 Contesting Spaces and Civil resistance movements: A case study on India’s #FeeMustFall Movement

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Abstract

The paper intends to conduct a spatial reading of civil resistance movements taking Jawaharlal Nehru University’s (JNU) #FeeMustFall in India as the case study. Amidst penetration of neoliberal politics in public goods like health and education, the pay-per-user principle is not limited to the argument of efficiency of allocation of resources. It can be comprehended as the larger strategy of the ruling dispensation to deplatform dissent and homogenise state space on an ideological singularity catering to majoritarian and hegemonic nationalism. The paper shall focus on the spatial reading of civil resistance movements using Lefebvre’s characterisation of state space and Gramsci’s understanding of hegemony and nationalism locating in the context of JNU’s #FeeMustFall movement.

Keywords: Civil resistance, Space, Hegemony, Social movement, Public education.

Introduction

The expanding neoliberal policies are making public goods like health and education subject to a competitive market place. Public goods like education play a pertinent role in overcoming intergenerational inequalities, and privatisation of the same shall deter relinquishing it. In India, the public-sector universities witness the same threat where the government is withdrawing higher education subsidies, claiming paucity of funds. The paper shall take the case of Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), where the administration hiked fees by around 300 per cent in 2019. The students resented and organised protests in large numbers. However, these peaceful protests were violently mitigated by the state police and security forces by water-cannons and
lathi charges. JNU protests in Delhi (India) had even inspired its neighbour Pakistan where students have raised voices against the failure of the state in ensuring quality education, right to unionisation of students, democracy and dissent.

With Jawaharlal Nehru University’s fee hike as a case study, the paper shall focus on the spatial reading of civil resistance movements using Lefebvre’s characterisation of state space and Gramsci’s understanding of hegemony and nationalism locating in the context of JNU’s #FeeMustFall movement. The paper shall examine the modality of the protests in the fee must fall movement, its internal politics, and the state’s response in the stated framework.

The idea of JNU as a space of resistance

The 1960s and 1970s ushered in utopian universities’ phenomenon conceptualising the idea of inculcating interdisciplinary research bringing faculties and students together in a residential space. The idea of such academic spaces germinated from the Sussex in the United Kingdom proliferated to Simon Fraser in Canada, Nanterre in Paris, Lusaka in Zambia and JNU in Delhi, India. These spaces were an experiment in communal living and were driven to engage and critique contemporary social problems. The Indian government established JNU (named after the first prime minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru) as a public university established by the act of the Indian Parliament in 1966 and came into existence in 1969, financed by the Union Ministry of Education. The first vice-chancellor, Gopalaswami Parthasarathy, endeavoured to establish interdisciplinary academic centres that focused and pioneered research on the intrinsic problems of the Indian society.

JNU, since its inception, has adopted an innovative points-based admission policy where applicants’ family income, caste11Caste is hereditary and hierarchal classes of Hindu society, distinguished by relative degrees of ritual purity or pollution and of social status., region and gender are incorporated as an adjunct of ‘positive discrimination’ so that more students from deprived backgrounds are given a chance to gain admission for higher studies. A perceivably unplanned hike in the fee made thousands of students coming out on the streets, reprsing the university’s sporadic fee hike that subsequently triggered the #FeeMustFall movement. The university inculcated the pay per user principle while justifying the proposed fee hike. Electronic and print media were replete with underprivileged students’ testimonials, for whom attaining higher education was only plausible because of a public university like JNU. The proposed fee hike shot expenses up to $112 (electricity, water and service charges) from around $37 a month. The numbers may seem highly affordable, but when it is relativised in the larger socio-economic milieu of Indian society and the university’s demography, it results in a severe accessibility crisis in higher education in India. A PhD student gets a monthly stipend of $112 for three years only. A considerable section of students even sends a portion of their stipend back to their family. Almost 40 percent of university students (Chirmuley, 2019) belong to families with less than $2018 of annual income. India has a per capita income of $147 a month amidst enormous economic disparity. According to the Global Wealth Report, 78 percent of adults in India had wealth below $10000, while 1.8 percent had more than $100000.

