

Student Unrest: Similarities in Student Movements in India and the United States

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The international aspects of current student protests have been widely publicized by the news-media. In perusing popular literature, however, the varying causes of student unrest across the nations are not always clear. The issues are further confounded by the fact that the "explanations" forwarded for student revolt are much the same in all countries. For instance, all the explanations given for this state of affairs in the United States are also advanced by the educated classes in India, but the Indian man-in-the-street has an explanation unavailable, and probably inadmissible in America, namely that it is the *Age of Kali*. (The *Age of Kali* is the last in the life cycle of *Brahma*, The Supreme Being. At the end of this period, *Brahma* destroys Himself and the world; then he recreates Himself and the life-cycle starts all over again.) During this period all manner of evil is expected to befall the earth, including the episodes of student revolt against the "guru", the transmitter of knowledge and wisdom—a relationship erstwhile held to be sacred. This explanation of the inevitable should, perhaps, be added to the repertoire of explanations already in existence regarding student unrest. However, a general adoption of such a philosophy may lead to the "do nothing" stand that seems prevalent in India today.

Indian students have experience and example in revolution. Many of the people in top social, economic, and political positions today were the revolutionary participants in the struggle for independence during their student days. In fact, for many years it was true that one had to have the "jail stamp" before aspiring to rise in the social and political world. Yet these same "revolutionaries" demand submission from student "reactionaries" today — a discrepancy not unnoticed by those involved in the current civil disorders in India.

Of course, revolution, even among students, is not unknown in America. There was a period of relative calm on campuses before Berkeley unleashed the revolutionary spirit in America; there was no similar

period of quiet acquiescence on Indian campuses, however, and revolt has succeeded in doing little else but furthering the deterioration of an already inept educational system.

The reasons behind the student movements in America are totally incomprehensible to the people, including students, in India. Perhaps the rest of the world shares the same bewilderment. After all, what do American students have to complain about? American higher education is within the reach of all who want it seriously enough, and it is this same education that has helped establish and maintain the most powerful social, economic and political superstructure in the world. American students are probably the richest among their contemporaries: they own cars, live in their own apartments, and have generous allowances. Even American dormitories look like luxury hotels to Indian students. Students in America do not want for food or clothing. Freedom between the sexes appears to be unrestricted. And above all, the college graduate can look forward to a promising career upon graduation. Sit-ins and demonstrations over student codes or release of academic personnel make little sense. The political and social basis for revolt, such as civil rights marches, make little more sense, but just a little more. It is unlikely that Indian students will demonstrate for caste equality.

The impression of American student demonstrations was well expressed by one student dissident at an Indian rally, who said, "American students play at revolution. To them it is a new toy. To us in India, revolution is as meaningful as life. We fight for life's necessities."

What is student unrest in India all about? It is the human cry against a creeping hopelessness — the instinct of life doing battle with the forces that spell death — poverty, hunger, disease, and a debilitating apathy. If we were to apply Maslow's hierarchy of needs in comparing student movements, then it

would appear that while students in India struggle at the primary need level (a basic need for food, shelter, etc.), the American students' struggle is at a much higher level of needs, namely that of status and respect. Thus the American movement does not have the "gut level" urgency of the Indian variety. The idiosyncratic twist lies in the fact that the American students are more likely to achieve their ends than are the Indians. (Perhaps this is to be expected in the *Age of Kali*.)

Indian students are likely to go unnoticed, by and large, because of the traditional "non-importance" of the young. Unlike America, it is age that is respected in India. In fact it is roughly analogous that the extent to which Americans worship youth, Indians venerate age. Consequently, although some universities have closed down due to student demonstrations, it is improbable that any of the student demands will be met. Educational institutions in India will re-open and continue along old, well-established paths. Examinations will continue to "leak"; hostels will continue to be "pens"; the portion of curry on student platters will continue to be insufficient and inedible. (But, the American hamburger is plentiful and the pickle is free!)

Comparatively, the American Establishment is a little more confused about its position. They listen to student demands, they confront students, and they talk. Since at least half of those in the Establishment wish they were youthful, it is likely that any ensuing compromise will be favorable towards student demands. As more student ideas become incorporated into the Establishment, it will have changed enough so that most American dissidents can bring themselves to actively participate in its preservation by the time they reach the venerable age of thirty.

It is difficult to predict what the outcome of student unrest will be in India. Total frustration continued over a prolonged period of time may produce an unprecedented apathy, or conversely, a toughened, revolutionary determination. If either of these alternatives come to pass, then the Indian Establishment stands to lose much if not collapse completely.

Communism, of course, has made major inroads into the student movement in India. Not that anyone seriously believes it is a better alternative, but it is an alternative. In a society where the majority of the people (and in particular young adults) feel they have nothing to lose, then change even without the proportion of "good" seems to become attractive and

desirable. Revolution offers the student-generation a means of shaping their own lives. Within the context of Indian society today this is most meaningful. Communism's appeal lies, perhaps, in its promise of a change-of-pace, for better or for worse.

Although the hard-core elements in the student movement in America may be leaning towards a communist orientation, many of those who are now against the Establishment are the idealistic "flower-children." Hippie-ism has no counterpart on the Indian scene, and, it might be added, no sympathy. The Indian students who spoke out on this issue considered the hippies an affront to India, and felt that India's national pride was hurt by such American fads. Maharishi Mahesh Yogi is a leader without followers in India. It is not the peace that he attains through transcendental meditation that arouses Indian emotions, but his "pad" in some hidden Himalayan valley and his private airplane.

India's student revolutionaries are not the products of the affluent upper middle class. The student movement identifies with and finds support within the circles of organized labor which forms the lower strata of Indian society. (There is also the little-or-no income group that is too browbeaten to even consider the possibility of collectivization.) Because hunger and want are never far away, the Indian students' orientation to revolution is different from that of his American counterpart. For too long the Indians have seen the other, much tougher side of the kind of life idealized by the hippies. Community living may be beautiful idealistically, but in reality it can become tyrannical, completely abrogating individual freedom. The philosophy of "enough for today" can lead to hunger and starvation tomorrow. Lack of a strong, central, and impersonal authority can lead to communal battles with much terror and bloodshed. It is with an understanding of this chaos, and the desire to correct it that students in India protest. Incredibly enough, America's "flower-children" seem to want these very same things. Salvation seems to lie in the ability of malcontents to learn from each other's experiences.

A real need exists for a more tolerable society. But all of us, both in the East and in the West, both student and Establishment, are so caught up in our passion for supremacy that we allow ourselves little time to reflect on our own and each other's virtues. Are we really that busy exploiting each other's weaknesses?