

Dalit Counterpublic and Social Space on Indian Campuses

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Abstract

This article discusses three different university campuses in India (Jawaharlal Nehru University, Osmania University, and the English and Foreign Languages University) and their political and social environments with a particular focus on Dalit student activism from March to June, 2013, and from January to March, 2014 when this ethnographic research was conducted. It questions what place Dalit student activism, constituting the ‘counterpublic’ (Fraser, 1990; Warner, 2002), occupied in these campuses; how Dalit student activists interacted with other student political groups; what characteristic features the Dalit student activism had on each campus. This article discusses the changing power relations in Indian universities and the role of ‘social space’ (Bourdieu, 2018) in negotiating social statuses. Dalit student activists actively engaged in appropriating social space by installing Dalit symbolic icons on the university campuses, bringing up caste issues to public attention and thus temporarily turning certain campuses into ‘political strongholds’ (Jaoul, 2012) of the Dalit movement. Contributing to the recent scholarship on student politics in South Asia this article argues for the understanding of interactive relation between campus space and student politics, showing how Dalit students changed the campus space through symbolic appropriation and, conversely, how historically constituted campus spaces affected the nature of Dalit student activism in each of the discussed localities.

Keywords

Dalits, student activism, counterpublic, social space, social statuses

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Introduction: Dalit Student Activism as a Counterpublic¹

Until the post-colonial modernity, public space in India was largely the privilege of upper castes. Gorringer argued that ‘few areas in India constitute public space in any meaningful sense since space has usually been hierarchically patterned’ (2005, p. 178). Untouchables through centuries were ‘isolated, excluded, and ostracized’ and ‘constituted “non-people” who were not accepted as being members of the “Hindu public,” but were perceived as “outcastes” on the fringes of civilized society’ (Ibid, p. 176). However, colonial and post-colonial reforms and the foundation of modern institutions began opening up accessibility of the public space to formerly marginalized groups. Some Dalits and other lower caste members, through the means of reservation policy, nowadays secure admission to universities--the sites of social privilege-- and become active participants in campus public life, leading to increased contestation over public space among different student groups.²

Indian universities are generally perceived in terms of the Habermasian ideal of the public sphere (Habermas, 1991) marked by social consensus and rational debates. There is a noticeable opinion that Indian universities should serve a double purpose: create the critical public sphere and enable the ‘bracketing’ (Fraser, 1990) of social inequalities (Béteille, 2007; Deshpande, 2016). This suggests an ideal that by educating young individuals universities should enable them to become active participants in the public life of the nation. Nevertheless, as Deshpande claims, Indian universities face one of the biggest challenges of accommodating, educating and empowering new social groups--the lower-castes (2016). This challenge stems not only from the difficulties in creating and applying efficient education policy and teaching methods, but also in accommodating these new groups as equal participants in universities’ and nation’s public life. In other contexts, for youth entering and studying in a university is an exciting journey, but for Dalits and other lower caste members the university years sometimes turn into a bitter experience, in not so infrequent cases leading to suicides (Ovichagan, 2015; Sukumar 2016).

Despite difficulties that university infrastructure and social norms impose on the subaltern youth, some Dalits and other lower caste members after going through educational empowerment become active participants in campus public sphere. However, instead of accepting the dominant construction of public concerns, some of these groups and individuals, drawing on their own subjective experiences of social marginality, create alternative ‘counterpublics’ (Fraser, 1990; Warner, 2002) that reframe the dominant understanding of social relations. Fraser defined subaltern counterpublics as ‘parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs’ (1990, p. 67). Meanwhile in Warner’s understanding, counterpublic is a self-organized discursive space that it is marked by the subordinate status with regard to the dominant public (2002).

Conceptualizing Dalit student activism as a counterpublic, this article situates it in the broader social and political environments of the Indian university campuses. Instead of viewing university campuses as representing a homogenous public sphere marked by social consensus, and following the critique of the notion of public sphere (Calhoun, 1992; Fraser, 1990; Susen, 2011; Warner, 2002), I look to university campuses in terms of ‘agonistic pluralism’ (Mouffe, 1999) as spheres comprised of

different publics, and clashing interests and concerns. Particular focus is placed on how Dalit student activism, representing the alternative counterpublic, re-appropriates the public space and what concerns, values, and interests it brings to the fore. However, it must be noted that Dalit counterpublic should not be understood as a homogenous entity but it should be seen as 'heterogeneous and varied and full of various kinds of tensions that are present within the Dalits as a group' (Narayan, 2011, p. xxiv). The existence of multiple Dalit student organizations within the same campus aptly proves the multiplicity of identities and interests within the Dalit student community and the overall complexity of the Dalit category.

While discussing how Dalit students appropriate the campus public space, I draw on Bourdieu's understanding of 'social space' and 'the spatial distribution of powers.' He claims that 'there is no space that does not express social hierarchies and distances' (2018, p. 106), therefore there cannot be unappropriated social space, as it is always a playground of power relations. The case of Dalits in Indian society is exemplary of the complex interaction of space, power, and social status, and shows how changes in social status affect spatial organization.

A number of authors have delved into the ways Dalits use public space to renegotiate socio-political relations and their social status in different regional contexts in India (Beth, 2005; Gorringer, 2016; Jaoul, 2006, 2012; Narayan, 2011, 2012). Jaoul has shown how in Uttar Pradesh Dalits negotiated their relationship with the state by re-signifying space with their own community icons and symbols (2006), and how political competition between Hindu nationalists and Dalits unfolded through symbolic appropriation of space resulting in the creation of 'political strongholds' (2012). Gorringer (2016) argued that by contesting the norms and practices regulating accessibility to social space in Tamil Nadu, Dalits were contributing to the creation of public space inclusive of representatives from different castes. Of particular relevance to the discussion presented in this article is Beth's work (2005), which shows how Dalit public gatherings took different forms depending on the public spaces where they were happening. In this article it will be shown how Dalit student activism in each discussed campus gained specific character depending on the historically constituted campus political culture and broader socio-political context, resulting in various campus-specific trajectories of Dalit student activism.

