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Indian Student Protests and the Nationalist-Neoliberal Nexus

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Abstract: This paper discusses the wider relevance of recent, 2014 and onwards, student protests in Indian higher education institutions, with the global neoliberal reorganisation of the sector in mind. The argument is tracked from specific high-profile junctures of student protests toward their grounding in the national/state level situation and then their ultimate bearing on the prevailing global condition. In particular, this paper considers present-day management practices and their relationship with projects to embed conservative and authoritarian norms in the higher education sector.

Keywords: management, university, fascism, state violence, austerity

The burgeoning tide of student and academic protests in India need to be taken out of their apparent nation-centred moorings and understood in a wider context. Such resistance has been simmering throughout the 2000s, and has exploded into the public view in 2015 and 2016. The issues at stake – what the protests stand for and what they stand against – are of universal import. Their ideological nuances resonate everywhere, and the conditions which generate them are evidenced to some degree ubiquitously ... globally. These protests offer a case for analysis and engagement with critical issues of our time: the character of exclusionary nationalism, the consanguinity of neoliberal and nationalist governance, and the global neoliberal takeover of the academy.

In the following the contexts of the ongoing protests are outlined briefly from the specific to the general: in terms, first, of specific high-profile “events”, then locating those within a broader view of student activism in a national or state context, and finally drawing some lines towards understanding them in a global context.

The Context of Two Cases

The Indian Penal Code of 1860, Section-124-A-Sedition, reads: “Whoever, by words, either spoken or written, or by signs, or by visible representation, or otherwise, brings or attempts to bring into hatred or contempt, or excites or attempts to excite disaffection towards the Government established by law in India, shall be punished with imprisonment for life, to

which fine may be added, or with imprisonment which may extend to three years, to which fine may be added, or with fine”. This particular section was enacted in 1870, not long after the anti-colonial Rebellion of 1857 and consequently the establishment of direct British rule in 1858. It stayed in force after independence in 1947 with minor amendments (replacing or deleting phrases like “British India” and “Her Majesty” and “Crown Representative”). It can obviously be misused to restrict the freedom of speech enjoined in the Constitution of India (1950), especially any expression of dissent and protest¹. It has been used to such effect with increasing frequency of late².

The sedition law was used to arrest Kanhaiya Kumar, Student Union President and Ph.D. student of the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), Delhi, on 12 February 2016, for allegedly raising “anti-national slogans” and participating in an “anti-national” discussion event in campus on 9 February. Complaints had been registered by a Member of Parliament of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and representatives of the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP)³. An investigation into whether Kumar and other JNU students had indeed raised such slogans, and what the remit of being “anti-national” consists in, is being most thoroughly undertaken as this is written⁴. Irrespective of this investigation’s final findings, the nationalist character of university authorities, the current government, the

¹ This possibility has long been acknowledged in judicial circles. In the first report on the Indian Penal Code by the Law Commission of India (1971), this section was left untouched with the observation: “Section 124A defines the offence of sedition. Despite the umbra of repression which a mention of this section is likely to evoke in one’s mind, it is a provision which has to find a place in the Penal Code” (p.146).

² According to a news article: “It is a charge used frequently in the country, with government data showing that IPC section 124A (sedition) was invoked 47 times in 2014, making up 27 per cent of all charges under the category ‘offences against the state’” (Tiwari 2016). Recent cases have involved sedition charges being brought against: journalist Manoj Shinde in August 2006 for using “abusive words” about Narendra Modi, then Chief Minister of Gujarat; *Times of India* editor Bharat Desai in June 2008 for publishing articles questioning the appointment of the Ahmedabad Police Commissioner (under the jurisdiction of the state government under Modi); author Arundhati Roy in October 2010 for saying that Kashmir had not been an integral part of India; cartoonist Aseem Trivedi in September 2012 for insulting national emblems in a series of anti-corruption cartoons; eleven protesters in Kudankulam in March 2012 for objecting to the construction of a nuclear power plant; 67 Kashmiri students in a university in Meerut in March 2014 for cheering the Pakistan team while watching a cricket match on television.

³ ABVP is the student wing of the Hindu fundamentalist organisation Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), which provides the muscle and much of the ideological underpinnings of BJP, and works alongside and within the BJP’s youth wing, Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha.

⁴ Various timelines in news outlets give usefully succinct accounts of the sequence of events that led to the charges, and of the aftermath that is sketchily covered here: in *Catch News* (catchnews.com 22 February 2016), *Vagabomb* (vagabomb.com, Bhaskar Chawla, 2 March 2016), *DNA* (dnaindia.com 3 March 2016).

police, the mainstream media, and the judiciary has been thrown into a stark light in this context.

