategically produces a union room as a space which is a constant reminder of hollowing out campus democracy itself.

Shomit's characterization of the relationship between the dadas and their followers as "feudal" merits closer attention. His characterization—undeniably influenced by his own political vocabulary embedded in the Maoist ideological position of characterizing Indian society as semi-colonial and semi-feudal—is misleading. To reduce his relationship with student organizations to a lord/serf model is to disregard the political character of these social ties. It may be more fruitful to grasp the relationship through the model of the Prince and his principality.[68] Romit does not wield despotic, absolute power to which these "activists" are compelled to submit. Rather, it is becoming a subject to a Prince to whom one willingly offers obedience. More importantly, he is one who gives "the law" within the confines of the campus to which "student activists" subject themselves to, not out of any compulsion, but volition. Volition was a political choice, even if utilitarian, with a hope for political patronages of various kinds from the parent party of the student outfit.

This monopolization of the political and politics, however, does not go unchallenged. There are always sections of the student body who wish to challenge this state of obedience and patronage. Campus violence was primarily a result of these challenges, and these challenges may come from within the student body. For example, a faction within the ruling student outfit sometimes disagreed with the princely status of a dada (such as the "intellectual-lobby" in Shomit's account). However, these challenges are not the result of oscillation between subject and citizen subject, it is merely a desire to capture the princely status. Instead of injecting fresh life into campus democracy, such a *coup* only resulted in intensified political passivity among students. More significantly, these incidents of violence became a reminder for the remainder (ironically the majority of the student population) of their exceptional status. In a campus with delegitimization of all democratic processes of grievance channelization and redressal, the dadas, who gave the law may also suspend it, which effectively implied free rein to the force of law. Students'

exceptional status as a subject was defined by an oscillation between obedience and compulsion: a compulsory obedience. Subject, by compulsory obedience is neither a resigned subject (like a slave) nor a willing subject (like the subjects of the Prince). Students are a passive subject. Students have the desire to become nonsubject; at the same time, do not see any avenues to claim the position of a citizen subject. But what happens if someone or a group does not aspire to be a prince or refuses the subject position characterized by compulsory disobedience? Let me turn to another interviewee, Ramen, to illustrate the effect of refusing the subject position.

Ramen came from a poverty-stricken background. To finance his higher education and cost of living in a city, he had to work the night shift at a gas station. So, Ramen felt his hard-earned money was going to waste when he had to pay 30 Rupees for a computer-room charge without actually being permitted to use the computer room. When Ramen approached the college principal with this concern, he was dismissed with the only explanation being that nothing could be done. The student union remained silent about the issue after taking the administration's side in the past. So, Ramen started rallying other students in the college and as he put it, "I decided to do dadagiri too. Even though, I of course had no desire to be one of them. I had no interest be part of union-baji (unionism)."[69] He managed to garner significant support for his cause and created a stir regarding the computer room fee. After the conclusion of a protest meeting, organized by the students, the union activists decided to intervene. Ramen was picked and locked up in a room on the third floor of the college. He was gagged and tied to a chair. One of the dadas abused him verbally and physically. Finally, a revolver was aimed at him. He was told "gayeb hoye jabe" (you will vanish). Obviously, the protest petered away soon; however, what disturbed Ramen more was the fact that his peers started avoiding him. Ramen wondered "because I rebelled, I became untouchable. I did not ask them why. So, I cannot say with certainty. But I guess the fear was any association with me would appear as disobeying [the] wishes of the dadas...might also appear as taking sides."[70]

Drawing from his experience of campus democracy at the Engineering Institute of Junior Executives (EIJE), Sushil, who was present during my interview with Ramen, characterized the situation as "*nairajya*" (anarchy).[71] If Ramen decided to do dadagiri, without aspiring to be one, Sushil took a more conventional route of claiming the student union and reenergizing campus democracy in the EIJE. By then, Sushil was a member of the USDF. With encouragement from USDF leadership, Sushil began interacting with students of EIJE who used to stay in the nearby mess facility. Initially the plan was to recruit students from his college for USDF. However, the plan changed when both USDF leadership and Sushil felt there was also a possibility for larger mobilization in the college. Instead of recruitment of individuals, a member-unit of USDF might be possible to organize.

(De)politicization of EIJE was obvious for most of the students. The Union's role at EIJE, like in most colleges, was to organize student activities, such

as religious festivals and student fests. The Union room was a space restricted for student leaders and their lackeys, where they spent time socializing. Often the Union room would function as the party-office of TMC or CPI (M) with local leaders holding meetings in the Union room. During student union elections, TMC or CPI (M) local activists moved freely in the campus to intimidate and ensure there were no contestants to their own candidates. The elections were in no way democratic and were more akin to appointments in all practicality. Thus, when Sushil and his cohort's intention was publicly known, the TMC and TMCP cadres came and vandalized the office. They threatened students openly during so-called class campaigns not to come and vote. USDF leadership advised Sushil and his friends to go into hiding and go straight to the college on the day that they filed for nomination. On that day, USDF activists accompanied Sushil and his friends and there was a crowd of TMC cadres outside the gate who intended to stop students from entering the campus. Immediately a scuffle broke out between USDF activists and TMC cadres. Police came to the scene and intervened, threatening to detain USDF activists because they were considered "outsiders" to the locality and to be meddling with local college affairs. However, police had no choice but to also guarantee the entry of Sushil and his friends, but it was all in vain. They were told that they would no longer be able to file for nomination. With the threat of campus violence looming overhead, the administration decided to close the nomination process.

