

# Dissent itself is memorable

**Controversial in their struggle with the authorities and yet a fundamental democratic right in both the UK and India, the world of student protests looks set to stay, writes diya gupta**

I ATTENDED my first demonstration at the grand old age of 30. It was very civilised. We stood under umbrellas outside the Senate House in Cambridge University in the rain, and maintained silence. This marked our protest against the precipitous rise in UK student tuition fees for universities, tripled from 2012 onwards for British students, and leading to an estimated average student debt of £50,000 (about 35.5 lakh) for a three-year course. Elsewhere, demonstrations against this increase had been rocking the country. On 10 November last year, 52,000 students took to the streets of London in protest against the education policies of the UK Conservative-led coalition government, followed by protests in every major city across the country. As I stood there, forming part of a quiet, collective dissent, I wondered why I had never done this before, especially when I was a university student in India. Had the causes not interested me or had protesting itself not seemed effective?

Naini Singh, a student at the Jindal Global Law School, Delhi, and a frequent participant in demonstrations, believes that protesting reinforces social bonds. Joining a rally against the Women's Reservation Bill, supporting the Delhi Queer Pride Parade and petitioning to free formerly imprisoned Indian activist Binayak Sen, Naini met new people with similar beliefs and witnessed first hand how many others too found this shared participation valuable.

"A student protest is an act that brings people together," agrees Safdar Rahman, a student of English at Jadavpur University, Kolkata, which has a politically active student body. "Protesting cuts across a swathe of differences. People who would otherwise group themselves into a thousand dissimilar categories realise that they belong to one generation, and that can only serve the general interest of a student populace."

Cross-border political activism is a growing phenomenon among Indian students. Rohit Dasgupta, currently reading for an MA at the University of Westminster, UK, was a union representative while at Jadavpur University and demonstrated against the imprisonment of Binayak Sen and government-instigated violence at Nandigram. He took gay activism overseas, representing India at summits in Amsterdam, Copenhagen and Liverpool, and joined in the UK student protests. "As an international student and scholarship recipient, the proposed rise in tuition fees did not affect me directly," he explains. "But having participated in student and youth protest movements in India, I felt the need to support British students and be part of a collective voice."

The UK protests then forged a new identity — not one determined by nationality or race or remaining confined to those on whom this change in policy will have a direct effect. It created solidarity among people from across the UK, who felt that imposing such a financial burden on students was unfair.

Mo Saqib of Manchester University's student union was amazed to witness the sheer number of protesters at the London demonstration in November last year. "Not only were there people in the thousands, but they represented a huge diversity of backgrounds — old and young, black and white, mature students and high school pupils." Mo has no doubts about the reasons behind this recent galvanisation of the British student body. "Tuition fee levels of up to £9,000 (about 6.4 lakh) a year are ridiculously high. Students wanting to go to university will now make their decision based on how much debt they will accrue rather than



Protests in central London.



November 2010 student protests in London.

on where their interests and passions lie. This is a clear marketisation of our universities sector by the government."

And Rahul Manginani, president of the Cambridge University Students' Union, who took a leading role in several of the UK protests, affirms, "These protests have mobilised student opinion and increased general student interest in politics. The act of protesting is important — indeed, a fundamental part of any modern democracy — and it is vital that students can express their opposition to plans they disagree with."

But are protests the most effective way to register our discontent? In the UK, attention from the issues driving the protests was hijacked by violence towards physical property and police, with demonstrators storming Millbank Tower — the Conservative Party headquarters at Westminster — and defacing public monuments, resulting in arrests and injuries. Police in riot gear and their mounted counterparts, widely present at the London protests in December, were accused of heavy-handed tactics that trapped thousands in the freezing cold — events which saw Alfie Meadows, a 20-year-old student from Middlesex University, undergo three hours of emergency surgery after he was beaten with a police baton. A BBC report highlights the case of Charlie Gilmour, son of Pink Floyd guitarist David Gilmour, who has been imprisoned for 16 months following a violent rampage at the December student fees protest in central London.

