



## Journal of Human Rights and Peace Studies

journal homepage: <https://www.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/HRPS/index>



# Student Activism in Indian Universities: A means of improving human rights awareness

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### ARTICLE INFO

### ABSTRACT

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#### **Article History:**

Received: 01-Dec-2022

Revised: 23-Dec-2022

Accepted: 27-Dec-2022

#### **Keywords:**

*student activism, human rights consciousness, social justice, student union*

This study investigates the agency of university student activists in educating themselves and others about human rights, through engagement in grassroots campaigns for social justice within and beyond the campus. The study raises the following research questions: what are the sources of human rights consciousness that help building an understanding of human rights among student activists; what role does activism play in developing human rights consciousness of the student activists; and how student activists raise human rights consciousness among other students? To answer these questions, a critical qualitative methodology was employed. The study found out that historical, cultural, racial and family background plays a significant role in shaping the human rights and social justice worldview of the student activists. The youth activism offers varied opportunities to the student activists to strengthen their ideas of social justice and human rights consciousness. The building and strengthening of human rights consciousness leads to educating others about social justice and respect for human rights.

## **Introduction**

This study investigates the agency of university student activists in educating themselves and others about human rights, through engagement in grassroots campaigns for social justice within and beyond the campus. The area of youth activism in schools has been extensively explored but student activism from the perspective of human rights at university level is understudied and calls for special research attention. The current study would add to the overall discourse on student activism and human rights education in universities.

## **Context**

The history of student activism in India dates back to the pre-independence era. The national movement for India's independence sought participation of the students as active members of the civilian population. A call made by Mahatma Gandhi inspired students to leave their schools and colleges and join the non-cooperation movement against the colonial regime (Chandra et al., 1989). The student activism continued to flourish after 1947 and campuses remained the bedrock of student politics.

Nevertheless, over the past decade, across India, the space for liberal values guaranteeing freedom of speech, debate, dissent, choice of food and dress, and civil right activism has contracted. Moreover, the right to education has come under scrutiny with the debate on whether education is a public good. The National Education Policy-2020 paved the way for private higher education institutions by inviting them to establish campuses (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020). This is due to increase in Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) rate in senior secondary school education which is currently 79.6 per cent (Ministry of Education, 2022). The increase in GER in senior secondary school implies a high demand for higher education. This is good news for private universities and for those who can afford high

fees, but the huge hike in fees has effectively denied access to a large number of eligible students who graduate from senior secondary schools.

Following a successful student-led Pan-Indian fee hike protest in 2019, higher education institutions in India have witnessed a series of student movements on issues ranging from freedom of speech, affordable and quality higher education, rights of depressed castes and tribes, women, minorities, migrants, and, notably, on citizenship. The public universities have had to roll back fee hikes, and students have turned greater attention to grassroots struggles for justice and human rights for marginalised groups beyond the campus. These developments seek an in-depth study of student activists' role in promoting an understanding of concept, standards, and mechanisms of human rights and bring in more students in the ambit of activism for ensuring social justice on campus and outside.

### **Student activism and human rights education**

McDevitt and Chaffee (2002) argued that the agency of the youth is vital in initiating and shaping the discussions on civic issues at home. Some youth activists have an inherent abhorrence against injustice, inequality, and unfair treatment and some inculcate it through socialisation. We know that families do shape the sense of social justice amongst youth (Davies et al., 2014). Thus, it can be inferred that both sets of youth, inherently motivated and socially trained, constitute the body of student activists who are taking the lead in university activism. The violation of rights of anyone or acts of social injustice is the concern of practically every student activist in India (Hazary, 1988). Hall (2019) argued that the aim of activism is to bring in social and political change. Student activism offers an informal space to impart human right education wherein student activists become pedagogues while leading a student protest. Once engaged in activism, students naturally assume the role of educators (Davies et al., 2014).