In the end, the TMCP candidates were selected unopposed. Sushil, with the help of a local unit of the civil liberty forum, went to the police station with the intention of lodging a complaint regarding vandalization of mess-facilities and assault when he wanted to file his nomination. The officer in charge (OC) did not take the complaints seriously and refused to formally receive their complaint. Rather, he advised, "don't waste your parents' hard-earned money. *Don't try to be an activist.* Study, then get a job and settle down. That's what your parents want; and good for you too. *Stay away from politics.* These are local matters and let the local party unit and college administration handle it." Restating the OC's statement, Sushil asks "how else do you describe the scenario but [nairajya]?"[72]

The dictionary meaning of the Bengali word is anarchy or lawlessness. However, here, Sushil is using the word in its more colloquial meaning—a state of nature. At the same time, the phrase state of nature does not imply absence of the state. The fact is that the state is very much present in these university spaces intended to exercise political control that was designed to transform higher education into an instrument of a managerial economy. Supriya Chaudhury describes the mechanism of such control in the context of Jadavpur University:

> Initially, it [TMC -led Government] had condemned political interference in higher education, but immediately after being voted into power it instituted amendments to the West Bengal Universities Act, drastically reducing the proportion of elected mem-

bers on statutory bodies and replacing them by ex officio or government nominees…It also imposed a moratorium on selection
of new faculty, appointed interim vice-chancellors of its own
choice, and revised regulations so as to have the final say in the
selection of all state university vice-chancellors. These measures
took shape through successive ordinances and amendments, and
at last in the West Bengal Higher Education Act (2017), which
more or less cancelled the autonomy of state universities.[73]

Thus, "nairajya" rather refers to a situation in which sovereignty and force of law
could be appropriated by anyone. The lines are continuously blurred between party,
student union, administration, and state apparatuses (e.g., police), and in this zone
of indistinction, domination, including violence, is possible. In addition to politics
of control, I wish to emphasize the politics of (de)politicization which was founded
on such domination.[74]

        Politics of control aims to restructure universities and make them part of
a managerial economy. In this neoliberal project, the state is also invested in bracketing students as a kind of disciplined and obedient subject. In various reports and
recommendation on higher education, the committees are pointing out that "activism" is a problem. In fact, the latter has been identified as a minority group
among students. And student population, according to these reports, does not welcome the presence of these activists in campus spaces.[75] But, who are these "activists"?[76] My contention is that these are the students who refuse the subject
position of compulsory obedience—a rather passive state. They are a problem not
because they are disobedient, but rather, their disobedience, in essence, is reclaiming
politics. And so long as politics and the political are not separate, it also activates
antagonisms and questions of power and powerlessness within the space of university campuses. So, activists are not the ones who are only politically active, they
are also the ones who *activate*.

        In the next section, I extend the above discussion empirically. Despite a
trend of shrinking space for ideology-based movements in post-secondary institutions, the USDF succeeded by providing an alternative space for politics. In turn,
the USDF's political articulation pertaining to social antagonisms and questions of
power and powerlessness, rendered more relevant by ongoing people's struggle in
Singur, Nandigram, and Lalgarh, resonated with students.

Politics Against (De)politicization: The Curious Case of USDF
To return to Shah's article, the concept of revolutionary subjectivity is constituted
by two parallel processes: ontological doubt to certainty and epistemological uncertainty to certainty. As discussed above, she explored the significance of the second process in constitution of revolutionary subjectivity. She merely hints at the
fact that ontological uncertainty, well explores in the context of religious subjectivity,

may be relevant too.[77] However, I wish to demonstrate that there is a need to explore both the processes in their dialectical relationships. An ontological desire to become a nonsubject may guide one's decision to opt for an organization as a credible choice for "rajniti kora" (doing politics) or "songothon kora" (doing organization). In other words, the decision to join an organization, such as Chotu Roy's motivation, can be an anti-political moment. But in this case study, political and politics constitute each other: a decision to join an organization may be born out of a willingness to engage with questions of social antagonism, power, and powerlessness. This dialectical understanding of the political and politics helps us to understand the USDF's successes and failures as well.

First Moment: Revolutionary Students Front to USDF, An Experiment
The emergence of the USDF is rooted in another student organization that was working in West Bengal during the 1990s. The Revolutionary Student Front (RSF), an organization representing student interests and propagating the cause of revolution in India, was radical in content and rigid in upholding the ideology of the Naxalite movement. The RSF was connected to the All India Revolutionary Student Front (AIRSF) which traced its lineage directly to the Naxalite movement. Formally, RSF was established in Jadavpur University (JU) around 1996 and quickly had units in various localities which functioned under a city committee of RSF. However, there was a lack of coordination between all of these units.

Representatives from various units were incorporated under the RSF city committee, with the Party being responsible for coordination between various units.[78] The Party had various wings, including a student wing. Accordingly, wherever they had influence, The RSF would establish a unit to mobilize students and local youth. In many ways, these units of the RSF were an extension of the Party's structure, helping the RSF to consolidate and mobilize specific sections of the population in an area where the RSF was working. The Peruvian student movement under the guidance of Peru's Maoist Party is comparable to the RSF. For example, *The Patrido Communista del Peru* had a long-term objective of creating an alliance between the urban proletariat and rural peasantry; for which, university students were thought of as the catalyst.[79]

By 2003-2004, the JU unit of the RSF encountered problems pertaining to mobilization and building a support base. The organization membership stalled with only a handful of full-time activists, owing to exclusive membership criteria. Within the social movement studies framework, RSF's dilemma revolved around resolving issues pertaining to interactions between the movement and sentiment in larger society, social movement organization and its support base, exclusivity and inclusivity of membership criteria, and exclusive and inclusive organizational structure.[80] According to an RSF activist, the top-down approach of the Party and organizational principle of centralization was not in sync with the overarching political milieu. Saptarshi puts it succinctly, "RSF needed to address the soul of this demo-

cratic aspiration. Instead of token solidarity with the democratic aspiration of the public, it needed to actively engage with this democratic spirit and plan its mass activities to inspire them."[81] This realization led the RSF leadership to think about organization and mobilization in a new way and take the Party in a new direction. The USDF became a space where they could experiment with different forms of mobilization.

Second Moment: The Formation of USDF

The birth of USDF coincided with emergence of the Singur movement in 2006. Its growth aligned with developments in the Singur and followed the resistance in Nandigram in 2007. On the one hand, USDF had tapped into the sentiment that was building against SFI and CPI(M); on the other hand, apathy was emerging as a result of the TMCP and TMC's oppositional politics. Taking inspiration from movements in Singur and Nandigram, students in campuses were coming together against the shackles of (de)politicization and violence.