In India, police brutality at demonstrations is well documented, with the firing of rubber



Demonstrations demanding Binayak Sen's release.

bullets and cane-charging a common occurrence. In June this year, students of Delhi University and Jawaharlal University protested against the violence unleashed by the Delhi police on sleeping supporters in the yoga camp of Ramdev at the Ramila grounds in Delhi. More recently, the Osmania University campus in Hyderabad has become the nerve centre for agitations over the creation of a new state of Telangana. The July demonstrations saw police firing teargas shells at hundreds of students to quell protests. Arrests were made and the university was under siege as police attempted to foil the students' indefinite fast.

This tendency of protests to snowball into violence could be a reason why Indian students in private colleges rarely organise themselves into movements of any sort. They are also often not allowed to do so by the authorities, with pamphlets and posters being frowned upon and no student elections taking place. "Organised student movements mainly arise from the political factions existing in the student body in government-run higher education institutions, and are therefore created along political party lines," says Vikrant Dadawala, a student of English at Jadavpur University. This could explain the disillusionment that many Indian students feel in the birth of activism: student political movements are seen as petty political wrangling between parties played out on a smaller scale. Student protests at Ashutosh College in Kolkata, for example, are rarely peaceful, frequently escalating into armed clashes between Trinamul Congress and CPI(M) youth wings. Many students do not wish to toe the inevitable jingoism and sloganeering of any party line or enter the often murky waters of campus politics.

Yet there is room for democratic assertions in Indian student life, with significant victories

achieved. Aritra Banerjee of Presidency University, Kolkata, and a member of the Students' Federation of India, explains that he participated in protests to make a case for developing the former college into an improved place for study, with fully equipped libraries and laboratories, better research careers and campus placements. "The protests became fruitful when the institution was granted university status at the West Bengal assembly," he explains. "We hope that this will result in Presidency University remaining a premier institute for liberal arts and sciences in India." He also recalls a recent peaceful protest by

Presidencians demanding an upgrade of the security system within the campus after a first-year student was severely beaten by drunken older students. "There was heavy police surveillance on us, but our protest was against violence and we were determined to remain calm," he clarifies. "Authorities on campus are now much more vigilant."

A concerted student protest from the Faculties of Arts, Science and Engineering against the imposition of a "code of conduct" within Jadavpur University was widely reported by the media last year. This would have banned street plays and the use of the university's open-air theatre, asked for identity cards before students could enter the campus and restricted political activity in general. Now, after the protest, the authorities are ready to negotiate such issues with students. "It was a 52-hour demonstration and the experience was inspiring," asserts Soham Kar, a student of Economics at the university.

But is protesting futile or merely tokenistic if the demonstrators' demands are not met? In the UK, the student marches did not achieve their immediate aim. The vote for higher tuition fees was passed by MPs by a narrow margin, and most universities will be charging \$9,000 per year from 2012. Rahul Manginani, however, thinks that the protests were effective: they mobilised student opinion and helped the campaign at Cambridge University to save student bursaries. Mo Saqib feels that the long-term effects of the protests will continue to reverberate in British society. "With an entire generation of students being betrayed, these students will voice their discontent where it matters most to politicians — at the general election ballot box, come 2015."

Student protests negotiate uncomfortable, often troubled waters. They forge new identities and express solidarity across groups, but these combined voices do not have a peaceful origin. Students unite to protest because they are angry; a demonstration is a physical manifestation of collective dissent. And the act of dissent, as Naini Singh says, is itself memorable. More student protests are being planned for autumn 2011 in the UK; the dispute over Telangana in India is far from over yet.

Controversial in their struggle with authorities and yet a fundamental democratic right in both the UK and India, the world of student protests looks set to stay.

institutions. The Nobel laureate, too, spoke in the same vein when he observed that along with Presidency, other institutes of learning like Jadavpur University needed attention from the government. He clarified his position saying that although as an adviser he could not "take any decision", so far as "restoring its glory is concerned", the group members would their best. In fact, he voiced the sentiments of the people of the state when he said that the overall standard of higher education needed to be improved.