While there is a rich literature on Dalits' relation to public space, comparatively little is known on Dalit political activism in university campuses. Existing research on Dalit student activism mainly explores beef and *Asura* counter-culture festivals, which were specific forms of campus protests. These festivals were analyzed in terms of 'democratization of the public sphere' (Gundimeda, 2009), 'counter-hegemonic assertion' (Pathania, 2016), 'dialectics of counter-culture' (Garalytė, 2016) and 'culturalization of caste' (Natrajan, 2018). Though providing interesting accounts of subversive or 'counter-culture' politics, these studies lack a more in-depth and detailed engagement with the ways Dalits make use of the campus public space and how the particular campus spaces affect Dalit student activism. Contributing to the recent scholarship on student politics in South Asia (Martelli and Garalytė, 2019), this article argues for the understanding of interactive relation between campus space and student politics, showing how Dalit students changed the campus space through symbolic appropriation and, conversely, how historically constituted campus spaces affected the nature of Dalit student activism. Through borrowing certain political strategies of symbolic appropriation of public space already employed by various Dalit movements

in regional contexts, Dalit activists in university campuses had more freedom for political experimentation and establishing broader socio-political alliances resulting into novel forms of cultural politics. If Warner argues that '[p]ublics do not exist apart from the discourse that addresses them' (2002, p. 416), this article claims that publics do not function apart from the social space that structures them. It is an attempt to elaborate on the complex relationship between the Dalit counterpublic and campus social space.

The research presented in this article is based on a multi-sited ethnography in three university campuses—Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), Osmania University (OU) and The English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU) conducted from March to June, 2013, and from January to March, 2014. JNU and EFLU are categorized by the Indian government as central universities, while, OU is a state university.³ These specific institutions were chosen for research because in 2012, at the time of planning of research design, they were most often reported in Indian news media with regard to Dalit student political activism. These universities were even more attractive for research as they were related to each other through the student activists' network. Research methods included participant observation of everyday campus life, and semi-structured interviews with student activists and faculty.

In the following sections, I discuss the context in which Dalit counterpublic emerged on Indian university campuses in the 1990s. Then, I separately focus on the chosen three university campuses highlighting the specificity of the Dalit student activism in each of them and how it was shaped by the specific campus political culture. The article ends with a reflection on the recent socio-political developments in these campuses, which proves the temporary and context dependent nature of the Dalit student activism.

The Emergence of Dalit Students' Political Subjectivity

When I joined Hyderabad University [University of Hyderabad] way back in 1991, it was a height of Mandal agitations—the pro-and anti reservation movements. We entered the Hyderabad University as young students to pursue our Masters [post-graduation]. Coincidentally that was also the year [of] Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's centenary celebrations. Thus, as students we were shaped by these two events: at one level we were constantly warned by some progressive teachers, 'look, there are anti-reservation forces fighting against Mandal interventions and you [Dalit] people have to unite and float the organization.' The other level was to understand how important Ambedkar's centenary was for students from Dalit backgrounds...It shaped an entire generation. I can say that I'm the seed of that particular generation and [I'm still] growing as a tree. I was a seed at that particular point of time. So we sprouted with the Mandal agitations along with Ambedkar's birth centenary celebrations.⁴

These are the words of a Dalit scholar, Sudir⁵, who as a student witnessed and participated in the political mobilization of Dalit students in the 1990s. Similar to other Dalit scholars' narratives, especially those who entered central universities as students at the turn of the decade, 1990s for them meant a turning point. Dalits associate this decade with particular events that provided impetus for the emergence of Dalit students' political subjectivity—Ambedkar's⁶ centenary celebrations, the Mandal reform⁷ and subsequent agitations.

The Indian government announced 1991 as the year of Ambedkar's centenary celebration, which according to some commentators was yet another attempt by it to appease lower-caste groups in the wake of their growing political consciousness and power. Many programmes were organized for the commemoration of Ambedkar throughout the country and abroad. Following the centenary celebrations in 1992, the Government of India established Ambedkar Foundation with an objective to spread Ambedkar's ideology and to enact long-term schemes that would improve the living conditions of Dalits. Ambedkar had laid a strong emphasis on education as a major means of social mobility for Dalits. Therefore, most of the initiatives that the Foundation took up included installation of libraries and universities under Ambedkar's name, the publication and translation of his works, initiation of various awards and scholarships for Dalit students, as well as projects for organizing events related to Ambedkar and his ideology. Since 1993, in some of the universities, Ambedkar academic chair positions have been established with an objective to encourage academic engagement with Ambedkar's writings and the study of social inequality and exclusion.

Ambedkar's centenary celebrations, the establishment of the foundation in his name and the institutional initiatives, enabled Dalit students to identify with the leader of the Dalit movement and his anti-caste ideology. Various institutional provisions opened a space in the Indian universities for Ambedkar's ideas to proliferate. Today at Indian universities the followers of Ambedkar's ideology call themselves Ambedkarites. For them, Ambedkar stands as the greatest role model in different spheres of life – education, politics, state, and religion. They have adopted, and further proliferate Ambedkar's ideas – his criticism of caste and Hindu religion, the belief in modernity, and principles of constitutional democracy – which today resonate not only among Dalits but also diverse underprivileged, and political opposition groups. These initiatives, as Rodrigues put it, were instrumental in moving Ambedkar 'from being the villain of Indian nationalism, to its center-stage in the socio-political contestation in India' (2014, p. 37).