The conceptual, geographic, and sociocultural diversity makes JNU perpetually in headlines, particularly in the national media and abroad. There are few higher institutions in India where students of myriad socio-economic and cultural backgrounds get admitted primarily because of the university’s affirmative action (positive discrimination) policies. The university has traditionally been critical of the establishment and has often been subjected to defamation and delegitimisation by the ruling dispensations spanning decades. Allegations such as the university are the hub of ‘anti-nationals’, ‘wasting taxpayers money’, a place of ‘drug addicts and protesters’ have been carefully crafted by the ruling elite and its IT cell to distract masses from the hard-hitting questions raised by the students against the policies and modus operandi of the establishment. The varsity has a history of demonstrating and resisting the ruling dispensation’s diktats, including the national emergency imposed in 1975 by the then union government headed by the then Prime Minister Mrs Indira Gandhi. It is the only university in the country where “students manage elections for their own union”. JNU has always been tagged as a ‘political space’ euphemistically by the political parties in power and the ruling elites. However, reading the word ‘political’ does not limit comprehending party
politics or electoral politics but caters to a more extensive understanding that modern life is political. Even though the word political has its etymological evolution from the Greek word *polis*, its other manifestations also direct to the notions and exercising of power. The classical understanding of power as a collective capacity of a community to take decision gradually culminated into some people’s capacity that impedes the interest of others by deplatforming them from the decision-making process. (Bhargava, 2009). However, the term ‘political’ during the renaissance was closely associated with ‘society’ and not ‘state’. Furthermore, an association of society with the state was armoured the ‘methodological nationalism’ of the 19th-century. The state-centric approach sees the process of nationalisation and territorialisation taken as the natural conditions of affecting social life and not as a resultant of history and should be a process rather than a permanent condition. A nation-state serves primarily as a political entity under which economic management is conducted and social welfare is ensured; in the absence of mismanagement of which voices of dissents culminates in civil resistance.

Comprehending Space

Poulantzas (2003) provides a historical account of how the state appears as a product of a modern nation. A national territory has a political character in which “the state tends to monopolise the procedures of the organisation of space”. A modern state ensures national unity and tends to expand. The expansion is not comprehended in a conventional sense but homogenisation of differences and different identities within the national territory’s frontiers. Critical spaces (universities) like JNU stand in contradiction to such spatial homogeneity based on the idea of hegemonic nationalism or ideology. The modern nation is not created by the bourgeoisie but is an “outcome of a relationship between the ‘modern’ social classes – one in which the nation is a stake for the various classes” that can be further comprehended as elites and non-elites in a spatial configuration. State and territory are mutually constitutive based on their interaction which state officials apparently manage. State officials seemingly administer a natural space but they “substitute another space for it, one that is first economic and social, and then political”. In such a scenario, state officials are of the perception that they represent their nation or the like; however, they are establishing an order of their own.

States are spatial entities, as evident with the emphasis on the notion of territoriality. Each state bifurcates itself from the ‘inner’ political interactions instead of ‘outer’ interstate relations and thus can be attributed as a ‘container’. There are multiple approaches through which theorisation of state space takes place. First, the link between state and society. It studies the spatiality of social life and combines cultural and political identity enclosed in geographical space. A state’s role as a ‘power container’ where a state acts as a static platform for constructing social relations. Third, post-world war ushered in the national state as a “primary political scale on which economic management was conducted, and social welfare was delivered, and treatment of political subjects as national citizens”. State space in an integral sense is “mobilisation of state policies, public investments, or financial subsidies to modify or transform social conditions within specific jurisdictions and at particular scales”. States tend to manifest their power through the principle of territoriality to contain myriad social, political and economic activities.

A nation-state can be taken as a representation of “self-organising historical entity” that focuses on making and achieving collective ends. The state serves as the political arm of a nation and as David Easton defines the political system as the authoritative allocation of values and resources to an economy, comes into play. The pursuit of national goals helps in concretising the idea of a ‘nation’. The ‘state’ in this context becomes a political arm of a nation that has the responsibility of cohesion and welfare. The idea of collectivity gives a sense of unity of goals that members of state should subordinate for a common good meaning thereby a sense of mutual responsibilities towards each other.

For , space is all about power and classifies it into different categories in the context of a state. First, material and natural space in which a physical space transformed by myriad infrastructures such as highways, railways, financial and commercial establishments, air routes and the like. Second, hierarchical institutions form the social space that may include state institutions, schools, workplaces, and higher education spaces relevant to this paper. Each state is a social space where there is a minimum consensus for attributing or denoting certain things or activities, or idea; in the stated case, the fundamental premise and nature of the Indian state. The
third is the mental space that includes the representations of a state which people at large construct, and the state provides social relations of productions. Lefebvre argues that a state tries to create a space where it claims to accomplish something perfect: a unified and homogenous society. The representational sense of state space examines myriad spatial imaginaries that compete with each other. The spatial imaginaries provide a crucial basis foundation for politics of representation, mobilisation and intervention and territorial politics.