The investigation of the students' alleged "anti-national" activities by JNU authorities, under a Vice Chancellor who took up his post on 26 January 2016, has consistently supported the allegations at the expense of academic interests and the university's duty to protect students. On the way to being first presented in the Court on 15 February 2016, Kumar and his supporters were beaten up by a group of lawyers chanting nationalist slogans. The lawyer leading this group spoke to the media of his part in this with righteous pride, and proceedings against him have been, to put it mildly, sluggish. The police investigation of the sedition charges thereafter often descended into farce, including, as the Human Resource Development Minister reportedly observed with due earnestness, searching for condoms in student refuse to establish their moral character. The mainstream media circulated a video purporting to prove Kumar's culpability; it proved to be doctored before long. The media carried reports that the Chief Minister of Delhi, the leader of the national opposition party, and the leader of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) were also to be indicted for sedition because they had spoken in support of Kumar. When conditional six-month bail was granted to Kumar eventually on 2 March, the High Court Judge Pratibha Rani's statement⁵ began with a quotation from a nationalist song; suggested that the raising of anti-national slogans by these students was possible since "they are in this safe environment because our forces are there at the battle field situated at the highest altitude of the world where even the oxygen is so scarce" and that this "may have demoralizing effect on the family of those martyrs who returned home in coffin draped in tricolor"; and observed that she regarded such "anti-national" slogans as symptomatizing

a kind of infection from which such students are suffering which needs to be controlled/cured before it becomes an epidemic. [...]. Whenever some infection is spread in a limb, effort is made to cure the same by giving antibiotics orally and if that does not work, by following second line of treatment. Sometimes it may require surgical intervention also. However, if the infection results in infecting the limb to the extent that it becomes gangrene, amputation is the only treatment.

The ruling enjoined on Kumar that, among other conditions, "he will make all efforts within his power to control anti-national activities in the campus", and exhorted JNU management and faculty to ensure that students "can contribute to the growth of the nation". On being released, Kumar made a defiant speech from the JNU campus on 3 March, which included a lucid and wide-ranging critique of prevailing social conditions and of the ruling political dispensation⁶. It was covered on primetime television and went viral through social networks.

⁵ Kanhaiya Kumar versus State of NCT of Delhi, High Court decision by Judge Prathibha Rani of 2 March 2016, W.P.(CRL) 558/2016 & Crl.M.A. Nos.3237/2016 & 3262/2016.

⁶ A full video recording of the speech can be viewed on the NDTV channel with a text summary in English: <http://www.ndtv.com/india-news/full-speech-kanhaiya-kumar-out-on-bail-speaks-of-azadi-on-jnu-campus-1283740>. A recording is also found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pcOpWw-KYoU>. The many abusive comments that are found beneath the latter are characteristic of extremist

This immediately led to a regional ABVP leader offering a monetary reward to anyone who would cut off Kumar's tongue, and an obscure rightwing group offering more money for his assassination; proceedings against them have been, typically, reluctant. As various accusations against and condemnations of Kumar continued to appear in the mainstream media thereafter, the case became a rallying point for protests in universities around India, and JNU became a centre for discussion and debate on the character of contemporary Indian nationalism⁷.

In his speech, Kumar expressed solidarity with another cause of student unrest that was unravelling in Hyderabad Central University: the suicide of Ph.D. student Rohith Vemula⁸. Vemula had been active in an organization, the Ambedkar Students Association or ASA (named after the author of the Indian Constitution B.R. Ambedkar, a major intellectual and a Dalit), which, since 1993, has engaged in programmes against discrimination of Dalits (the so-called "untouchable" caste), and on human rights and women's rights issues. A series of confrontations with ABVP members in the university had led the Vice Chancellor P. Appa Rao (appointed on 22 September 2015) to suspend five ASA members including Vemula, remove their access to university accommodation and stop Vemula's scholarship payments in September 2015. The instigation of the Union Minister for Labour and Employment Bandaru Dattatreya (who wrote to the Vice Chancellor condemning "casteist" and "anti-national" ASA students in the university) played a significant part here. In dire financial straits, Vemula committed suicide on 16 January 2016, leaving a note blaming the discriminatory and prejudiced "system" for his death. Protests against the university's decisions spread across India. Amidst widespread condemnation, the Vice Chancellor went on leave by 24 January. Cases were filed against him and Dattatreya. While these were still under investigation, and protests continued, on 21 March Appa Rao resumed his office as Vice Chancellor, seemingly unscathed by accusations and investigations. This exacerbated disaffection among students, confrontations followed, and brutal repression by police and university authorities: numerous students and bystanders were arrested, electricity and water to students' accommodations were cut, food supplies were stopped, and internet connection was blocked. Various activists and student representatives, including Kumar, who appeared in Hyderabad to express solidarity with protesting students there, were refused entry into the university. While the mainstream media and university authorities sought to shift the debate by questioning whether Vemula was Dalit at all, this became another rallying point for student protests – which resurged in universities around the country.

trolls; comments such as these appear numerous with every online news article or video critical of the BJP's policies with a facility for posting comments.