Sudir refers to another important event, the Mandal agitations. In 1991, the implementation of the Mandal reform triggered major opposition between upper-caste students who protested against the extended reservations against lower-caste students, including Dalits, who supported the new reforms, turning Indian universities into battlefields of the Mandal and the anti-Mandal groups. From the universities, the anti-Mandal protests spilled on the streets. Rajiv Goswami, a student from Delhi University, immolated himself in protest against the new reforms, becoming a symbol of the anti-Mandal protests (Kumar, 2012). Guha notes that there were nearly 200 suicide attempts across the country: 'These self-immolators were upper-caste Indians whose hopes for obtaining a government job were now being undermined' (2012, p. 609). Although Dalits were not directly affected by the Mandal reforms, the violent attacks on the policies made them unite with OBCs and form various organizations to defend the reservation policies (Jaffrelot, 2011, p. 343-348). Many of the first Dalit and other lower-caste organizations in central universities were set up against the backdrop of these events. For example, in 1991 the United Dalit Students Forum (UDSF) was founded at JNU (Raman, 2013). In 1993, Ambedkar Students Association (ASA) was founded at the University of Hyderabad (Johari, 2016; Janyala, 2016).

The rise of the Dalit political consciousness in the 1990s was not a completely new phenomenon. As demonstrated by numerous works on the Dalit socio-political movement and Dalit politics in various regional contexts in India, Dalit political

subjectivity grew and every so often emerged through various socio-political anti-caste movements since late colonial days and post-independence. What was new with the upsurge of the 1990s was that it touched the sphere of India's public life that was previously not much affected by the Dalit movement. In the earlier accounts of the Indian student movement and campus politics (Shah, 2004), there was no mention of Dalits as political actors in Indian universities, neither caste figured prominently in student politics. This was not because they were absent there but because the earlier studies focused almost exclusively on central elitist universities that did not have significant Dalit representation. If we had switched our gaze to the regional state universities, we could have found that, for example, in 1978 in Maharashtra, Dalit students mobilized into *Namantar andolan* to rename the Marathwada University after Ambedkar, which led to terrible violence against Dalits (Guru, 1994; Jaoul, 2008; Omvedt, 1979; Gupta, 1979).

The 1990s signified a new era of Dalit student activism as it entered central university campuses gaining more public visibility than before. Sushil, a Dalit scholar from Hyderabad, whose political shaping occurred during the Mandal period, reconfirms this saying that 'before the 1990s, so before the Mandal [commission], there were no Dalit student organizations, there were organizations mostly of the Left kind.' Referring to the Mandal agitations, he highlights the shift that happened in Indian universities during that time:

So it [caste] became a public issue both in Parliament, in press, as well as in the university. That really empowered and enabled Dalit students to talk about it [caste], because there was some kind of a ban to talk about it before. [To] talk about casteism [was] like you're talking about primordial identities. In fact, the general kind of language used [for caste] was if [it was] 'the ugly face of tradition' and [as if] 'caste is the monster or evil' or something like that. So there was a discussion about what is caste, is it evil? Or is it social reality? Is it system for discrimination? And is it also [an] identity? Does it also give you [a] social status? Is it a marker of social status? What is it?... What is caste? So, there were a lot of counter discourses that came up. And how does one think of Indian society, Indian reality without thinking of caste, without some kind of conception of caste and discrimination? So that really kind of allowed these new organizations to come, and articulate, and elaborate these questions.⁸

Sushil remembers the confrontational Mandal agitations as an 'empowering' and 'enabling' moment, which allowed Dalit students to share publicly their experiences of caste. He reveals that for Dalits caste has contradictory meanings. In a negative sense, caste is an instant reminder of the humiliating experience of caste discrimination and untouchability. Yet in a positive sense, it signifies one's social identity. Today Dalit student activism continues to navigate through these contradicting notions of caste, perceiving caste identity both as a social stigma, as well as the "social, economic and cultural capital" of the community' (Satyanarayana, 2014, p. 52).

The coincidence of these two events laid the foundations for the Dalit counterpublic to emerge in India's university campuses. Ambedkar's centenary celebrations exposed the SC students to Ambedkar's anti-caste ideology and foregrounded their ideological transformation from the SC to Dalit. The Mandal agitations served as a political opportunity structure for Dalit student activism to emerge, which highlighted major caste confrontations (with upper-castes) and enabled caste alliances (with OBCs and other subalterns). With Ambedkar's ideological foundation and the SC and

OBC participant base, Dalit student activism began entering central, elite university campuses as the new political player, reconstructing the university public space and public debates through the lens of caste. I now explore how Dalit student activism, more than two decades after the 1990s events, manifests in present day Indian university campuses.

Jawaharlal Nehru University—Searching for Space in the Left Dominated Campus

Popularly known as the ‘Kremlin on Yamuna,’ JNU throughout its history has been the symbol and centre-stage of the oppositional Left wing politics in India (Martelli and Parkar, 2018; Martelli and Raman, 2016). The most iconic image of the campus has been its walls. Every year before the JNU students union elections in September, the University’s walls were covered with new building-size drawings by different student groups, which were later covered with an additional layer of various smaller posters and pamphlets (*parcha*), thus rendering JNU walls a constantly changing, multi-layered venue of political communication. The issues depicted covered both international and national issues, and quite often both of the discourses overlapped – Marx and Lenin stood together with Indian independence fighters, regional movements advocated together with the international struggles etc. Right and Left wing groups on the walls seemed to be in a constant blame game. The radial Left supported the Naxalite movement, and criticized the Congress of neo-imperialism and Hindutva of fascism. Hindu Right groups denounced leftists’ violence and anti-nationalism. A recurring icon and point of agreement and disagreement throughout the visuals of various organizations was B.R. Ambedkar – historical leader of the Dalits and their social justice movement.