Hegemony and Space

Hayek (1945) had demolished the presumption that experts had sufficient knowledge to design solutions to all social problems consciously. He noted that the kind of knowledge to make investment, production, and consumption decisions was often very localised, context-specific, and personally idiosyncratic. According to him, amidst the absence of dissent, there would be “stagnation of thought and decline of reason.” He argues that the growth options could not be limited as it jeopardises the room for new options or the alternative narrative to creep in. It manifests the contestations between the elites and non-elites that Antonio Gramsci’s cultural hegemony can further comprehend.

Power of domination in space is manifested predominantly through violence and consent. However, Godelier (1978) argues that the consent of the dominated is stronger than the violence of the dominant. Every society is based on shared interests, including a share of interests that are conflictual and compromising constantly. Bourdieu further complicates his concept and applies it to the field. An individual anchored around various symbols, identities and beliefs where identity is given by society and not created by an individual.

The idea of power and culture works by controlling a person’s loyalty which is a key to power. Power comes with consent and manifests subtle and innocuous agreements wherein people do not control the ideas, but the ideas control people. All political, economic and social ideas are accepted passively. Moreover, everyday actions to which individuals do not put much effort into thinking are what cultural hegemony is. The idea of the thing or the concept of a thing that affects people and their behaviour demonstrates the exercise of real power. For instance, anyone who holds a counter-view to the majoritarian beliefs (the ruling dispensation vs JNU in the stated case) is tagged as a threat to the nation’s unity and is ‘anti-national’. This de-platforming manifested predominantly through propaganda by the ruling Right leads to otherisation, leading to homogenising space based on ideological singularity. The ruling elite would distract the masses from the core issue. For instance, why public education should not be subjected to commodification or on the significance of varsities as an independent and critical space to narratives of students being anti-nationals as they resist certain state policies. The manifestation of ‘one nation’ based on religion does not limit the homogenisation of geographical or physical spaces. It intends to capture the psychological mind-space of masses where varsities like JNU stands in contestation to the popular imagination perpetrated by the ruling elite.

Thus, hegemony is political leadership based on consent, diffused by the popularisation of the ruling class’s world view. The working class gives consent to the ruling class to be ruled. Just by leading the daily lives, the non-elites consent to be ruled by the elites, which is a process in perpetuity. It is essential to comprehend consent and coercion wherein Gramsci says it is not coercion but subtle and voluntary consent on the part of those who are ruled. The popular discourse against the varsity is thus touted as anti-national and subversive by the masses in general.

Spatial understanding of resistance

Educational institutes like schools and cultural organisations employ the most significant number of people in a state. To have a linear, coherent and homogenous world view, control over the stated institutions is ineluctable. According to Gramsci, there is a significant gap between the popular masses and the intellectual groups as the state does not entail a homogenous conception; however, to mitigate such contradiction to homogenise the space, the ruling elite encapsulates it. As Gramsci notes, unlike other previous ruling classes who were conservative and operated within their spheres and did not enlarge it to subsume other classes, bourgeois intends to absorb the entire society into its conception of the cultural and economic realm. Here
the paper would instead attribute bourgeoise as the ruling elite where they intend to hegemonise their own socio-political and cultural world view and deplatforms the ones who disagree.

The parties are analogous to classes, and they develop, solidify and universalise them. Here, the paper intends to see a class in a broader sense of entailing more aspects of identities that pertain to a belief system. When an elected government commence operating as a ‘party, Gramsci argues it sets itself above other parties not to harmonise the myriad interests under the framework of nation and state but only to disintegrate it from the broader masses. Parties are a product of classes, and parties form state personnel.

As Gramsci asserts, “repetition is the best didactic means for working on the popular mentality since the masses are slow to alter their beliefs”; therefore, the rhetoric of power elites must be incessantly put through questioning in order to divulge their propaganda and the divisive polemical narratives for electoral gains and their attenuated imagination of nation-state. Since November 6th, 2019, there has been continuous protests against the arbitrary and unjust fee hike that has gathered nation-wide attention. The students have resorted to myriad ways of non-violent methods of protesting. Briefly, it includes complete lockdown of the departments, making posters and singing protest songs, setting up the late-night ‘Guerrilla Dhabas’ (makeshift food stall), serving tea where students gather and have discussions over a cup of tea, maintaining the night culture of conversations and debates inside the campus, mass sleepovers in the department building, boycotting semester exams, holding long silent marches to the parliament and the Ministry of Education. Concomitantly, during the rallies outside the campus, the students distributed pamphlets making masses aware of the cause and intent of the movement, running social media campaigns with hashtags #FeeMustFall, #JNUProtest, #EducationForAll debating with people and sensitising those who are in support of the policies related privatisation of education by the government. Interestingly, these peaceful protests have been violently mitigated by the state police and security forces by water cannons and lathi charges. Such a series of incidents have stirred up the debates in the Indian Parliament and the universities and colleges spread across the country to debate the questions about affordable and quality education.