To illustrate this trend towards student unity, one respondent narrated the following incident: USDF activists went to have a meeting with a section of students in St. Paul's College, close to College Street which was the cultural and educational hub located at the heart of Calcutta (now Kolkata). The agenda was to explore possibilities of opening a USDF unit in St. Paul's College; however, the meeting began on a surprising note. USDF representatives were immediately asked whether they could help "beat up" SFI activists. Students from St. Paul's College were clear in their understanding of the situation—before creating a space for alternative politics like USDF, the need of the hour was to confront the sheer muscle-flexing of the SFI. It was only then that adequate confidence in student politics could be reenergized. The social movement studies alert us to the fact that like any organization, a political organization within a social movement plays an important part in fulfilling the participants' basic demands.[82] All my respondents agree that in colleges like St. Paul's College, campus violence was so pervasive that the first and foremost task was to fight for campus-democracy, if need be, through direct confrontation. Only then, did widening the landscape of student politics become a possibility. Against this backdrop, the USDF concretized its political program around two issues: bolstering campus democracy and opposing the state's Liberalization-Privatization-Globalization (L-P-G) policies. USDF activists recognized that each campus would have their specific tempo of struggles, with their own set of agendas. Keeping the need to address specific campus' needs, the USDF adopted the strategy of opening political units in colleges under different names, not necessarily as USDF units. Once set up with USDF's intervention, these organizations were brought together as member-units of USDF. While these organizations did not bear the USDF name, these were de facto the units of USDF, given that USDF leadership oversaw "guiding" them.

Third Moment: The Fall of the USDF

With the Singur movement persistently resisting TATA Motors' entry and Nandigram becoming increasingly militant in its armed resistance to the state, USDF leadership felt that it was the opportune time to revert to their radical political agenda. Their hope was to articulate a revolutionary connection between the student and the oppressed masses in line with the Naxalite movement of the 1960s. However, the shift in ideological moorings—from L-P-G to revolutionary agendas—caused irreparable damage. Many individual representatives left the coordination committee citing their disagreement with this ideological shift. Soon the USDF found itself in a situation where their Coordination Committee was left with 7-8 like-minded members who shared a consensus on the Naxalite and Maoist politics. Such change in orientation also hampered the USDF's mobilization. For instance, one respondent argued that while in 2007 or in early 2008 they could mobilize 500 students for a protest march, the number decreased drastically to 50-60 by the end of 2008.

The USDF leadership, however, continued the same strategy in 2009. For USDF activists, the struggle in Lalgarh could be taken to the students and the public as "the second Naxalbari." USDF's principal role became propagating the cause of the Lalgarh struggle. With such conviction, in 2010, the USDF, during its annual conference, emerged as an organization and openly declared their commitment to Marxism-Leninism (M-L). The Maoist allegiance was left out on paper to allow the USDF to evade direct state-repression. Ultimately, this ideological switch in the core membership of the USDF would be the end of the organization. Throughout my interviews, respondents indicated that following this shift, USDF membership deserted campus spaces and started speaking only about Singur, Nandigram, and more emphatically about Lalgarh struggle as the shimmering hope of Revolution.

The life cycle of the USDF had comes full circle. The USDF's success was rooted in addressing the ontological desire which otherwise remained passive for the majority of students. With the program of campus-democracy and the framework of L-P-G, the USDF provided a concrete horizon for an epistemological engagement, as opposed to RSF's demand for revolutionary consciousness in another time and another place. One student, sympathetic to the USDF said:

> See, nobody really understands what even liberalization, privatization or globalization exactly mean. However, you see these words in newspaper, hear people saying. You see McDonalds and coffee shops mushrooming; factory shutting down; government giving lands to a private company; a young girl being burnt to ashes as a retaliation to unarmed, hungry landless and hapless peasant protesting. So, you can make sense of yourself and what's happening around you through your own life. You need not read Marx, Lenin or Communist Manifesto…you can talk politics in canteen like you do about a new movie or novel. That

was refreshing.[83]

But when M-L arrived on the scene, the demand for epistemological engagement—as my respondents themselves accept—became rather abstract. The USDF hastily concluded that a student's ontological desire was to be a "nonsubject" by becoming a "citizen" in their own (campus) democracy as the ground for revolutionary subjectivity. Students refused such an epistemological engagement with the political, postulated on an abstract horizon of class struggle and foreign politics, encapsulated by the Maoist party.

Not surprisingly, while reflecting on their failure, USDF activists locate the source of failure as the unstable subjectivity in student movements. There is consensus among these activists that the old form of radical left politics is no more replicable today. One activist argued:

> The days are gone when student-youth will go to village with Mao's Red Book because somewhere in one village, called Naxalbari, the peasantry has decided to take up arms. Such organic—emotional, political or intellectual—connections, or if you want to say affinity, are not there. You just cannot assume it. You have to rebuild it…There are jobs, which give scope to travel the world, Starbucks make you feel you are no more in Kolkata. Yes, if poor people get killed not even 50 miles away from Kolkata, there is rage. However, rage is not guarantee for rebellion. Rage needs to be addressed in the first place.[84]

Amitava shared a similar opinion. He emphasized on the concrete everyday reality of a student and considered their ideological imperative almost secondary in politicizing a new entrant. He saw politics more as an art of engagement—creatively intervening in an individual's life and enabling them to draw the connection (an epistemological exercise) between their own struggles, anxieties in life, and larger struggles going on elsewhere. Referring to his parents' expectation that he would become an engineer, Amitava pointed out new set of crises amongst middle-class students with parents desiring new middle-class mobility, "On the one hand, parents seek further mobility for their next generation with neoliberalism offering lucrative job opportunities and a promise of global reach. On the other hand, the same generation is increasingly aligning themselves with Hindutva politics and ready to embrace new cultural conservatism."[85]

Abhiroop identified the same anxious reason for his decision to join the USDF. His parents' aspirations for him were in stark contrast to what was going on in Singur or Nandigram. He reminded me:

> If you remember, when we are growing up one middle class les-

son was always taught to us without fail: if you find a ten-rupee
note on the street always give it to a beggar. We were taught to
be sensitive to poverty and poor. Now suddenly, middle class val-
ues were telling me: go for your career, find a job in Tata Con-
sultancy Service. It is meaningless to worry about what TATA is
doing in Singur. Nothing will come out of these protests and
petty politicking of political parties. I was confused, uncertain
and hesitant about where I am heading. This is where USDF be-
came important in my life.[86]

The USDF, as an organization, supplied Abhiroop with the ground and resources
to consciously organize his own experiences towards the political: questions regard-
ing social cleavages, power, and powerlessness:

> Once in a movement, you would learn who is friend and who is
> foe. Student-peasantry-workers are all oppressed somehow or
> other. Perhaps we would not be part of the real revolutionary
> struggle, but we must integrate with the struggle…you can learn
> some by reading books but you must test those in the light of
> real experience. That is why I used to take part in "go to factory"
> with great eagerness…I repeatedly felt that without practical en-
> gagement and programs, I would never be able to blindly accept
> ideological maxims and theories (of revolution) …I needed
> those experiences. After coming to left politics, and without ex-
> periencing one can never complete oneself.[87]

Towards the end, the USDF failed to understand this anxious subjectivity
of student movements.[88] "People left because it may [have] become unbearable for
one to hear all the time about revolutionary sacrifice, courage; and then feel, you
have to be like that if you are in the organization. What do I do, if I am not that
courageous? Does revolution have any space for me?", quipped an erstwhile sym-
pathizer.[89] Ultimately, the USDF failed as an organization. Indeed, rather than help-
ing members "endure experiences that would otherwise be outwardly unbearable",
the USDF itself became an unendurable experience.[90]

**Towards a Conclusion: The USDF An Experiment and Contemporary Stu-
dent Movements**
I adopted the strategy of letting my respondents explain the failure of USDF, be-
cause I hope to reveal a paradox at the centre of the USDF core ideology. It appears
that despite their critical reflection on their "wrong" mobilization and politicization
practices—deserting the campuses—senior activists of USDF failed to learn polit-
ical lessons from it. The USDF continued to locate the question of social cleavages,

power, and powerlessness at the level of the crises of youth—students representing a young generation—and society. Erstwhile, the USDF leaders' response to *#Hokkolorob* or any similar kinds of student mobilization, which were spontaneous and upheld a principle of distancing from "old fashioned" politics, were typically marked by critical distancing. The movements are labelled either as postmodern or as the expressions of new middle class (NSM) aspirations. One leader argued, "a large section of the Bengali middle class (or Bhadralok) now has [a] real stake in the [neoliberal, globalized economic] system. Instead of being critical of the system, now they are eager to reform the system, which provides opportunity for them."[91] Though it is not the case that all these activists hold the same opinion about *#HokKolorob*, nonetheless, there is an accepted consensus. For these activists, coupled with the demise of an organization such as USDF, the dynamics of such movements is determined by an "ideological void." On the one hand, these movements fail to decipher the deeper political and economic transformations. On the other hand, these movements usurp progressive voices which stand in solidarity with the struggling masses as was the case during Singur, Nandigram, and Lalgarh. The USDF should be subject to the same criticism that they bring against other forms of mobilization—an ideological void. Leaving aside the long tradition of scrutinizing the question of ideology in Marxist philosophy and praxis, we can describe the void as an inability to raise and address the following questions: what kind of antagonisms and skewed distribution of power is/ought to be the object of contemporary student movements? How has the university become the battleground for democracy?

Throughout this paper, I have argued that the historical trajectory of student movements in India is characterized by a political subjective articulation whereas students, as a special group of citizens questioned the logic of nation building on behalf of the masses, subjects by obedience. Unfortunately, as I have mentioned before, this political articulation, based on an imagination of egalitarian order, also meant that there were categories of exclusion from the political imagination, such as caste and gender. Thus, universities are not simply a battleground between the state and students, they are a battleground rife with internal contradictions predicated on class, caste and gender. The question of exclusion or subjection is no longer located outside the campus and in the society. It is internal to campus democracy itself. With respect to the place of caste as a political question in the student movements in JNU, Singh and Dasgupta argue:

> BAPSA and many other Ambedkarite forums refused to be led by the Left, and persistently sought to assert an independent ideological-political identity, promising to provide a new direction to student politics. The BAPSA [Birsa Ambedkar Phule Students Association] and other Ambedakarite forums characterised the left and right formations on the Indian political spectrum as just

two faces of the hegemonic Brahmanical social and political order. [92]

On the other hand, since 2014, universities under the BJP's regime have witnessed the intensification of (de)politicization by domination. This intensification has led Rosinka Chaudhuri, a cultural studies scholar, to equate students with stateless migrants and argue that "…the students of India, citizens of the country who, at the time in a minority in relation to the reigning political dispensation, were treated by their own government almost as stateless migrants are dealt with by the nation-states that seek to contain them."[93] This lack of agency is no longer limited to the suffering masses, but it is a burning issue for students too.

Singh and Dasgupta mention a judgment by the Delhi High court regarding JNU-row. The judge said, "Students like [Kanhaiya Kumar] were (suffering from) 'infection' which required 'surgical intervention', even 'amputation' before such infections could become an 'epidemic.'"[94] The judge used the term "epidemic", but, from the works of Michel Foucault, we have learned that this apprehension is rather an endemic—an internal threat to nation as a Population. So, when democratic dissent in campuses is exceptionalized, it creates a racist state which seeks to extend its biopower to the extreme. Because making life of the Population is the goal, letting a part of it die—an amputation—is a legitimate option.[95] Thus universities have become—to recall Timothy Mitchell—a frontier. By establishing a territorial boundary around it, enclosing a population, controlling its movement through regulation and discipline, the state seeks to redefine nation and establish itself as a state above and over it.[96] It is also in this sense, that the university has become a battleground, for not only campus democracy, but for democracy itself. Students are no longer young citizens who will be the "vanguard" of the people. Students themselves are now subjects.