Dalit socio-political mobilization at JNU began in 1991, when the United Dalit Students Forum (UDSF) was founded. This was the year when India was shaken by the neo-liberal turn and the Mandal reservation reforms that expanded quotas to the OBCs, leading Dalits to get into the crossfire between pro-Mandal and anti-Mandal groups (Raman, 2013). The UDSF emerged as a cultural organization, a forum that did not have the status of a political group and did not contest in the JNU Students Union elections. Contrary to other organizations, UDSF recognized natural membership, which meant that every SC/ST student on the JNU campus was by default a UDSF member, while possibly belonging to any other student political body on the campus. The organization functioned more as an awareness group raising students’ knowledge about diverse caste issues, as well as the experiences, thoughts and ideologies of subaltern communities.

There were other Dalit organizations on the campus. *Mulnivasi Sangh*, for instance, was a student branch of the Backward and Minority Communities Employees’ Federation (BAMCEF) with just a few members at that time. Mulnivasi Sangh was different from the UDSF mainly in some ideological aspects, in a sense that it drew the Dalit question into autochthon discourse, claiming that Dalits were real *mulnivasis* (aboriginals) of India and had a natural birth right to control the land and the country. There were also two other subaltern organizations that once had been active in the campus but during my fieldwork were not much visible—the BSF (Bahujan Student Front) and the AIBSF (All India Backward Student Forum). Soon after I returned from my fieldwork, through social networking sites on the Internet I discovered that Dalit

students started posting posters with new banners of the NSOSYF (National ST, SC, OBC Students and Youths Front), and the BAPSA (Birsa Ambedkar Phule Students Association). The names of the two organizations indicated that they attempted to unite all the Bahujans⁹ (STs, SCs, OBCs and other minorities). The ideology stemming from these groups was defined by their social experience of caste discrimination and anti-caste, anti-Hindu sentiments. They both carried on the legacy of the historical icons that fought for social equality and justice – B.R. Ambedkar, Jyotirao Phule, Savitribai Phule, Periyar etc.¹⁰

None of the lower-caste groups at JNU, probably the only exception being the short-lived NSOSYF backed by the controversial Dalit politician Udit Raj, were supported by any national political party. When asked about party support, students kept repeating that the Bahujan Samaj Party, a national level Dalit party, and which could have been the logical initiator of a student branch, held a general assumption that Dalits should first concentrate on studies and not waste energy in politics, which was seen as a risky matter. Since Dalit groups at JNU at the time of my fieldwork were not contesting elections and functioned more as cultural or awareness groups, I could not observe any rivalry among them. A Dalit student could be simultaneously a member of a few cultural groups and at the same time belong to any of the students' groups that contested elections. Visible charismatic leaders were absent in these Dalit organizations and groups organized as described by Hardtmann (2011, p. 238):

The organizational structure of the Dalit movement is flexible and constantly changing, which makes the movement difficult to suppress. It is a movement guided by innumerable leaders, where none could claim to be the one and sole leader. Fissions and fusions in the networks are constantly taking place and activists cross back and forth between networks, often taking part in more than one group or organization.

While leftist groups voiced protests against neo-liberalism, globalization, and communalism, and Hindu Right groups bemoaned threats to national integration and security, Dalits framed their ideological line based on caste critique, as Dipak, a Dalit activist from JNU, explained:

Either Left, Right, [or] Centre—we have criticism. The Congress, BJP¹¹ and Left, we have criticisms for all of them because they...didn't consider caste as a major contradiction of Indian society... Casteism [is a] major [issue] for Dalits. Casteism is a major problem of [the] Indian society. But Marxists never consider that. That is our major criticism and that is the criticism [against] BJP and Congress as well. How they [are] doing their caste politics?...Congress Party is ruling for 65 years in this country after the independence...but reservation is not fulfilled in 65 years.¹²

Open conflicts between Dalits and other student groups, which was characteristic of Dalit student activism in the universities of Hyderabad, were absent in JNU, where Dalit politics reflected the general climate of the university. JNU student politics up until recently¹³ was known for its democratic tradition, debates rather than fights, which were common in other Indian universities (Mehta, 2015; Singh, 2016; Singh, 2015). Dalit student activism at JNU also developed in a rather mild tone of assertion. Dipak further elaborated:

More organization, more democratization. More voices, more democratization. This is the process of democratization. So we are not afraid of that. We [are] all friends, even other parties not even Dalit we have friends. [We have] very good friendship with other organizations.¹⁴

Despite a non-confrontational position, politically active Dalits on the campus were spreading the idea of their moral superiority, that only Dalits could understand and solve the problems of Indian society. This idea had been initially set in motion by some Dalit scholars, who argued that only those having experience of untouchability could authentically and morally engage with it (Guru, 2013).

Since 2013, the time of my fieldwork, Dalit student political subjectivity in the JNU campus underwent growth. Formed in 2014, Birsa Ambedkar Phule Student Association (BAPSA), carrying forward ‘Justice for Rohith’ agitation,¹⁵ contested 2016 JNU students union elections. Its major slogan was unity among oppressed or otherwise Bahujans – Dalits, Adivasis (STs) and minorities. Ideologically it tried to ‘expose casteism practiced by the Indian Left.’ Rahul Punaram Sonpimple, BAPSA’s presidential candidate, addressing his main adversaries, claimed, ‘For a change, you must listen to the underprivileged speak in their own tongue and style’ (Talukdar, 2016).