The agency of youth has long been vital in the campaign for human rights in the form of ensuring social justice and equality. The youth population has witnessed a substantial increase worldwide in the last decade (DeJaeghere et al., 2016). Ortiz and Cummins (2011) termed this growth "youth bulge" and in India it is identified as "demographic dividend" by

the National Knowledge Commission (2007). The knowledge economy and society imbued with the spirit of human rights is significantly dependent on active participation of the youth. The higher education institutions are a critical site in raising and disseminating human rights consciousness among the youth. Freire condemns the banking concept of education in which students are the repository of knowledge transferred to them by teachers, and calls for an emancipatory education wherein students actively engage in the process of education (1998). Raza (2019) considers student protest and movement as a source of emancipatory education which educates students to become catalysts of social change. Sastry (2020) sees student activism as warp and weft of enlightened social matrix. The vibrant student activism in Indian universities manifests itself in campaigns or *dhamas* (peaceful demonstration) aimed at raising and resolving difficult issues of equality, opportunity, and social justice. Student activism prepares the ground for advocacy of human rights and trains youths of all hues in active citizenship vital to the strengthening of liberal democracy (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). The presence of student activism on campus is a step in the direction of liberal democracy through emancipatory education.

The understanding of student activism is significant for the academic community as it can play a constructive role in prospective university reforms (Altbach, 1989). Ramaswamy (2020) argues that campus agitation is an outcome of breakdown of communication between the administration and the student body. Majumder (2020) suggests that student activism is a rational way of discussing politics. In this context, the current study attempts to understand the role of student activism in improving human rights awareness in Indian higher education institutions.

## Methodology

This study employs a critical qualitative research methodology to understand the role of student activism in improving human rights awareness in Indian universities. The critical qualitative research is one of several genres of inquiry into non-quantifiable features of social

research (Carspecken, 1996, p. 3). The fundamental assumption of criticalist scholars is that every society is marred with inequality, oppression, and unequal power relations which are sometimes apparent and often hidden. Hence, the aim of critical qualitative research is to ensure social change through unbiased social research. It has been successfully applied by various scholars in different social settings to study diverse social phenomena (Carspecken, 1996). Critical qualitative research delves around three types of validity claim, namely objective (directly accessible to all), subjective (directly accessible to the subject actor) and normative (consensus among all whether some actions are proper and appropriate according to prevalent norms). In other words, objective category signifies “the world”, subjective category suggests “my world” and normative category entails “our world”.

Any research delving on human experiences encounters the three validity claims. On the basis of the claims, five stages have been evolved in critical qualitative research: compiling primary record, preliminary reconstructive analysis, dialogical data generation, describing system relations and system relations as explanations of findings (Carspecken & Apple, 1992; Carspecken, 1996). The five stages are not tightly compartmentalised and are interactive in nature. For instance, while building on primary record the researcher might feel the need for going back to the participants to clarify any emergent doubts or issues for clarity. The purpose is to put forward participant’s views/arguments/opinions without any distortion or imposing researcher’s perspective on them. The study addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the sources of human rights consciousness amongst student activist other than student activism? (Objective, subjective categories)

2. How does student activism in Indian universities impact on student activists’ understandings of human rights standards and mechanisms? (Objective, subjective, normative categories)

3. To what degree are the activities of student activist instrumental in exposing and orienting other students to human rights concepts through protests and campaigns for justice on campus? (Objective, subjective, normative categories)

## **Activists' profiles**

To explore the above questions, 17 student activists (seven women and 10 men) were interviewed about their journey as campaigners for social justice on campus. Their institutions cover a wide territorial nexus located in New Delhi, Srinagar (Jammu & Kashmir), Allahabad and Varanasi (Uttar Pradesh), Patna (Bihar), Kolkata (West Bengal), Guwahati and Lakhimpur (Assam), Bengaluru (Karnataka), Chennai (Tamil Nadu), and Thiruvananthapuram (Kerala). The reference of participating student activists was attained through a few known activists. Later on, participants voluntarily suggested other names whom they thought were relevant for this study.

The study reflects on activists' motivations, since many had themselves experienced the violation of their dignity and rights, while others were sensitive to the pain of the aggrieved. Some of the student activists had earlier studied in private universities and later moved to government HE institutions. They compared their experiences of activism in the two types of institutions, and the study in some measure captured the state of student activism both in private and public universities.

The student activists came from different socio-economic, linguistic, religious, and geographical backgrounds. The medium of conversation was English and all student activists were well versed in the language. An open ended questionnaire was prepared and interviews were scheduled according to the activists' availability. The interviews, spread over a month, were done virtually and recorded. Post-interview conversations were held over the phone through calls and texts. The interesting part of the interview process was participants' curiosity in knowing the *raison d'être* of such a study. The answers to their queries helped build a relationship of trust with the participants. Moreover, the researcher's long association with the research on human rights softened them up. To maintain anonymity of the participants, pseudonyms are used.