USDF activists, critically looking back at their unsuccessful political organization, fail again to acknowledge this new set of political lessons. They continue to uphold, as we have seen from their responses, a vanguardist imagination. In recent times, they have distanced themselves from thinking of students as a potential revolutionary subject. They show a willingness to accept students as a political category in and of themselves—with its specific set of subjective articulations and ontological desires. Nonetheless, former USFD members continue to hold the view, in the last instance, that student movements must represent the people and people's struggle. In other words, student, as a political subject must accept an egalitarian vision of society as their ultimate principle of politics. However, irony lies in the fact that today student movements are always constituted as such. The political issue for student movements has moved beyond campus democracy, it is now about democracy for society as a whole.

The aim of this paper is not to dismiss USDF's criticism entirely. It may be useful to think of their criticisms at the level of politics. If student movements are

one of the most productive and hopeful moments in the Indian political landscape today, it is because their battles are not a mere question of externality. They are confronting similar contradictions internally, which expands the scope of the political and politicization. At the same time, these contradictions are grounds for crises as well. Pinjra Tod (Break The Cage) is an example of one of these crises. Based on issues with hostels giving curfews for women and curtailing women's movement in public spaces, the movement emerged from Jamia Milia Islamia University, New Delhi. It soon spread to various university campuses, such as Delhi University, and spread further across campuses throughout the country. The scope of the movement expanded during the anti-Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) protests in 2019 as activists from the organization joined the protests of Muslim women against the CAA. The protests grew so volatile that two affiliated activists were arrested. However, Pinjra Tod may have faced a more important crisis from within when a group of activists left the organization alleging undemocratic functioning and exclusionary practices of its leadership on the grounds of race, religion, and caste.[97] Although it has implications for the political, the crises emerged on the ground of politics—organization, mobilization, and its institutionalization of spaces for grievances and internal protests. Given this, the question looming before these student movements, such as Pinjra Tod, is how should we engage productively with grievances and protests that emerged within the organization in-line with new antagonisms and orientations of power and powerlessness?

Does an organization like the USDF have insights about facing such crises to offer? We can only offer a speculation. Prathama Banerjee points out that the nation has been the most enduring form of "people" as it comes to be concretized in the state form.[98] So, to engage in a battle, with the state and the collective political subject—namely a "nation"—that the state claims to represent, is to articulate a collective political subject differently. Singh and Dasgupta write, "Movements like that at JNU try to make possible a vision of a different country, where the difference is a condition for the unity of its people."[99] However, as Banerjee alerts us, such collective political subjectivity also requires the creation of "institutional complexes" to counter the state form and state-power. I see relevance of the political lessons from left ideology-based movements, such as the USDF here. As an experiment, the USDF demonstrated the willingness to interrogate the limitations of an organization like RSF, deeply entrenched in Maoist party-formation with vague notion of new democratic revolution.[100] USDF is an experiment, worthy of our attention, because as a political organization it recognized "historical configuration of anthropological differences" in the contemporary West Bengal.[101] Though, admittedly, it failed to sustain an openness to anthropological differences towards the end. Second, it may also be the case that in a battle for democracy, it will not be sufficient to build, what Balibar refers to as "counter-society." It may require a strategy of "counter-power"—an organized capacity to oppose the state, in its ideological and repressive forms.[102] To that extent, I believe, studying the USDF holds value for

looking at contemporary movements.

Besides Kanhaiya Kumar, two of the most (in)famous student activists in India today, are Umar Khalid and Anirban Bhattacharya. It is notable that both activists were once part of the Democratic Student Union (DSU), at JNU. Similar to the USDF, the DSU is a left, radical political leaning organization. Months before the JNU row in 2016, they exited this organization protesting against the patriarchal understanding and functioning of CPI (Maoist) on issues of gender and sexuality. After their release from prison, they became founding members of an organization called the Bhagat Singh Ambedkar Student Organization (BASO). The organization pledges to carry forward Bhagat Singh's political principles, an Indian revolutionary who committed to fight the British colonial forces as part of an anti-imperialist struggle, and the B.R. Ambedkar's political project of annihilation of caste. BASO is restricted to the JNU campus alone with a handful of activists. Its political impact should not be overestimated. In fact, one may even question whether their decision to found an organization on the principle of integrating class and the caste struggle is because of a conscious political decision. Rather, it is possible, that it is out of compulsion due to the growing assertion of Dalit Bahujan within student movements.[103] At the same time, it is indicative of a larger trend nonetheless.[104] The student and youth activists in India are now actively thinking about how to organize Dalit and class-based mobilizations—acknowledging their anthropological differences—in a productive relation of dialectical *oscillation*, instead of unity.

NOTES

[1] Many instances of student mobilizations mentioned in the essay are best described as 'student protests.' However, for the sake of clarity, I use the term 'student movements' uniformly throughout the essay. Only while describing a particular instance of a mobilization, I retain the term, protest.

[2] For a critical discussion on education policies and recommendations, see P.K. Vijayan, "Privatising Minds: New Education policies in India," in *Academic Labour, Unemployment and Global Higher Education: Neoliberal Policies of Funding and Management*, eds. Suman Gupta, Jernej Habjan, and Hrvoje Tutek (UK: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), 57-78.

[3] I do not deny the importance of such a vantage point given that many protests in Indian universities, in recent times, are against fee-hikes, the steep rise in hostel charges, defunding of scholarships, etc..

[4] Supriya Chaudhuri, "On Making Noise: Hokkolorob and its place in Indian student movements," *Postcolonial Studies* 22, no. 1 (January 20, 2019), 1-15.

[5] My distinction is indebted to the insights offered by Prathama Banerjee in her recent book. She argues, Western European philosophies have always privileged the political over politics. The former is a domain of the philosophical thinking, whereas the latter pertains to activities ranging from legislation to voting. I use the distinction throughout this essay. However, I understand that these two categories are constitutive of each other; cannot be separated and/or one privileged over the other. See, Prathama Banerjee, *Elementary Aspects of the Political: Histories from the Global South* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020).

[6] See Etienne Balibar, *Citizenship* (UK; Polity Press, 2015), 99; Wendy Brown, "American Nightmare: Neoliberalism, Neoconservatism, and De-Democratization," *Political Theory* 34, no. 6 (2006), 692.