⁷ The views expressed at the time in JNU teach-in sessions organised by protesting professors and students have been documented and collected in Azad et al (2017).

⁸ Two timelines in *The Wire* (thewire.in) cover the events leading up to Vemula's suicide (Vikram Chukka, 19 Jan 2016) and of the conflicts and protests before and after (30 March 2016).

The National/State Context

These two series of “events” are simply the most discussed, the obviously high-profile and intensively mediatized. These are extrapolated from an ongoing continuum of state- and corporation-backed attempts to repress leftwing or liberal students and scholars in Indian higher education and research institutions and a growing current of student and academic resistance. Other such “events” occupied newspapers and news broadcasters at national or regional levels with increasing vehemence in 2014-2016 (after the overwhelmingly BJP-dominated National Democratic Alliance or NDA government came to power), but rooted in developments considerably earlier⁹. More or less independent strands of protests in Delhi University, Jadavpur University, Pune Film and Television Institute of India (FTII), Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Madras, Trivandrum College of Engineering, English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU) Hyderabad,¹⁰ and elsewhere, occupied reporters at this juncture. Various other protests of smaller scale haven’t caught the public eye

⁹ A coherent, initially low-key and gradually intensifying, grumbling of student and academic protests is found since the late 1990s, shortly after subsequent phases of economic liberalization began in 1991, and especially with the rise of the BJP into national politics using Hindu communalism as a mobilizing force (the destruction of the Babri Masjid and riots in 1992 mark a turning point). The “restructuring” of higher education, ushering in a markedly (religious) nationalist and managerial ethos, is easily charted from that indecisive moment in 1997-1999 when a series of Congress- and BJP-led governments rose and fell in quick succession, followed by a stable BJP-dominated government taking office in 1999. It ruled till 2004; then a Congress-led alliance took over till 2014 until the current BJP-dominated alliance was returned firmly in government. Throughout this period, and under both political dispensations (though undoubtedly more aggressively under BJP-led governments), nationalist and managerial restructuring of higher education has worked together and become entrenched. The embedding of nationalist and neoliberal agendas in education (school and university) is analysed in, for instance: SAHMAT 2001; Sundar 2005; Lall 2009; Guichard 2010; Kapoor 2011; in most of the contributions to Gooptu ed. 2013 and in Samaddar and Sen eds. 2012; Gupta 2015, Chs. 7 and 8. To put education within a wider context of the (religious) nationalist agenda, Jaffrelot ed. 2007 is a useful resource.

¹⁰ Brief outlines of the protests at the universities named here are as follows. Delhi University saw a series of protests by teachers and students in 2010-2014 against the ill-conceived imposition of semesterization and then a change of undergraduate programmes from 3 to 4 years by university authorities. Student protests in Jadavpur University since 2014 have been predominantly against the repressive tactics of university authorities, where the VC called the police to deal violently with protesting students. Students at the Pune FTII organised protests in 2015 against the appointment of an ill-qualified actor as Chairman of the Governing Council. Students at IIT Madras have staged protests since 2015 after members of the Ambedkar Periyar Study Circle were expelled by the university for “spreading hatred” towards Prime Minister Narendra Modi. In the Trivandrum College of Engineering, students protested by systematically breaking a curfew imposed on Women’s Hostels by the university in 2015. EFLU Hyderabad students have organised protests since 2015 after eleven students were suspended for criticising the university on Facebook.

significantly. The Rohith Vemula and Kanhaiya Kumar cases in particular have generated a web of student protests which has left scarcely any public university untouched.

A consolidated record of the impetuses and key moments of this ongoing phase of academic protest in India, stemming principally from liberal (which doesn't mean "neoliberal" in the current sense, a distinction clarified below) and leftwing alignments, is yet to be put together¹¹. Contemplating the above sketch of the two most discussed cases gestures towards some of the wider features of this phase.