Addressing Dalit Concerns: Different Student Groups in JNU Invoking Ambedkar (Photographs by the Author)

Despite being apart from the main political competition, Dalit student activism in the JNU campus seemed to have significant influence and visibility. Apparently, the strength of the Dalit activists in the campus was their power to veer common political debates towards the issues of caste, social justice, and Dalit representation. It has

been observed that the campus politics in recent years witnessed an upsurge in lower-caste political participation. A JNU student activist, Abhay Kumar, in a commentary noted that in the 2012-2014 JNUSU election all Students Union presidents were from socially marginalized backgrounds. In the 2014 JNUSU election, members of lower-caste groups also took four main positions of AISA (All India Students' Association).¹⁶ Significantly, the key candidates of other student groups were coming from socially 'backward' backgrounds, including the schedule castes. Kumar notes that this tendency has been gaining prevalence since 2006, that is Mandal II reforms, when 'the social demography began to shift in favour of Dalit bahunjan' (Kumar, 2014). The mainstreaming of the Dalit and social justice issues could also be seen in the emergence of new organizations that fused leftist and Dalit movement ideologies. In 2013, the campus had a small group of lower-caste students called *The New Materialists* (TNM) and the socially diverse *The Concerned Students* (CS), both groups fusing Marxism with Ambedkarism and venturing into counter-culture initiatives such as beef and Asura festivals (Garalytė, 2016). Ambedkar was an icon not only of the Dalit groups, but was increasingly appropriated by different student groups across the political spectrum, all of them trying to attract SC students under their ideological influence.

Osmania University—Challenging and Combating Hindu Right Wing

Osmania University (OU) was the hotbed of the radical students' movement since the 1969 Jai Telangana agitation setting the demand for a separate Telangana state that was materialized during my fieldwork in Hyderabad in 2014. Being the symbolic epicentre of the Telangana movement, the campus student politics had a strong Left leaning (Pathania 2018). With student activists capturing more and more power in their hands and student activism taking a violent turn, students union elections in the university was banned in the mid-1980s. Nevertheless, student organizations were present in the campus and continue to raise their demands for re-introduction of students' union polls till this day.

In 2014, OU had a strong presence of Dalit organizations—Bahujan Students' Front (BSF), Dalit Bahujan Cultural Association (DBCA), Madiga Students' Federation (MSF), All Mala Students' Association (AMSA), the latter two representing Dalit sub-caste identities, and highlighting the inherent inequalities and divisions within the SC community. Despite underlying sub-caste identity differences, they propagated the 'autonomous' Dalit political discourse and ideologically disassociated from both Right and Left politics. This shift reflected the broader changes in the SC members' political orientation in the area since the mid-1980s. After the Karamchedu and Tsundur Dalit massacres, in which Dalit families suffered from the dominant castes, the SCs began disassociating from the Communist and Naxalite movements, asserting an 'autonomous' Dalit political identity, instead of class taking caste as a main point of ideological positioning (Berg, 2014; Gudavarthy, 2005, 2013; Kota, 2019; Satyanarayana, 2014; Srinivasulu, 2002). At the time of the fieldwork, the 'autonomous' Dalit political movement discourse which had questioned Dalit involvement in Left politics, was already present in the Osmania campus and the existence of the aforementioned Dalit organizations proves this point.



The Arts College Building of Osmania University with Dalit Political Posters (Photograph by the Author)

Besides these two blocks, Dalits and leftists, there was a group of Telangana organizations that were largely pre-occupied with the Telangana movement, and in a way had mixed political identities, ranging from Left to Dalit leaning. Dalit students were especially articulate in the Telangana agitation, creating an impression that the Telangana movement was majorly led by Dalit and other subaltern students. During the fieldwork, the Telangana cause was one of the most significant resources upon which the Dalit student activists built up their repertoire of contention. In 2014, the campus public space seemed to be in the grip of Dalit student activism. The Arts College building every now and then would display huge building-size posters with pictures of Dalits and other lower-castes' historical icons and political leaders—Buddha, Ambedkar, Phule, Kanshi Ram and others.

Despite their differing ideological positioning, the SC students, both from Dalit and Left leaning came together to participate in common Telangana agitations and their collaboration was especially evident when it came to confronting 'communal forces,' that is Hindu Right wing student group – ABVP (Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad). Conflicts among different groups were seen as essential to campus politics, as they were a major way to expand political influence and public visibility. The Dalit student activists of OU in interviews often recalled their conflicts with ABVP. Many of them alleged that 'until recently OU was in the clutches of the ABVP goons' who used to frequently beat up Dalit students and force them to participate in Hindu celebrations. As the Dalit student numerical and political strength grew they gradually curbed ABVP dominance by force and numerical strength. Territorial contestation was the most prevalent form of political strife. I kept hearing Dalit students saying that Osmania was 'their territory' with 'their people,' while others would look on with suspicion to this 'dangerous' area. However, the 'stronghold' had to be maintained as tensions between Dalits and ABVP 'goons' were persistent and kept emerging at critical moments. Lenin, a renowned communist Dalit activist from OU recalled:

Ek night ko ABVP goons mere bhai ko mare, bahut mare [One night ABVP goons beat my brother]. Stick se bahut mare [Beat him a lot with a stick]. When we reached [in the] morning we gathered all student organizations.

What followed was an agitation in front of the Arts College building in which agitated Dalit students burned the portrait of Hedgewar¹⁷ and of other Hindu nationalist leaders and brought down a *Saraswati* (goddess of learning) statue inside the campus.

These reactions emerged in response to a particular incident in the campus, but they immediately translate into a symbolic political message. Dalit politics in OU was based on outward confrontational strategies and the bigger the confrontation, notwithstanding some sacrifices, the more intense was Dalit political mobilization. Arun (2007) observes how Paraiyars in Tamil Nadu purposely instigated confrontation with upper-castes since ‘they came to realise that they could assert themselves in the village only by creating conflicts’ (p. 93). Similarly, beef and Asura counter-culture festivals were employed by Dalit students in this polarized and combative university setting because of their communicative explosive symbolic potential.