[7] Adrienne Cooper, *Sharecropping and Sharecroppers' Struggles in Bengal, 1930-1950* (New Delhi: K.P. Bagchi and Company, 1988).

[8] Sumanta Banerjee, *In the Wake of Naxalbari: A History of the Naxalite Movement in India* (Kolkata: Subarnarekha, 1980).

[9] Sumanta Banerjee, "A Political Cul-de-sac: CPI(M)'s Tragic Denouement," *Economic and Political Weekly,* 43, no. 42 (2008): 12-15; D. Bandyopadhyay, "Singur: What Happened, What Next and Time to Pay the Cost," *Economic and Political Weekly* 43, no. 48 (2018): 13-16.

[10] See, Amit Bhattacharya, *Singur to Lalgarh via Nandigram: Rising Flames of People's Anger Against Displacement, Destitution and State Terror* (Ranchi: Visthapan Virodhi Jan Vikas Andolan, 2009a); Amit Bhattyacharya, *Singur to Lalgarh via Nandigram: Rising Flames of People's Anger Against Displacement, Destitution and State Terror (Update-2)* (Ranchi: Visthapan Virodhi Jan Vikas Andolan, 2009b). To some extent ideologically partisan, Bhattacharya draws from first-hand accounts of these movements from the vantage point of an academic and an activist.

[11] Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015)*,* 30.

[12] Lorenzo Cini and Cesar Guzmán-Concha, "Student movements in the age of austerity. The cases of Chile and England," *Social Movement Studies* 16, no. 5 (2017): 623-628. 10.1080/14742837.2017.1331122

[13] Maria Kousis, "The Spatial Dimensions of the Greek Protest Campaign against the Troika's Memoranda and Austerity, 2010-2013," in *Street Politics in the Age of Austerity*, eds. Marcos Ancelovici, Pascale Dufour and Héloïse Nez (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016), 147-173; Héloïse Nez, "'We Must Register a Victory to Continue Fighting' Locating the Action of the Indignados in Madrid," in *Street Politics in the Age of Austerity*, eds. Marcos Ancelovici, Pascale Dufour and Héloïse Nez (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016), 121-145; Anne Kaun, "Narrating Protest: Silenced Stories of Europe in Occupy Stockholm and Occupy Latvia," in *Europe Faces Europe: Narratives from its Eastern Half,* ed. Johan Fornäs (Bristol: Intellect, 2017), 133-152; Daniel P. Ritter, "A spirit of Maidan? Contentious escalation in Ukraine," in *Global Diffusion of Protest, Riding the Protest Wave in the Neoliberal Crisis*, ed. Donatella dela Porta (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), 191-213.

[14] Brown, *Undoing the Demos,* 27.

[15] Ignacia Perugorría, Michael Shalev, and Benjamín Tejerina, "The Spanish Indignados and Israel's Social Justice Movement: The Role of Political Cleavages in Two Large-Scale Protests," in *Politics in the Age of Austerity Street,* eds. by Marcos Ancelovici, Pascale Dufour, and Héloïse Nez (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016), 94.

[16] Anthony D'Andrea, "2013 Protests in Brazil: The Kite and the Byte in New Forms of Popular Mobilization," *Anthropological Quarterly* 87, no. 3 (2014): 937–938.

[17] Todd Gitlin, "Occupy's predicament: the moment and the prospects for the movement," *British Journal of Sociology* 64, no. 1 (2013); Craig Calhoun, "Occupy Wall Street in perspective," *British Journal of Sociology* 64, no. 1 (2013): 1.

[18] For example, protests in Venezuela or Bulgaria were primarily a confrontation with the state. See, Juan Masullo, "Making sense of "La Salida" Challenging left-wing control in Venezuela," in *Global Diffusion of Protest, Riding the Protest Wave in the Neoliberal Crisis*, ed. Donatella dela Porta (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), 85-112; Julia Rone, "Left in translation The curious absence of austerity frames in the 2013 Bulgarian protests," in *Global Diffusion of Protest, Riding the Protest Wave in the Neoliberal Crisis*, ed. Donatella dela Porta (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), 137-166.

[19] For a concise account of the events and evolving relationship between student, university, and Indian democracy, see Sandipto Dasgupta, "The Fight for India's democracy, From the University to the Streets," *The Wire*, January 12, 2020, https://thewire.in/politics/india-democracy-protests-university.

[20] Gaurav J. Pathania, *The University as a Site of Resistance: Identity and Student Politics* (India: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[21] These observations are drawn from my participation in these protests or close interactions with activists from both campuses.

[22] Jawaharlal Nehru University Students Association (JNUSU) remains the most important organ of student politics on campus. However, it is because, besides an institutional body, JNUSU has always functioned as a political platform engaging with students' diverse opinions through general body meetings; or contesting ideologies through novel political practices such as all organization meetings.

[23] Rajarshi Dasgupta, "#HOKKOLOROB: The Politics of Making Noise," *Kafila*, September 29, 2014, https://kafila.online/2014/09/29/hokkolorob-the-politics-of-making-noise-rajarshi-dasgupta.

[24] Dasgupta, "#HOKKOLOROB."

[25] Chaudhuri, "On making noise," 9.

[26] Dasgupta, "#HOKKOLOROB."

[27] Phillip G. Altbach, *Student Politics in Bombay* (Calcutta: Asia Publishing House, 1968), 1-21.

[28] Ghanshyam Shah, *Protest Movements in Two Indian States: A Study of the Gujarat and Bihar Movement* (Delhi: Ajanta Publications, 1977), 21.

[29] Jawaharlal Nehru was the first prime minister of India. It is widely discussed how his vision was grounded by both carving out a secular nation amidst a population divided by castes, religious communities, and class inequalities and on the other hand, rapid industrialization as a vector of development.

[30] Shah, *Protest Movements in Two Indian States*, 86.

[31] Suniti Ghosh, *Naxalbari: Ekti Mulyayan* (Kolkata: People's Book Society, 2010).

[32] Gail Omvedt, "Ambedkar and After: The Dalit Movement in India," in *Social Movements and the State*, ed. by Ghanshyam Shah (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2002), 301–304.