## **Discussion**

There are three segments in this section addressing the three research questions posed in the beginning. The research questions are answered under the following headings: 1) sources of human rights consciousness amongst student activists; 2) student activism as a source of understanding of human rights; and 3) student activists as pedagogues of social justice and human rights education.

### **Sources of human rights consciousness amongst student activists**

The following section attempts to understand the role played by sources other than student activism, such as family background, lived discriminatory experiences, and university as a space to inculcate human rights consciousness amongst student activists. Following this, the next section reflects on the processes of student activism by which student activists gain a better understanding of human rights. The last section of the discussion focuses on student activists assuming the role of a human rights educator and promoting awareness about social justice and human rights among fellow students.

### **Family and shaping of human right consciousness**

The family is the key institution of socialisation process in the society. Through socialisation, children pick up values, beliefs, and political ideas at home (Braungart, 1971). The familial socialisation gets refined at school while learning new ethos and values. The participants of the study acknowledged that the active engagement of their family members in student politics played a vital role in creating an ideal image of activism. The young minds got initiated into the idea of activism at home and took it up formally as they joined the university. Sukanya is from north-east India and the region is politically fervent. She gives her family credit for inspiring her:

*I have a history of student protesters in my family. My uncle and father were student leaders in their colleges. They were always an inspiration and I joined student activism because of my family history.*

Assam is another politically tense state in north-east India. Nalin grew up in Assam when insurgency was at its peak. His grandfather was a trade unionist and had a tough life in a state affected by insurgency. Nalin got his first dose of activism at home under his grandfather's mentorship:

*I grew up in a curfew-ridden era. Indian Penal Code Section 144 was so common in Assam that each child knew what to do when 144 was in vogue. It was not taught to us and we learnt about it through our daily experiences. My grandfather was a trade union member and I learnt activism from home.*

Nalin shared collective experiences of children of his age group who grew up in a human rights hostile environment. Their basic rights, such as freedom of mobility or congregation, were regularly violated and this experience taught him to fight for his and other's rights later when he entered the university.

Karmakar hails from Uttar Pradesh and the violence he received from his aunt's hand shaped his human rights worldview:

*As a child, I lived with my aunt, and the violence I experienced during my childhood made me what I am today. My family background, typical patriarchal upper caste, gave me a privileged position and I always questioned it.*

Karmakar chose a non-violent path after experiencing violence in his childhood and his upper caste privileged background on the contrary made him stand against that position and be critical of the hierarchical and patriarchal features of caste based practices in his family. His perspective was in line with what MacGregor noted about upper caste students

relinquishing caste based privileges and striving for social justice (MacGregor, 2016). Similarly, Altbach (1991) found that student activists constituted a minority that came from wealthy and politically proactive backgrounds. Hence, the students from upper caste and privileged background tend to take the lead in the protests against human rights violation and for social justice. A similar experience is being shared by Ishita who holds an advantageous societal position and never faced any discrimination of any sort but took up the activism voluntarily:

*I come from an upper class background and my class position has always protected me from any kind of discrimination from my peers and teachers. I have seen students being discriminated against on the basis of their caste, class, and other factors but I had never experienced any discrimination because of my family background.*

In the case of Ishita, the sticking point was the discriminatory attitude of her fellow privileged class members towards the marginalised section of the society. Her activism was motivated by a genuine desire for respect and dignity of all. Tsutsui and Wotipka (2004) found out that the people with more resources were prone to get involved in human rights movements, and Ishita's upper class background may have facilitated her decision to pursue activism in the university.

Prem is another participant from backward class in Uttar Pradesh who provided instances of social inequalities:

*I come from a village in the eastern Uttar Pradesh. The journey from a rural background to a university was not less than a roller coaster ride. I come from a backward class background and the village life was filled with inequalities and since then, for me the right to equality is the most important human right.*

For Prem, the journey of upward mobility from a rural schooling background to a top university in a city was not easy. There were barriers of language, caste, and class emanating from his rural background to joining an urban university but he overcame the obstacles and

got the admission. He described how he learnt English to qualify the entrance exam as the medium of instruction in school was Hindi. His lived experiences of inequities made an activist out of him who believed in an egalitarian campus and for which he worked.