While in JNU Dalits as a counterpublic were participating in student politics largely on an ideological level, in OU the counter positioning took the form of physical conflicts and open confrontations in the quest to capture campus social space. What could explain this tendency? State universities in India are more prone in general to physical violence than central universities. Secondly, the historical legacy and proximity of the Telangana movement might have influenced the overall nature of student politics and Dalit student activism in the Osmania campus. The context of the Telangana movement played a structuring role in a double sense. It infused students with the spirit of resistance and taught the strategies of counter mobilization. On a more practical level, it enabled local SC, ST, and OBC students to mobilize across different campuses establishing an empowering political network.

The English and Foreign Languages University—Outreaching for the Subaltern Alliance

Like JNU, The Central Institute of English (the initial name of EFLU) was the ‘brainchild’ of India’s first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru which was established with a mission to prepare highly qualified English language teachers for the developing nation. Being a central university and the centre of foreign language learning, EFLU had a multicultural character with students coming from different Indian states. In general, EFLU was not known for its student politics until it got into national media attention because of beef and Asura festival celebrations in 2011 and 2013.

During my fieldwork, the campus was dominated by DABMSA (Dalit Adivasi Bahujan Minority Student Association). Although established around 2000, the organization was not active until 2004 yet through the years it has managed to become the most visible and influential student organization in the campus. It united not only Dalits but also other subaltern groups – *Adivasis* (STs), OBCs, Muslims, and Christians among others thus forming a wider subaltern alliance of the minority communities. Befitting to its social orientation, the group has been actively involved in the fight for the implementation of the reservation policy. At that time, besides DABMSA, there was a small but vocal LGBTQ group that was politicizing sexuality issues in the campus, as well as feminist groups. They did not have a formal name but were active in shaping public opinion within the campus.

Back in 2005 and later on, DABMSA was preoccupied with cultural debates. Samata Biswas, an upper caste Bengali student (2005), recalls poster wars between

university administration and DABMSA members over what musical instrument – *Veena* (a classical Indian string instrument associated with upper-caste culture), or *Dappu* (a drum of Madigas, the local SC group) – should sound in the campus. Biswas observes that ‘we tend to forget that “culture” is...not non-coercive’ and that ‘the relationship between the Veena and the Dappu is one of domination’ (Biswas, 2005). In 2013, DABMSA members organized ‘Asura pride week’ celebrating the so-called antagonists of the Hindu mythology as a symbolic declaration of appreciation of cultural differences (Mathew, 2013). They also staged an alternative Onam celebration in 2013 that brought to the public the silenced experiences of subaltern communities in Kerala (Garalytè, 2016). These initiatives were intended to fight against the ‘forced homogenization of our lifestyles.’¹⁸ Through the claims of multiculturalism, cultural liberalism and tolerance, DABMSA managed to attract ‘progressive’ students from different social backgrounds including some upper-caste students who had become ‘Daliticized’ or ‘subalternized’ during their study years through involvement in student politics and certain study courses.

However, the organization was not without its contradictions. DABMSA started contesting elections since 2006 and this created many problems and divisions within organization. The initial name of the organization was DBMSA and did not involve Adivasis (STs) who were added later on. *Banjaras* – the dominant ST group in the area, which gained increasing visibility on EFLU and OU campuses, began questioning the logic behind the organization’s name. Rakesh, a DABMSA’s member, recalled:

*Some people were asking why Dalits in the front, why not Adivasis first and then Dalits, some small issues, some problems. They were able to resolve that problem, but yeah some issues like that [were there] in the beginning.*¹⁹

Another contestation of DABMSA’s influence in the campus came from Telangana Student Association (TSA), an organization that largely stood for the Telangana cause, but more broadly was also involved in Dalit student activism. During the 2009 agitation²⁰ there was heavy repression of OU students: the police *lathi-charged* (beat with batons) students while SRPF (State Reserve Police Force) entered hostel rooms in a crackdown on student activists. Osmania students quite often found refuge in the nearby EFLU campus. As students recall, people used to come to EFLU to sleep and discuss the Telangana movement issues overnight and that is how TSA was formed.

Apart from being the natural spillover from the Osmania campus in the context of the Telangana agitation, the formation of TSA also had another impetus – it sought to challenge the caste composition of DABMSA. The members of TSA articulated a ‘discrimination within discrimination’ discourse on a regional basis, as Suresh, one of the leading members of TSA, explained:

DABMSA was largely dominated by Andhra [people], that is why TSA [Telangana Student Association] had to emerge. And those people, our people: Telangana Dalits, OBCs, STs and everybody, used to work for DABMSA. But when this Telangana movement started, we even started looking at DABMSA, the functioning of DABMSA in a critical [way]. Saying who are all presidents? Who all are given posts? Why Telangana people are only treated as their work force? The greatest development in DABMSA is [that] they have given the president post to the Telangana Lambada, the ST...To survive in this Telangana movement, regional movement they have given it to him. DABMSA is not representing our concerns and they are using our work force.

The Telangana movement and its ‘victimization’ discourse allowed local Telangana groups, be it SCs, STs or OBCs, to gain an upper hand in the campus politics and revealed that within the Dalit and subaltern organizations there was an inner competition over dominance. It also showed that there was a constant reshaping

of what constitutes 'we,' which proved difficulties among Dalits or subalterns in forming common political platform. Despite organizational disagreements, in terms of ideology most of the organizations in the campus, except ABVP and DSF (Democratic Students' Front) – a leftist student organization, aligned with the Dalit/subaltern discourse, adding to the major cause of social justice supplementary ideological hues.