[33] Tharaileth K. Oommen, *Protest and Change: Studies in Social Movements* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1990), 105.

[34] Andrew Feenberg and Jim Freedman, *When Poetry Ruled the Streets French May Events of 1968* (Albany: State University of New York, 2001), 33.

[35] Alexander Van den Hoeven, "Mario Savio's Speech at Sproul Hall Steps, December 2, 1964," YouTube Video, 7:41, n.d., http://www.youtube.com/watch v=fYSY2ohHFnQ. Accessed on July 23, 2020.

[36] Ranabir Samaddar, "Banglar Bidrohi Jubo-Chatra Andolon: 1966-1970," in *Sattar Dasak (Vol. III.): Shaat-Sattarer Chatra Andolon*, ed. Anil Aharya (Kolkata: Anustup, 2012), 171.

[37] Joao Biehl, Byron Good, and Arthur Kleinman. "Introduction: Rethinking Subjectivity," in *Subjectivity: Ethnographic Investigations*, eds. Joao Biehl, Byron Good, and Arthur Kleinman (Berkeley, USA: The University of California Press, 2007), 5.

[38] Biehl, Good, and Kleinman, "Rethinking Subjectivity," 23.

[39] Mostafa Rejai, and Cynthia H. Enole, "Nation-state and State-nations," *International Studies Quarterly* 13, no. 2 (1969).

[40] Sherry B. Ortner, *Anthropology and Social Theory: Culture, Power, and the Acting Subject* (London: Duke University Press, 2006), 110.

[41] See, Partha Chatterjee, "Development Planning and the Indian State," in *Empire and Nation: Selected Essays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 245-247.

[42] I have intentionally left out a discussion on student movements in the northeast part of India. It merits a separate discussion owing to their regional character. Grouping them with "mainstream" student movements would omit crucial nuances and complexities specific to these movements. Nonetheless, I believe, provisionally, my contention holds true for a few of these movements as well. For example, the Assam movement (1979-1985) is based on such "unity of community" between students and peasantry. See, Samir Kumar Das, "On the Question of Students' Hegemony: A study of the Assam Movement (1979-1985)," in *Student Power in North-East India: Understanding Student Movements*, ed. Apurba K. Baruah (New Delhi: Regency Publication, 2002), 132-148.

[43] Etienne Balibar, *Citizen Subject: Foundation for Philosophical Anthropology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 26.

[44] Balibar, *Citizen Subject*, 24.

[45] Balibar, *Citizen Subject*, 31.

[46] Balibar, *Citizen Subject*, 34-35.

[47] Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya, "Left in the Lurch: The Demise of the World's Longest Elected Regime," *Economic and Political Weekly* 45, no. 3 (2010): 51-59.

[48] Atul Kohli, *The State and Poverty in India: The Politics of Reform* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 117; John Harris, "What is Happening in Rural West Bengal? Agrarian Reform, Growth and Distribution," *Economic and Political Weekly* 28, no. 24 (1993): 1237-1247.

[49] Harris, "What is happening in Rural West Bengal?"; Dipankar Basu, "Political Economy of 'Middleness': Behind Violence in Rural Bengal," *Economic and Political Weekly* 36, no. 16 (2001): 1333-1344.

[50] Banerjee, "A Political Cul-de-sac," 13.

[51] Basu, "Political Economy."

[52] It is important to note, CPI (M) initiated attempts to lure investment and restructure West Bengal economy in line with a neoliberal ethos—mostly to win over middle-class support— as early as the mid-1990s. See, Ritajyoti Bandopadhyay, "Hawkers' movement in Kolkata, 1975-2007," *Economic and Political Weekly* XLV, no. 17 (2009): 116-119.

[53] For a comprehensive discussion on CPI (M)'s ideological shift towards a neoliberal economy, see Bidyut Chakrabarty, "The Left Front's 2009 Lok Sabha Poll Debacle in West Bengal, India Prospective Causes and Future Implications," *Asian Survey* 51, no. 2 (2011): 290–310.

[54] For a critique of policies related to Special Economic Zone, adopted by the In-

dian government post 2005, see Preeti Sampat, "Special Economic Zones in India," *Economic and Political Weekly* 43, no. 28 (2008): 25-27, 29.

55 Banerjee, "A Political Cul-de-sac"; Bandyopadhyay, "Singur".

56 Partha Chatterjee refers to such extra-legal political economic system as "illegal." See, Partha Chatterjee, "The Coming Crisis in West Bengal," *Economic and Political Weekly* 44, no. 9 (2009): 42–45.

57 Partha S. Banerjee and Dayabati Roy, "Behind the Present Peasant Unrest in West Bengal," *Economic and Political Weekly* 42, no. 22 (2007): 2048.

58 The cadres of CPI (M) who held the extra-legal structure of domination together in everyday life. CPI (M) however denied the existence of the militia.

59 Banerjee, "A Political Cul-de-sac."

60 Interview with Sushil, March 27, 2014.

61 Alpa Shah, "In search of certainty in revolutionary India," *Dialectical Anthropology* 33, no. 3/4 (2009): 273.

62 Shah, "In search of certainty," 103.

63 Interview with Shomit, May 22, 2014.

64 During my fieldwork, I have come across several similar instances of in-fighting within a ruling-organization on various campuses.

65 Interview with Shomit, May 22, 2014.

66 Craig Jeffrey conceptualizes it as a politics of waiting among young students in Uttar Pradesh, India, few of whom opt for "improvised politics" as a makeshift career choice. See, Craig Jeffrey, *Timepass: Youth, Class, and the Politics of Waiting in India* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

67 See, Henry Lefebvre, "Reflections on the Politics of Space", in *State, Space, World: Selected Essays*, eds. Neil Brenner and Stuart Elden (London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 169.