As to what transpired during his talks with the chief minister, he said he "had a discussion on the issue" with her: she wanted them to "work towards the development of the standard of education in the state" and promised that the "decisions and suggestions" of the mentor group would be implemented. With characteristic élan he declined to comment on the standard of Presidency University unless and until he had "evidences about its standard and analyse them well."

Evidently, there is no ambiguity about the new government's priorities. To begin with, it must try to put a stop to further commercialisation of education. It is a Herculean task but the government must explore the possibilities to achieve that goal most dexterously.

Secondly, the state government should institute scholarships, arrange for educational loans and introduce fee waiver schemes for students belonging to this category so that they can continue their studies even in select privately managed institutions of repute. Coaching centres for civil services, the National Entrance Test, State level Entrance Test and the IIT entrance examinations should also be set up to enhance the employability of students of the state universities.

## On the wall

**Gautam Banerjee explains why the Central Selection Committee needs revamping**

STUDENTS attending last week's counselling session went on a rampage over the Tuition Fee Waiver scheme and the chief minister was prompted to intervene and apologise for the mishandling of the process. The outburst was, however, due mainly to the Central Selection Committee's mismanagement of the situation. The TFW scheme debuted this year as per a All India Council For Technical Education directive. It allows an additional three per cent seats for all colleges — these seats being super-numeric, beyond the normal approved strength. The AICTE allowed respective state governments to fix the threshold level of family income to determine eligibility and formulate the modalities of allotment. That the CSC was callous about the task was clear from the fact that it allocated just one day for completion of the screening process and TFW allocation.

Determining eligibility and publishing a list of eligible candidates is certainly no easy task, more so because a quota of Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe candidates was incorporated in the scheme at the last minute. But no seat matrix was declared till the time fixed for commencement of the counselling session. It is alleged that the colleges were in the dark and the number of reservations did not correspond to the quota prescribed. Also, the streams for the reserved quota were chosen at random and followed no procedure or guidelines. All of this delayed commencement of the allocation process, which antagonised many candidates who had come from distant districts. Though the government declared the eligibility limit for family income, for many the necessary certificate of proof was not clear. Quite a number of students approaching the counters to seek eligibility were rejected on technical grounds and some grew restive because they wanted time to get endorsements from the necessary authorities. It was clearly a blunder by the CSC to conduct both these operations on the same day. It could have allowed more time in advance for willing students to register their names and a final list could have been prepared for allocation on the appointed day.

So the inevitable happened. Faced with the prospect not making the TFW list, some students resorted to pressure tactics to win eligibility. As tensions mounted, things went out of hand. In the melee, as is claimed by some onlookers, some outsiders saw fit to vandalise the venue.



The CSC's allocation process has for long been alleged to be a money making business for many, but this time some with a proximity to the previous regime failed to garner the advantages so long enjoyed. Could these disgruntled elements have fuelled the trouble? Again, with the minister for higher education having expressed his surprise about the autonomous authority of the CSC, it would be interesting to determine this committee's legal status.

Over the past 10 years, regular articles in this column have questioned the CSC's legal status. Under what authority it collects fees from students attending counselling is not clear. There are complaints that accounts in the past were not audited properly. That even high-value tenders relating to computerised displays were awarded on a single tender basis. Year after year there have been complaints galore about the poor performance of the computerised displays, yet the system has never been revamped nor has any permanent set-up been planned.

It has also been alleged that the occasional fault in the system comes handy for manipulation through the resultant manual allocations; that the procedure of allocations is not fully explained and that only a selected few are passed crucial information. A couple of years back, candidates were not informed that they would have to waitlist themselves for an opportunity in recounselling. When the actual recounselling process began, candidates without a waitlist entry were denied allotment. The scandal was hushed up despite an outcry, perhaps for the simple reason that then government functionaries were in the know.

Possibly the worst case of nepotism was witnessed in the last decade when a senior CPI(M) leader's son was favoured with a seat in the Bengal Engineering and Science University though an innovative but crude method. Seats in that stream had been exhausted much earlier. The chairman, after making a dramatic entry into the counselling hall, declared the vacancy due to a dropout in the stream. It was all too obvious that the candidate sought and got a seat he could have never have achieved had there been a transparent procedure. That the politician is often in the news for the wrong reasons is another story; but his son proved to be helpful for Besu, because it was during his "stay" there the institution was polarised in a political divide. Interestingly, a logical tuition fee hike was avoided by the then government just to avoid a backlash. Yet the same government kept mum when counselling fees were increased, and without any official order! The logic or reasoning behind this was never questioned; as though the decision of an "autonomous body" warrants no scrutiny.