In a self-evident way, what's underway evidences growing ideological polarization and consequently confrontations, for which the Indian academy is now a significant arena. On the all-too-visible surface, the polarizations and confrontations are principally concerned with identity (focalizing questions of Indianness; religious, racial, caste and gender identities; regional and linguistic allegiances). In this regard, the following points are relevant here with the above cases in view.

1. The student and academic protests are characterized above as grounded in liberal and leftwing alignments; that, however, is too loose a characterization of the ideological basis of resistance. In fact, it cannot be characterized more precisely in ideological terms because those are diverse and variegated. What defines the character of the student and academic protests more clearly at present is what it is up against and opposed to – and that is not ideologically diverse or variegated at all. It is evident in the public ruling of the High Court judge quoted above, in the recourse to sedition laws, in the media and government discourse of "anti-nationalism": an ideology of authoritarian and exclusionary nationalism. This is nationalism as it has appeared in its crudest forms at the most troubled historical junctures anywhere: supremacist and repressive, while courting a rhetoric of inclusiveness and moral rectitude; defining the nation in terms of majority integrities, while "tolerating" diversity so long as minorities behave themselves (or expelling and oppressing and building walls); purifying history and cleansing "leftist and foreign distortions", or putting history in the "right and balanced perspective"; enforcing ritualized and militaristic practices in everyday life, by way of demonstrating "harmony"; claiming cultural and moral superiority over other nations, especially those labelled "Western", and presenting such superiority as "universally" valid; and constituting a cult of the unquestionable

¹¹ In fact, the phase of student unrest and activism in India since the 1990s, not to speak of most recently, has been indifferently analysed in a consolidated fashion – or rather, analyses have seldom extended beyond interventions in newspapers and magazines. The larger context of post-independence student activism till the 1990s can be gauged from literature surveys: Raza and Malhotra (1991) has a section on "student unrest", and Shah (2004) on "student movements". More recent work on this area includes: Ray (1997, focused on the Banaras Hindu University); Kapoor (2004); and Jeffrey (2010), with an anthropological approach, primarily on field work in Uttar Pradesh state – Jeffrey is also the author of several relevant papers.

leader¹². Religious, racist, casteist and patriarchal convictions are coeval with this ideology's exclusionary agenda, though denied whenever expedient. In brief, this passes in India primarily as a majoritarian religious ideology, Hindutva, but in fact it is more than that: it is an extreme nationalist ideology. It is promoted by an alignment which therefore shows all the characteristics of being, and is aptly understood as, fascist¹³. The rise of the BJP since the late 1980s, to its current position as ruling party under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has been on the back of a support base which subscribes to this ideology, bolstered by organized cadres¹⁴. With dominance in government, functionaries in the judiciary, police, media, and other state apparatuses

¹² At various points in the notes above it is apparent that criticising Modi, whether as Chief Minister of Gujarat or now as Prime Minister of India, is a dangerous business. Those who followed the BJP campaign in the 2014 general elections will recall that it was almost entirely personality-led and had little to do with a campaign manifesto. In fact, the BJP manifesto was somewhat indifferently released on 7 April, that is the day polling began and *after* the campaign period ended. A sense of how Modi's status as leader is understood by his followers can be obtained from Jhindal, Agarwal and Sharma eds. (2015), *21 Leadership Lessons of Narendra Damodaran Modi*. This presents Modi as synthesising in his leadership the salutary qualities displayed by, among others, M.K. Gandhi, Napoleon Bonaparte, Nelson Mandela, Deng Xiaoping, Barrack Obama, Winston Churchill, Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, Steve Jobs, Margaret Thatcher, Bill Gates, Warren Buffett, Abraham Lincoln, Aung San Suu Kyi, Chanakya, Franklin Roosevelt. This document would be of interest for discourse analysts: it performs, laboriously but persistently, a uniting of neoliberal and nationalist language usage. The prevailing focalization of "leadership" in business, political and academic circles worldwide as the panacea for all problems inevitably slips into fascist discourse where expedient – I had examined this briefly in Gupta (2012).

¹³ The term "fascist" is not used here as a vaguely insulting one, but in the way it would have been understood by the late 1930s in Europe: a modern form of exclusively defined and aggressive nationalism, grounded in a militaristic organization with a strong (unquestionable) leader – associated predominantly with the regimes of Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler, and, to some extent those of António de Oliveira Salazar, Ioannis Metaxas, Francisco Franco. The exclusionary definition of nationality has come to be strongly associated with Nazi concepts of racial superiority, but could equally be presented in religious, ethno-cultural and other terms. Interestingly, the BJP leader who was instrumental in the party's rise in 1990s national politics, L.K. Advani (2002, Ch.4), had tried to defend the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) from charges of fascism in 1976. The RSS and aligned organizations variously promote an idea of Indian "nationality" in biogenetically described terms, coinciding with religious and ethnic terms. Advani's defence involved circumventing that issue by reading Nazi-fascism as primarily state-authoritarianism which used racism manipulatively. By that reading too, the current ruling political alignment and its functionaries and affiliates could be considered as displaying fascist characteristics.