### **Facing discrimination and human rights consciousness**

Personal experiences play a critical role in shaping one's world view. The participants shared how their daily life experiences were discriminatory and instrumental in raising their human rights consciousness. Once the consciousness was there, the student activists ensured that self-respect and the dignity of everyone else was duly respected:

*Being from North-East India, we face discrimination on a regular basis. My friend was discriminated on campus on the basis of his racial features. I took up his case and started protesting. I was threatened by the anti-social elements and the administration tried to put me off and wanted me not to take it forward. Finally, the administration apologised to him.*

Amita, a woman student activist, believes that the way human rights are looked at by individuals is primarily dependent on culture, history and daily experiences they have. In her case, she experienced racial prejudices often but protested against it when her friend fell prey to it. She went on with the protest even after getting threats by the administration and hostile elements. Davis (2011) argued that the individual's sense of belonging to a social group or geographical and cultural affinity is the guiding principle in making judgements. In Amita's case a sense of cultural, social and geographical affinity with her friend encouraged her to take up his cause through protest and ensured redressal.

Neel's family came to India from Bangladesh as refugees in the early 1960s and has not been able to get over the trauma of forced migration experienced long back. He is into

activism due to his family history of migration. He is also very conscious of the rights of the migrants and strongly favours their cause:

*My father had to migrate from Bangladesh following a massacre. My family had to go through a lot. We are still treated as outsiders. The citizenship amendment act has generated a controversy and once again we feel vulnerable as we came here as migrants and after living here for so many decades we are still considered outsiders. I personally feel that the rights of the migrants are very important.*

The citizenship amendment bill created widespread unrest and it seems that Neel was sensitive to it and, hence, participated in almost all the protests organised by the student union against the bill.

Azad grew up in an insurgency prone environment and his childhood experiences consisted of gunshots from different weapons. The violence around him during his growing up years shaped him into an activist:

*The environment I grew up in 1990 was very hostile, full of gunshots. We could distinguish which shot was from which gun. I was 14 and I was able to tell whether it was a grenade or a gunshot from AK47. We had detailed knowledge about these things.*

On asking why did he not fall for the path of violence even after experiencing it for so long, Azad responded that the answer to violence is not always violence. He insisted on the efficacy of dialogue and quoted Spivak that “your voice should not be muzzled and you should develop yourself in such a way that your voice is there along with your existence”. He is well versed with Spivak’s work and critical theorists and believes in peaceful activism despite a violent historical background.

### University space as a source of raising human rights consciousness

Habermas (1969/1987) while discussing the role of universities, highlighted political consciousness among students as one of the most important contributions. Student activism in a university is a manifestation of that political consciousness. Asim, a participant, shared that it was the university space that introduced him to the ideas of equality and social justice:

*The university exposed me to the idea of equality and social justice. Attracted towards the ideas of socialism and communism created spark in me and motivated me to fight for the cause of social justice. I am still looking for more opportunities wherein I can contribute as an individual in ensuring social justice.*

The university spaces are the sites of democratic dialogical processes. For Asim, exposure to the ideas of socialism and communism made him think critically about social justice and took up every issue involving social injustice. While discussing his journey of activism, he gave the example of sanitary workers' salaries which were not paid for months. Since he got to know about it, he along with his other activist friends initiated a sit in protest and encouraged sanitary workers to join in. Asim's call to sanitary workers to join in the protest resonates with Spivak's (2004) argument i.e., the sufferer has to raise the voice to bring in the change. Moreover, Freire (1998) saw the redemption of oppressed only in voicing their concerns to the oppressor. Asim's decision of including the aggrieved party in the protest is an indication of his faith in the agency of oppressed in seeking justice, too.

The university spaces also include extramural activities such as theatre, photography, music, and dance club, which are crucial in instilling human rights consciousness amongst students through creative imagination. Derbyshire and Hodson (2008) argued that the theatrical treatment of human rights ensures wider dissemination of information, arouses compassion and raises consciousness in a way that is particular to that form (p.191). Fatima observed that school and formal curriculum have content on human rights issues but their transaction is not as effective as compared to theatrical representation of human rights concerns. For instance,

feminism and patriarchy are commonly used terms but they are not easy to understand as the discourse is filled with difficult jargons and technical terminologies. Hence, theatre becomes useful in addressing complex and difficult concepts or themes without losing rigour:

*Feminism and patriarchy were just words for me, there was a paragraph or two on these themes in the school textbook. I got to understand these terms and their wider implications for dignity of a woman and her independent existence while watching a street play done by the drama society of the university.*

As raising human rights consciousness amongst student is their main purpose, imaginative and informal mediums have been employed by the university students to communicate their views on human rights issues effectively.