While higher education minister Bratya Basu is keen to discover the details, it would be as much in order to probe the gross misdeeds that have taken place in the past. A revamp is mandatory in the allocation system of engineering seats in Bengal. Every year problems surface at the time of counselling. Despite promises of improvement, there is total inaction till counselling for the next year comes knocking. At which time ad hocism is allowed to prevail and no revamp is allowed. A task force to find a permanent solution is the crying need of the hour. And a mandate is definitely necessary to ensure that the total control of "big name" universities and a few government colleges is removed. The government needs to act independently, as is done in all other states.

## A new beginning

**There can be no doubt about the Mamata government's top priority — it must first rein in commercialisation of education, says ardhendu chatterjee**

SPEAKING at a seminar in Kottayam on "Complexities in the Education Sector", organised as part of the 40th state conference of All India Students Federation Dr Prabhat Patnaik, former Vice-Chairman of the Kerala State Planning Board, regretted that "Higher education is fast becoming a commodity by its very nature and is being limited to a package. The process of commercialisation of education is leading to its destruction, and affecting young minds in free thinking and probing..." That higher education was turning into "a saleable commodity like onions and potatoes" was, according to him, a telling comment on the state of affairs in the country.

Well, he couldn't be more accurate for, despite the apex court's ruling that educational institutions cannot be allowed to fleece learners, we have hundreds of profit-making "teaching shops" in the country. Citing the example of Western universities like Stanford, Harvard and Columbia that could "maintain a commitment and benchmark for excellence on their own" with the promoter's investment being "more or less in the form of charity", he observed that India needed "a system that produces intellectuals who are committed to building the nation."

We have, however, no dearth of "intellectuals" of the stature Dr Patnaik had in mind, but

unfortunately they are often sidelined when it comes to planning and formulating education policies. But West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee seems to be cautious not to make this mistake. To begin with, she has formed a mentor group of eight scholars from India and abroad with Sugata Bose, grand-nephew of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose and a Harvard university professor of history, as chairman, and Nobel laureate economist Amartya Sen as adviser to the chairman, to restore the pristine glory of Presidency College, now rechristened Presidency University following its elevation, to commemorate its historic role in cradling the 19th century Bengal renaissance and nurturing the Bengali intelligentsia at the height of the British rule.

Banerjee has also roped in Sam Pitroda, the Prime Minister's adviser on public information infrastructure and innovations, as her government's "chief adviser on Bengal's resurgence" whose "advice will be of great use to us." Apart from providing help in respect of information technology, he will guide the state government "on how the state's image — with its culture, arts, knowledge, industry and commerce — can be presented before the world in a better way."

Soon after having "a brief dialogue on parivartan (change)" with the chief minister at Writers' on 16 July, Pitroda observed that although Bengal was a "big state with big problems", he could still act as a "catalyst" in the development of sectors such as technology, education, innovation and health that needed "massive change". True, he might not be able to



Dr Prabhat Patnaik

make it to Kolkata frequently but in "this age of communication" he didn't "really need to keep showing up physically for this purpose" with his "heart and mind" being in Bengal. He said, "What has happened in the last 30 years is behind us" but Bengal needed "a definite direction for the next 30 years". In a lighter vein he added that being 70 he was "in a hurry" and didn't "have much time" like Banerjee who is "also in a hurry because she wants to do a lot of things."

Hopefully, the mentor group for the improvement of Presidency University has started its groundwork in the light of the guidance of Professor Sen to achieve its supreme goal of making it a centre — and not an island — of excellence. At a recent programme at Town Hall Professor Bose, whose biography of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose was released by Professor Sen, hit the nail on the head when he said that if they succeeded in bringing back "the glory of Presidency", it could be "a model" for other