As a threat to a perceivable homogenised space by the ruling right, even these unique non-violent modes of resistance were put into questions. The onus quickly shifted on to the students to work within the ‘social contract’ of the institutions that deprived them the rights and justice in the first place. However, a social contract’s goal is “to show that members of some society have reason to endorse and comply with the fundamental social rules, laws, institutions, and principles of that society”. The question, however, remained to what extent that the individuals demonstrating are represented and justified under the social contract they signed up for. The students’ resistance intended to bring an element of introspection for the state apparatus rather than locating it within ‘state legality’ to uphold the social contract’s sanctity equitably and justifiably prior branding them as recalcitrant and subsequently delegitimising them.

Therefore, to disregard and delegitimise counter-narrative, the ruling dispensation diverts focus to civil resistance’s modus operandi locating its legality and validity within states institutions. States can obliterate the protests through their ‘legitimate coercion’ as it wields its authority to do so through the summation of power and legality. Thus, a confrontational demonstration from a disaffectionate population, even though they are an active adjunct of the state through social contract, is deemed illegitimate by state institutions (Mishra, 2020).

The counter-narratives from academia is discredited by the ruling elite as they are democratically elected where numbers decide everything. Since a majority elects them, they have a popular mandate and support of anything they intend to promulgate. However, numbers merely have an instrumental value and, as Gramsci calls ‘giving a measure’. The measured thing is the persuasive and expansive capacity of rationality and historicity of elites (i.e. few individuals), thus contradicting the hypothesis of equal weightage to all individual opinions. The sporadic rise in the fee is one of the many regulations (varying from political appointments to the massive funds cut for the library and other academic activities) be an endeavour to straight jacket public universities along linear pedagogical lines and reducing education coherent to the right-wing nationalist understanding and the idea of the nation-state, India. Such imaginations are manifested through discipline, spatial homogeneity, hierarchy and order.
Conclusion

Civil resistance in the context of social movements exhibits political socialisation that varies across age brackets, creating contesting spaces. Cognitively, humans tend to adopt specific behavioural attributes at certain life stages; thus, youths tend to be risk-takers, radical, and reluctant to experiment or innovate. On the contrary, elders, in general, tend to be more status-quo and conservative. Furthermore, polysemous understanding of the word ‘radical’ (i.e. political radicalism) is often subjected to misinterpretation and thus used as a tool to discredit and dislodge by the ruling dispensation as an act of subversion. The current right-leaning dispensation’s rationale of pay-per-user principle with the constant push for privatisation of higher education is the efficiency in allocating resources and training masses for the industry to usher in economic growth. However, the approach’s implications have been contrary to where private colleges in India have resulted in an enormous number of degree holders who are incompetent to get absorbed in the industry, and education differential (public vs elite and expensive private) has exacerbated the class divide. However, the economic rationale of efficient allocation of resources does not hold water as the recent imbroglio of a senior faculty member of Political Science at a leading private university in India resigned for being critical of the government highlights a more significant politico-culture manifestation. Furthermore, public-funded universities are not meant to serve the industry’s immediate interest but are focused on identifying and conducting an independent inquiry of social complications.

Through endeavours like fee hike, the university space is systematically and structurally under attack from the right-wing ruling dispensation as it is regarded as the bastion of left ideology. However, if one closely observes the varsity, it is a melting of a myriad school of thoughts, and that is how a university ought to be if it intends to insinuate a space for critical thought. However, this space is challenged by the space that exists outside the campus. The idea here is not to make two spaces stand in contradiction or opposition to each other. The ruling elites’ pursuit to remain relevant in executing spatial ideational homogeneity needs an adversarial space as a threat. Critical thinking spaces like universities are potent examples of such ‘adversarial spaces’ as they evade the ruling establishment from tough questions and concomitantly equips them to seek popular consent from the masses for their hegemonic belief system manifested through fear psychosis. The concerted effort by the ruling right-wing to delegitimise and to be contemptuous to different political thoughts and concomitantly normalising the idea of a Hindu nationalist state is an explicit attempt to homogenise space manifested through hegemonic nationalism.