The strength of Dalit student activism in the campus was not only due to the work of student organizations but also of former Dalit activists who after entering the university in faculty positions started teaching courses that addressed caste, Dalit and subaltern issues. EFLU's Department of Cultural Studies offered most such courses and was seen as the most radical and politically challenging department in the university. It brought alongside trendy courses on film, culture, gender, feminist studies, and a course on 'Dalit Studies,' which was introduced by a former student activist and faculty member. The course has become popular in the campus, exposing the wider student community to Dalit and caste issues. Many of the Dalit and pro-subaltern students, even some from the upper-castes whom I spoke with, narrated the transformation of their political attitudes and social vision, once they got exposed to the Dalit/subaltern discourse.

Another reason behind the strength of Dalit student activism was the emergence of the 'Dalit Camera' – a YouTube channel that was mainly dedicated to video coverage of various issues related to Dalits, 'through the un-touchable eyes,' as it claims. It has become one of the most authoritative and visible Dalit media platforms nation-wide. It was founded in 2012 by a Dalit PhD student from EFLU, originally hailing from Tamil Nadu a state where Dalit politics is particularly strong. The 'Dalit Camera' was mainly run by EFLU students, belonging to different social backgrounds, even upper-castes, who were associated with DABMSA and who have gone through 'caste sensitization' in the campus. The presence of the 'Dalit Camera' was a sign of empowerment for Dalits, who have been voicing their complaints of not having their own media or sources of representation. The 'Dalit Camera' had a significant influence on shaping public discourse not only in the campus but also nationally. By bringing silenced Dalit experiences from different parts of India onto one easily accessible platform, the 'Dalit Camera' contributed to the formation of the imagined pan-Indian Dalit community. It also attracted upper-caste members, who participated in the video material production, probably not only because they were sympathetic to the social cause, but also because it was a 'modern' and 'cool' way of engaging student politics. As I came to know, the presence of the upper-caste volunteers in 'Dalit Camera' became a contested issue on the campus, as some students began questioning why instead of employing Dalits, who would be real representatives of their own cause, the 'Dalit Camera' chose upper-caste members in its team.

The EFLU campus politics is interesting in a sense that it started forming in the post-Mandal (I and II) period, marked with an active Dalit and other subaltern political assertion throughout the country. At the EFLU campus, Dalit and other subaltern groups had an social space, not dominated by other student groups, to assert their identity and turn the public debates towards Dalit and subaltern issues. The dominance of Dalit concerns was clearly seen by visual political representations in the campus public space during my fieldwork. Ambedkar's images and his quotations were displayed on the administration building as well as in the Sagar square – central meeting point of the campus – unchallenged by the presence of any other political icons; the row of subaltern icons (Jyotirao Phule, Ambedkar, Savitribai Phule, Komaram Bheem, and Periyar, near the image of Gandhi, which was framed differently and installed on another occasion) were placed at the doorway to the administration corridors or in the

women’s canteen overlooking the tables where food was usually served. Whether one related to these ideological icons or not, their presence consciously or unconsciously shaped people’s sense of place and belonging and formed the sensation that one was in the stronghold of the Dalit/subaltern movement.

While the strength of Dalit student activism on the Osmania campus might be attributed to successful mobilization of local Telugu students formerly exposed to radical left politics, in the EFLU campus Dalit activism managed to successfully outreach other non-Dalit student groups, simultaneously evolving into the broader counter-culture movement that, during the time of my fieldwork, was the most visible form of student politics in the campus.



Poster with the image of Ambedkar at the entrance to EFLU's administration building (photograph by the author)



Poster with Ambedkar’s image at Sagar square at EFLU (photograph by the author)



Dalit-Bahujan icons and Gandhi inside EFLU's administration building (photograph by the author)



Dalit-Bahujan icons in women's canteen at EFLU (photograph by the author)

From Social Justice to Counter-culture

The examples from three university campuses illustrate the process of how contentious politics is related to the appropriation of social space and reconfirms Gorrings claim that '[t]he notion of space, thus, is a central social idiom of the Dalit struggle' (2005, p. 171). Dalit student activism with its greatest resource of caste identity, Ambedkar's anti-caste ideology, and expanding lower-caste participant base, brought to public attention debates about caste and social inequality; the grievances that were previously

invisible in the public sphere of university campuses. They essentially attempted to reframe the public sphere through the subjective and ideological worldview of the Dalits, which was essentially constructed through the lens of caste and experience of untouchability.

A number of authors have showed how the Dalit socio-political movements at the grass-root level and the Dalit political parties acted to re-signify public space while marking it with their own symbols (Gorringer, 2005; Jaoul, 2006; Narayan, 2011, 2012). These accounts show that the symbolic re-signification of public space was related not only to the formation of identities/subjectivities, but also to political competition and power relations (Gorringer, 2005; Jaoul, 2012). Similar to the above mentioned works, campus social space was a battleground of different publics (student groups), their concerns, and worldviews, while Dalit students became major players in university campus politics. Dalit student activists positioned themselves as a counterpublic with regard to other student organizations in a triple sense: they sought to challenge the ideology and praxis of the dominant student groups, to change the present social system, and also to reverse the power balance in campuses. They sought social inclusion but in some of the campuses, became temporarily dominant.

Despite shared similarities (caste worldview, the icon of Ambedkar, anti-Hindu ideology, etc.), Dalit student activism in each of the studied campuses had its own specificity, which was affected by the broader socio-political context and the political culture of the campus. One could see a clear difference between the Dalit student activism in New Delhi's JNU and Hyderabad where the other universities are located, both in terms of strength and visibility of the movement and the nature of the movement's ideology. At JNU, Dalit student activism existed in the shadow of Leftist student groups that tried to appropriate the Dalit cause for their own political agendas. In JNU Dalit student activism was non-confrontational and was led largely in ideological debate form and was asserted mostly in terms of social justice with minor undertones of a more radical rhetoric asserting Dalits' natural right to lead the social justice movement in India.