¹⁴ A great deal of careful, historically informed scholarship charts this, for instance: Basu *et al* (1993); Jaffrelot (1998 and 2010); Hansen (1999); Ghosh (1999); Noorani (2000); Sarkar (2002); Mukherjee, Mukherjee and Mahajan (2008); Guichard (2010); Basu (2015).

have already aligned their interests with this ideology and power structure – the academy is at stake now.

2. The student and academic resistance in question then is best understood as ideologically the *other* of the exclusionary and authoritarian nationalist. That could be thought of as liberal insofar as that involves subscription to some inclusive tenets of individual rights and freedoms, social justice and public interest; and leftwing insofar as that incorporates an analysis of economic and political regimes which underpin the perpetuation of inequalities and a commitment to universal egalitarianism. At various troubled historical junctures putatively liberal and leftwing alignments or regimes have made common ground with fascism, which provides fodder for nationalist denunciations of both. Nevertheless, the inclusive and rational principles which underpin modern pedagogy and scholarship – without concessions to moral, cultural and identitarian high-grounds and boundaries – make the academy a particularly unyielding formation for exclusionary and authoritarian nationalist governance.
3. In the outline of the Kumar and Vemula cases above, it is evident that a newly instituted management structure within universities played a significant role in exacerbating conflict and repressing protests. It is no accident that in both cases very recently installed Vice Chancellors took recourse to, and were supported by, the police, the governmental and the judicial machinery. In fact, this has been a feature of establishment attempts to render the academy compliant with narrow ideologies, especially since the ascent of BJP to power in 2014, but also before that whenever necessary and indeed throughout in post-independence Indian history. The Indian higher education and research sector was structured from inception to be, at the very least formally, constantly subject to political control¹⁵. Given the paucity of academically credible ideologues of the current form of authoritarian nationalism, the governmental strategy since 2014 has been to install persons of doubtful academic credentials into upper management positions in universities and advanced research and pedagogic institutions. This strategy has been under constant scrutiny¹⁶. Through

¹⁵ At the level of the central government, the mechanics and phases of such control can be extrapolated from Singh (2003). The central government's modes of political control for various levels of centrally funded institutions of higher education and research are replicated at the level of state government for state-funded institutions.

¹⁶ A significant number of appointments to key academic positions have caused newsworthy controversies since 2014. Within 2014 itself, such controversial appointments of RSS affiliates and persons with strong BJP links to influential positions included, to name a few: Baldev Sharma as Chairman of the National Book Trust (March 2014); Y. Sudarshan Rao as Director of the Indian Council of Historical Research (July 2014); Chandrakala Padia as Chairperson of the Indian Institute of Advanced Studies (September 2014); Lokesh Chandra as President of the Indian Council of Cultural Relations (October 2014); Girish Chandra Tripathi as Vice Chancellor of Banaras Hindu University (November 2014); Vishram Jamdar as Chairman of the Visvesvaraya National Institute of Technology,

bullying, “strategic planning and visions”, “policy implementation” and spin, this growing stratum of upper management in universities is expected to transform scholarship and pedagogy from within to serve authoritarian nationalism. By simply being appointed, such management functionaries then find themselves (or are used) both as members of governmental committees and commissions which validate education policy at national and regional levels and as executives who thereafter institutionalize those policies. Their appointment then is attended by a string of diktats to instil a nationalist and exclusionary temper in academia: by redesigning curricula, centralizing control of resources, investing in such essentialist nationalist scholarship as can be found, and trying to secure the markers of prestige if not actual credibility for these.