68 Balibar, *Citizen Subject*.

69 Interview with Ramen, September 9, 2014.

70 Interview with Ramen, September 9, 2014.

71 Interview with Sushil, March 27, 2014.

72 Interview with Sushil, March 27, 2014.

73 Chaudhuri, "On making noise," 7.

74 This analysis borrows from the distinction that Michel Foucault introduced between domination as capacity and power as relation. At the same time, he argued that both, along with relations of communication constitute "blocks" or regulated, concerted systems. See, Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," in *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984,* Vol. 3, ed. James D. Faubion (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2002), 338.

75 See Kavita Krishnan, "By trying to silence campus activism, education policy report is ignoring voices of India's students," *Scroll.in*, June 24, 2016, https://scroll.in/article/810505/by-trying-to-silence-activism-the-education-policy-report-is-turning-a-deaf-ear-to-students-voices. Also see M. Ambani and K.

Birla, *Report on a Policy Framework for Reform in Education* (New Delhi: Prime Minister's Council on Trade and Industry, 2000); J.M. Lyngdoh, "Report of The Committee to Frame Guidelines on Students' Union Elections in Colleges/Universities" (Lyngdoh Committee Report), 2016, www.education.gov.in/en/report-committee-frame-guidelines-students-union-elections-collegesuniversities-lyngdoh-committee.

[76] I am raising this question strictly from the vantage point of left and progressive protests. Student activists, belonging to the right and centrist organizations require a separate investigation.

[77] Shah, "In search of Certainty."

[78] I shall refrain from naming the political party for the sake of protecting my respondents from further exposure to the law. A few of them are under trial.

[79] Paul Navarro, "A Maoist Counterpoint: Peruvian Maoism Beyond Sendero Luminoso," *Latin American Perspectives* 37, no. 1 (2010): 165.

[80] Mayer N. Zald and Roberta Ash, "Social Movement Organizations: Growth, Decay and Change," *Social Forces* 44, no. 3 (1966): 327–341.

[81] Donatella Della Porta, and Mario Diani, *Social Movements: An Introduction (*Australia: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 137

[82] Interview with Saptarshi, November 20, 2014.

[83] For a detailed ethnographic study of ambivalence and contradictions inaugurated by neoliberal globalization among the Bengali lower middle class, see Ruchira Ganguly-Scrase and Timothy J. Scrase, *Globalisation and Middle Classes in India: The Social and Cultural Impacts of Neoliberal Reforms* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009). For a discussion on the politics of the new middle class in India see, Leela Fernandes and Patrick Heller, "Hegemonic Aspirations," *Critical Asian Studies*, 38, no. 4 (2006), 495-522. My respondent's observations echo the findings of Fernandes and Heller's study. Also, his observations can be fully appreciated in light of Fernandes and Heller's argument that these two tendencies—neoliberal aspirations and cultural conservatism—are not contradictory. New middle-class politics revolved around a version of cultural conservatism or illiberalism which allowed the dominant section of the middle class to secure their interests and aspirations in the era of neoliberalism. At the same time, conservatism maintained unity within the middle classes, otherwise highly fragmented and with diverse interests. Finally, such a unity, mobilized by the new middle class allowed to distance themselves from the lower classes in India.

[84] Interview with Ritam, May 15, 2014.

[85] Interview with Amitava, November 17, 2014.

[86] Interview with Amitava, November 17, 2014.

[87] Interview with Abhiroop, November 10, 2014.

[88] Interview with Abhiroop, November 10, 2015; "Go to factory" is a political practice of providing members and sympathizers opportunities to visit factory sites, stay with workers' families, and gain insights into the living and working conditions of the workers. The choice of a site is guided by either the Maoist

Party's presence in the area or any worker's protests going on in a factory. In the latter case, members and sympathizers also participate in the protest as a show of solidarity.

[89] Ortner, *Anthropology and Social Theory*, 120.

[90] Interview with Pratyush, March 12, 2014.

[91] Biehl, Good, and Kleinman, "Rethinking Subjectivity," 14.

[92] Fieldnotes, October 18, 2014.

 Mohinder Singh, and Rajarshi Dasgupta, "Exceptionalising Democratic Dissent: A study of the JNU event and its representations," *Postcolonial Studies* 22, no. 1: 72.

[93] Rosinka Chaudhuri, "Questions of minority, agency and voice: student protests in India in 2016," *Postcolonial Studies* 21, no. 3: 339.

[94] Singh and Dasgupta, "Exceptionalising Democratic Dissent," 67.

[95] Michel Foucault, "*Society must be Defended": Lectures at the College de France* (New York: Picador, 2003), 239-264.

[96] Timothy Mitchell, "Society, Economy, and the State Effect," in *The Anthropology of the State: A Reader*, eds. Aradhana Sharma and Akhil Gupta (UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 180.

[97] LiveWire Staff, "Why Some Bahujan, Muslim and Tribal Students are Quitting Pinjra Tod," *LiveWire*, February 18, 2019, https://livewire.thewire.in/gender-and-sexuality/pinjra-tod-your-time-is-up-why-bahujan-tribal-and-muslim-women-are-quitting-the-collective.

[98] Banerjee, *Elementary Aspect of the Political*, 165.

[99] Singh and Dasgupta, "Exceptionalising Democratic Dissent," 74.

[100] Banerjee discusses a similar vagueness in the communist party's utopia of "dictatorship of proletariat." See, Banerjee, *Elementary Aspects of the Political*, 165-166.

[101] See Etienne Balibar, "The Genre of the Party," *Viewpoint Magazine*, March 15, 2017, https://viewpointmag.com/2017/03/15/the-genre-of-the-party/.

[102] "Counter-society" is "the ensemble of forms of resistance to exploitation, solidarity in struggles, and confrontations with the state, church, and 'social policies' of the bourgeoisie in determinate national conditions." On the other hand, "counter-power" refers to the "capacity to oppose itself to the state and the ruling class." See, Balibar. "The Genre of the Party."

[103] Based on participatory observation, drawn from my participation in students protests in JNU during 2016-17.

[104] There is now a renewed interest in the slogan "Jai Bhim, Laal Saalam." See, G. Sampath, "When Jai Bhim meets Lal Salaam", *The Hindu*, December 1, 2016, https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/When-Jai-Bhim-meets-Lal-Salaam/article16070409.ece. However, it should be highlighted too, that the political project is not uncontested.