Meanwhile, in Hyderabad, which had a living history of the Telangana movement, Dalits were at the forefront of student activism at large and actively engaged in appropriating other movements and their discourses. At both of the university campuses – OU and EFLU, despite their differing status (i.e. state and central), Dalit student activism was confrontational and dominant. The Dalit student activism elaborated its frame from social justice to the counter-culture movement, which enabled it to attain broader resonance and gain dominance and power to shape the social space and public debates. As a result, Dalit grievances, caste question, and Dalit-Bahujan culture temporarily took centrestage in everyday campus life, making even others speak in Dalit terms. Counterculture frame and counter positioning allowed various groups to accept Dalit discourse as a legitimate political narrative and strategy to challenge Hindu Right politics before the 2014 Parliamentary elections.

Postscript

Warner pointed out that '[a] public can only act in the temporality of the circulation that gives it existence' (2002, p. 421). I got back to these campuses in January 2019 that is five years after my PhD fieldwork. The first term of the BJP government was coming to an end and its second victory was impending in a few months. The atmosphere in the campuses has changed to a significant extent.

In JNU students were not allowed anymore to express themselves on the walls with political drawings, which was once the hallmark of liberal character of JNU. The University administration has tightened surveillance and hired a security firm which besides ensuring security also monitors student activity on campus. Vivekananda's statue,²¹ robed in a saffron sheet and protected by security staff, was waiting to be unveiled. Some professors and students complained about the administration's attempts to replace the teaching staff with the loyalists of the governing regime and about increasing fees.

In EFLU, the situation was similar. Once a Dalit political stronghold, now EFLU was devoid of student political activities and seemed to be undergoing infrastructure improvements and campus beautification. Posters with Ambedkar's images and protest writings on the walls were absent. Security guards, who had doubled in numbers since 2012, in a demonstrative military-like fashion marched through the campus during the shift exchange periods twice a day. A former student activist in EFLU, now having a position in another university in Hyderabad, told me that every time he had got back to EFLU, he felt being looked upon with suspicion because of his former student activist identity. One professor shared his bitter experience about his apartment being raided by the police in search for the 'fabricated evidence' of him having Maoist links, a worrying scenario that had occurred before and will repeat itself with other intellectuals representing and advocating Dalit and other subaltern communities.

Meanwhile, Osmania University appeared to be much calmer compared to the peak days of the Telangana movement in 2014. On university campuses, Dalits and other counterpublics withholding their breath were waiting for the upcoming Indian general elections.

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Endnotes

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- 2 For the discussion on how untouchables became Dalits, see Guru (1998), Muthukkaruppan (2014) and Zelliot (2010).
- 3 There are 42 central universities in India that are controlled by the Federal government and are known for high teaching and research quality, and fierce competition for admission. There are 310 state universities controlled by the state governments. In popular opinion, central universities are considered to be of higher prestige and research quality than the state universities.
- 4 Author's interview with Sudir at the University of Delhi, on May 3, 2013.
- 5 The names of all informants are coded.
- 6 B.R. Ambedkar (1891-1956) was the first and the most influential leader of the Dalit movement (Jaffrelot, 2012).
- 7 As part of affirmative action against the marginalized sections, the constitution of India guaranteed a reservation policy for the SC (Scheduled Caste), that is Dalits or former untouchables, and the ST (Scheduled Tribe) or indigenous groups in 1950 allotting 15 percent and 7.5 percent seats in legislatures, jobs and state-run higher education institutions. In 1991, the Government of India announced implementation of the Mandal Commission recommendations extending reservations to Other Backward Classes (OBCs)—intermediary caste groups that were supposed to be characterized by educational and political marginalization—and assigned them 27 percent of seats in government services and Public sector Undertakings (PSUs). These reforms were met with fierce opposition from the high caste groups leading to nation-wide anti-Mandal agitations. Meanwhile, the reservations for OBCs in education sphere were passed only in 2006 by the so-called Mandal II reform (Hany Babu, 2010).
- 8 Author's interview with Sushil at EFLU, February 7, 2014.
- 9 Term Bahujan (majority) was popularized by the BSP (Bahujan Samaj Party) – Dalit party that was founded by Kanshi Ram in Uttar Pradesh state in 1984. The term has been used to represent Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes and religious minorities.
- 10 For a discussion on the ideas and work of various historical anti-caste leaders, see Omvedt (2013).
- 11 Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is a Hindu Right party currently in the central government for its second term.
- 12 Author's interview with Dipak at JNU, June 2nd, 2013.

- 13 January 2020 was marked by unprecedented violence in JNU when a group of unidentified outsiders entered the campus and attacked student activists.
- 14 Author's interview with Dipak at JNU, June 2nd, 2013.
- 15 In January 2016, Rohith Vemula, a Dalit student activist from the University of Hyderabad, after being expelled from the university, committed suicide. His suicide ignited outraged protest throughout India, social media and even among the Indian diaspora. Protestors interpreted his suicide in terms of "institutional murder" committed by the discriminatory university system and the Hindu Right government, especially hostile to minorities and political opposition (Sukumar, 2016).
- 16 It's a radical left wing student organization affiliated to the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) Liberation.
- 17 Dr K.B. Hegdewar was Hindu Nationalist leader who founded the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in 1925 in Nagpur.
- 18 DABMSA Facebook page (on August 27, 2020).
- 19 Author's interview with Rakesh at EFLU, February 25, 2014.
- 20 This was a year of the intensification of the Telangana movement. In 2009 Kalvakuntla Chandrashekhar Rao, the leader of the Telangana Rashtra Samithi, declared an indefinite hunger strike, which is supposed to have influenced Indian Parliament to approve the formation of the Telangana state.
- 21 Swami Vivekananda (1863 – 1902) was a Hindu monk who contributed to the revival of Hindu spiritualism. He has been appropriated as an ideological icon by the Hindu Right groups.