4. Political power works in much the same way at the national level as within academic institutions. The role that ABVP plays in both the above cases is symptomatic of another layer of fascist mechanics: it is a national youth cadre with a pervasive institutional presence. Their representatives appear as guardians of nationalist ideology seemingly from the grassroots of student populations, but whose tactics are devoid of the principles which define *study* (therefore the *student*) – and consist predominantly in intimidation and bullying. The ABVP acts as BJP’s Blackshirts in the academy (that is to say, as representatives of the ruling political party’s main cadre base in the fundamentalist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh [RSS]).
5. An important point that also comes through in the cases outlined above is the complex fissure that Dalits present for the exclusionary nationalist discourse, and the part that caste therefore plays in the student protests. That the protests in the Hyderabad Central University stemmed from attempts to repress members of the Ambedkar Students Association, or in IIT Madras (see note 9) members of the Ambedkar Periyar Study Circle (Periyar E. V. Ramasamy was an activist against caste discrimination) gestures towards the upper caste character of the nationalist forces with which university managements are aligned. In this exclusionary nationalist discourse, the Dalits – whose ideologues have presented a powerful intellectual critique thereof –

Nagpur (November 2014). Such appointments have become routine thereafter and so numerous that they are ceasing to be controversial (Girish Chauhan’s appointment as Chair of the Governing Council at FTII Pune in June 2015, as noted above, aroused students to protest). On the flip side, a series of high-profile disposals (post-holders resigning or being removed or discouraged from continuing) from academically significant positions have also been discussed extensively in news. However, this isn’t simply a matter of appointments and disposals from “leadership” positions. The appointment of board or trust and committee memberships which bear upon policy making has been observed with unease: including in bodies like the Indian Council of Historical Research, National Book Trust, Central Advisory Board of Education, Committees set up by the Human Resource Development Ministry to review the University Grants Commission, those planning the new National Education Policy (since the 1986 policy), etc.

represent a fissure between inclusion within ethno-nationalist descriptions of Hinduness and perpetual customary exclusion within Hindu polities¹⁷. That fissure has dogged higher education policy-making and the lives of universities and institutes persistently¹⁸. In fact, Rohith Vemula's suicide was far from being a singular occurrence in Indian higher education institutions: suicides by Dalit students has been a significant concern since at least 2008, and had featured in government and media reports¹⁹. However, those didn't enter public debate to the extent Vemula's suicide did, and nor were they particularly recalled in the latter debate.

These processes have focalized identity-based discourses as the main register of polarizations and confrontations – indeed of resistance and protest itself. Even with universalist and inclusive tenets, student and academic activists have of late confined their arguments to the precincts of the Indian nation and state territory, as an atypical political, cultural and economic field. In a sense then, the discourse of resistance has met the discourse of nationalism halfway, by addressing predominantly an identity-based discourse. The main debates and contestations appear to revolve around such questions as: what is nationalism?; what does it mean to be Indian or Hindu?; what is the situation of class and caste within India?; how does the Indian situation compare to that of the rest of the world? And they always appear *within* India, seeking solutions to peculiarly Indian problems. But this is, as observed already, on the all-too-visible surface, and perhaps it is a distraction from a deeper phenomenon – or at least revealing of a deeper phenomenon: the global neoliberal takeover of the academy. At any rate, all the above observations are intricately entwined with strategies and policies of neoliberal governance. What we have here then is a seamless convergence of exclusionary nationalist and neoliberal authoritarianism, and it is difficult to tell whether the fascists are piggy-backing on a neoliberal agenda or whether neoliberals are piggy-backing on a fascist agenda²⁰. With the above observations still in view then, a few further points should be made in this respect:

¹⁷ For historically informed overviews of Dalit politics and activism that clarify the current context, see Omvedt (2006 rev. ed.), Rao (2009), and Gundimeda (2016).

¹⁸ On the position of Dalits in Indian higher education, see: Deshpande and Zacharias (2013) and Ovihegan (2015).

¹⁹ Following an investigation set up in 2006, The National Commission for Scheduled Castes (NCSC) produced a *Report on the Incidents of Caste Based Discrimination and Harassment at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences [AIIMS]* (NCSC 2008). Soon after, in 2010 and 2012 respectively, two scheduled caste students of AIIMS committed suicide, Balmukund Bharti and Anil Meena. The high incidence of suicides by Dalit students in prestigious Indian higher education institutions was widely reported at the time and investigated by activist organisations (Subrahmaniam 2011, Gaikwad 2012, Gatade 2012, Raman 2012).

²⁰ Various scholarly books examine the intertwining of nationalist and neoliberal policies in India, e.g.: Corbridge and Harriss (2000); Oza (2006); Mahajan and Jodhka eds. (2010); Ruparelia *et al* eds. (2011); Samaddar and Sen eds. (2012); Gooptu ed. (2013).

1. The dependence on an upper management structure in universities to engineer changes, to devise and execute policies, does not merely derive from an existing mode of state control and ministerial interference. It is now nuanced and honed by corporate and bureaucratic practices which are typical of neoliberal governance. The observations made above on leadership, the structure of policy making and the implementation of policies are all in that direction.
2. Drives to transform pedagogy and scholarship in the direction of authoritarian nationalism have generally been sold by using neoliberal tactics of citing metrics, target-setting and cost-accounting rationales (on which more in the next section). Possibly the most trivial and yet persistently vociferous debate about higher education since 2014 has concerned rankings of Indian universities – their embarrassing showing in global rankings, restructuring to meet global standards, the imperialism of global rankings, the need to generate India-specific rankings, etc. The thrust of policy for higher education in India has pushed, explicitly since 2000²¹, the need to measure skills for employability in university education, to redesign curricula and programs to meet those ends, and to expand and facilitate an ever-growing private sector²² – all with more efficient public investment (that is, disinvestment in real terms). This thrust has grown more ambitious with the advent of authoritarian nationalism as the ruling ideology: critical thinking and academic integrity are countered by skills training and employers' needs (in the national interest); management and policy that is untrammelled by academic principles is de rigueur (as a demonstration of national fiber); maximizing the cost-benefits of education by recourse to the private sector and private education service providers is considered essential (to increase national competitiveness); intensive surveillance and policing of universities is necessary (as a national duty); etc. Managers of few public sectors have embraced BJP policies of “make in India” and “India is open for business” as enthusiastically as the university sector: private-public partnerships – or state-corporation accords – have multiplied significantly, both within the country and across borders, since 2000.
3. Much of the student and academic unrest mentioned above, though predominantly articulated within the limits of nation and state, have been about the setting in of

²¹ That was the year when industrialists Kumaramangalam Birla and Mukesh Ambani published their *Report on a Policy Frame Work for Reforms in Education*, commissioned by the Prime Minister's Council on Trade and Industry. The thrust of policy in and since this is outlined succinctly in Vijayan (2016). The earlier situation in this regard can be gauged from Tilak (1999).

²² The share of unaided private institutions as a percentage of total higher education institutions had gone up from 42.6% in 2001 to 63.9% in 2012, and the student enrolment in unaided private higher education institutions as a percentage of total enrolment had gone up from 32.9% to 58.9% over the same period – according to a Centre for Civil Society (2014) report.

neoliberal policies and management practices in universities. The dumbing down of curricula and programs for skills-training, hikes in fees and costs of education for students, close-to-the grain surveillance, discouragement of union activities, disinvestments from student support and educational infrastructures, etc. have all motivated protests alongside or through the rise of authoritarian nationalism. These are all moves which are evidenced widely in neoliberal regimes elsewhere, and have been inspired by examples or imported from practices elsewhere into India.

Unpacking these dimensions call for a larger contextualization of the ongoing student and academic protests in India, against the backdrop of neoliberalism in universities worldwide.

Global Context

The consanguinity of neoliberal and exclusionary or supremacist nationalistic governance has been examined only occasionally.²³ In an obvious sense, they seem to follow opposed directions, in that such nationalist orders tend towards a narrowed worldview while neoliberal arrangements are expansionist (not the same as inclusive) and transnational in ambition. It is possible that neoliberal rationalization finds it expedient to segment populations as niches in the global market, which could become analogous to a fascist vision of humans divided into segments with essentialist features. Both modes of governance also manoeuvre through multiparty democratic systems using similarly mendacious publicity ploys. Perhaps the principal area of overlap – which generates symbiotically linked neoliberal and nationalistic institutions and power-structures – is in the will to exercise authoritarian control. Government bureaucracy and corporate management mirror each other, often merging into a power block. Around the financial crisis of 2007/2008 in Europe and the USA, and the perpetual austerity orders that have emerged therefrom, much theorising of neoliberalism has involved unpacking its authoritarian practices, grounded as they are in everyday life and habitual ideas, structured into language itself. Concepts of the financialization of everyday life, of biopolitical forms of sovereignty bearing upon functioning as human, of subjectivity moulded

²³ In fact, the synthesis of neoliberalism and nationalism in India is probably the most frequently cited case (see note 20). In a more general strain, it is considered that neoliberalism is often opposed by exclusionary nationalism, though increasingly neoliberalism is instrumentalizing such nationalism for its ends. In his brief history of neoliberalism, Harvey (2015) makes this point. The contributions to Goodman and James eds. (2016) also consider this cautiously – the editors' introduction observes: "More recently, the distance between (neo) liberal and (civic) nationalism has collapsed, at least for a significant number of neoliberals. [...] The affective dimensions of everyday nationalism ironically make civic nationalism a useful complement to the contradictory meld of economic globalization, global military expansion and national border protection" (Goodman and James 2016, p.11). The possibility that conceptions of market niche and essentialist national domain may usefully support each other, mentioned below, is persuasively presented in Volvic and Andrejevic eds. (2016).

into commodity forms, have been meaningfully proposed²⁴. These gesture towards, in brief, a kind of penetration or seepage of authoritarian practice into the normality of life which every fascist must dream of co-opting to realise the national utopia.

It is of some interest that the ongoing student and academic protests in India have been little analysed and discussed in international forums. Many factual reports have appeared in the international news media. There have however been very few attempts at published analysis, discussions in symposia or conferences, solidarity meetings and demonstrations, online petitions, etc., in continental European, North American or Australasian or other forums. Only a few have been initiated by academics with Indian connections or working on Indian themes, who are in some way directly affected. This is of interest since it is not lack of information that explains it. Speculatively, perhaps there now prevails a sort of systemic discouragement to respond to these issues beyond India: academic mediations are increasingly sieved through institutional collaborations and agreements, formal mechanisms of funding and sponsorship, which discourage critical intervention from outside India²⁵. These collaborations, agreements, funding and sponsorship mechanisms are fiercely protected by various managers to ensure that investments are not threatened, that the optimism of profit-making is not undermined by intellectual or critical discord. As the most hopeful prospect among BRICS countries, so open to business and inviting to investment,

²⁴ These are informed by: Deleuze and Guattari (particularly 1977/1971) on structuring psychoanalysis for capitalist conformity; Foucault's (2008/2004) 1978-79 lectures on neoliberal governmentality; Marazzi's work from the 1990s on communicative manipulation as the bedrock of financialization (such as Marazzi 2008/2002); Martin (2002) on financialization infused into domestic economies. With the 2007-8 financial crisis and austerity measures in view, the following, among others, explore neoliberalism as deep authoritarianism: Fisher (2009) on cultural products that naturalise an account of capitalist realism; Lazzarato (2010) on an ethics of indebtedness that moulds subjectivity and intersubjectivity; Lordon (2014/2010) on concepts of desire and fulfilment systematized to make capitalist subjects habitually obedient; Mirowski's (2013, Ch.3) description of everyday life experiences which serve neoliberal tenets; Haiven (2014) on the manner in which the financial sector is now woven into the informal sphere of social and cultural life.

²⁵ To some extent this has to do with the establishment of neoliberal systems for controlling scholarship in general – especially research – within specific countries (such as the UK) or zones (such as the EU) in a way that bears upon all international collaborations. That mainly entails closer surveillance and management of scholarship through academic institutional management. For instance, in the UK such measures include: a national regime for gauging research production and performance tied in with public funding of universities since the 1980s; setting targets for “external funding” rather than institutional funding of research, and management of such funding of projects through “full-economic costings” accounting (since the early 2000s); setting criteria for “economic and social impact” for research in allocation of funding and national assessments (later 2000s), and ring-fencing research funding for “academic leadership”, “knowledge transfer”, “skills training” and applied areas of policy interest; and even well-meaning compulsion towards open-access publication of publicly funded research (following the 2012 Finch report) effectively enables institutions to determine what researchers should publish.

there is scarcely any academic institution with some international ambition which hasn't extended its gaze to India. They have set up optimistic ventures there, offering "knowledge transfer", "technology transfer", "skills training", "education services", "knowledge exchange partnerships", "accreditation and validation services", etc. In the environment of academic entrepreneurialism that prevails, institutional management and government bureaucracy do not look kindly on resistant analysis and dissident solidarity among academics. They prefer an upbeat, cheering band of experts, and make do with cautious and compliant scholars.

More may nevertheless be expected from students and researchers. The current phase of student and academic unrest in India has coincided with widespread evidence of student activism in various countries around the world. Numerous occupations, marches, picket-lines, sit-ins, open conferences and debates, performances, etc. could be cited, initiated by or involving students, addressing larger social and political concerns as well as particularly those which pertain to higher education²⁶. Most of these find common ground at present in resisting the spread of neoliberal management of academia worldwide. And that is where the common ground extends most cogently to India also. As the student protests against authoritarian nationalism in India widen their critique to the collusion of neoliberal agencies, this common ground will become clearer – and no doubt come to be discussed more energetically than at present.

²⁶ Both the neoliberal structuring of academia and the resulting student protests are discussed from an international perspective in: Hill ed. (2009); Solomon and Palmieri eds. (2011); Giroux (2013); Sukarieh and Tannock (2014); Gupta, Habjan and Tutek eds. (2016).

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