India is a diverse country with complex needs and aspirations of the regional states. Some states in India are experiencing insurgency due to historical reasons. Kashmir is one such example where there are many unsettled issues that are causing constant struggle between the state and sections of the society. Sikander, a student activist, was convinced that the discussion on human rights is not part of classroom teaching and discussion but of informal conversations that take place at informal places such as small tea stalls, eateries, and playground:

*Human rights violation is a daily discourse in Kashmir but universities have no place for human rights discussion in the classrooms. However, in open spaces such as dhaba (eatery), canteen, gymnasium, stadium, playground everybody from students to teachers discuss about human rights violation taking place in Kashmir.*

As seen from the quotation above, the participants in the conversations in informal settings involve not only students but also teachers. Sikander shared that the classrooms teaching-learning processes are monitored by the administration and show cause notices can be issued against any teacher or student. The fear of being watched by the administration

restrains the teachers from discussing human rights issues in classrooms. Due to these challenges, teachers and students have turned towards informal spaces for conversations, teaching and learning of the status of rights in their local context and comparing it with the national and international scenario.

### **Student activism: a source of understanding of human rights**

The current section looks at how activism infuses students with an understanding of social justice and encourages them to raise their voice against injustices taking place on campus and beyond. Kirshner (2007) argued that while engaged in activism, the youths not only contribute in the cause of social justice but this whole process of engagement is a learning-development experience for them. Navit, a participant to this study shared that activism is an integral part of overall culture of the campus and an ongoing learning experience:

*In the discourse outside the classroom and on campus, various issues are taken up and activism becomes a part of the whole curriculum. Right to citizenship and shelter are the areas/themes students are currently getting oriented and exposed to. The activism on campus led students to expose the repercussions of citizenship amendment bill for the vulnerable.*

It was due to student activism that the issues of right to citizenship and citizenship amendment bill have been raised on various campuses. The bill is seen as discriminatory as it allows access to Indian citizenship to the refugees who are followers of particular religions and excludes the rest. There were protests all over India even though opinions were divided on the issue. It was at this juncture that the student unions of different universities took it upon themselves to provide a comprehensive explanation of the hidden and apparent intentions of the state with regard to the citizenship amendment bill. The discussions around the bill educated students about a crucial and basic human right and how it is going to affect millions of Indians residing in India for decades but would have to offer a proof of their

citizenship now. In many cases they do not have the papers to prove their ancestry and stand to lose their right to citizenship once the bill became a law. Hence, the role of student activism in raising major social and political issues and getting students acquainted with the implications of these on the vulnerable section of the society is evident in the case of citizenship bill.

Student activists' search for innovative mediums to communicate their radical ideas sometimes leads them to campus walls. Asim admitted that campus walls with revolutionary slogans of different student political groups tended to strike a conversation with an onlooker who then starts thinking. This often leads to curiosity to know more about the student political group and perhaps encourage students to join the group or the cause.

*The walls of the university campus are filled with posters, slogans, ideas of different student political groups. We get to learn so much from these walls. The university walls talk to us through these posters.*

The campus walls covered in graffiti are an effective means of communication. The images and inscriptions they carry are colourful and powerful. These serve as educative material for causes and movements. The slogans and posters reflect the idealism of student activism and their intention to convert nonchalant fellow students. The posters are accessible to not only insiders but even those visiting the campus. Therefore, graffiti, slogans and posters expose university populace to the ideas of social justice, equality, and freedom of speech and become an avenue of raising consciousness about human rights issues.

The student unions are democratic institutions (Bergan, 2015). Like any other democratic institution, student unions hold general body meetings. The general body consists of every student of the university as a member. Every student has the right to raise concerns over matters relating to campus life. Sukanya highlighted the role of general body meetings in initiating students into activism and making them feel an active member of it:

*The Right to Education, treating everyone equally, no-discrimination based on gender are rights that are integral to the discussions during the general body meeting. The whole process of protest is so*

*empowering that you can voice your demand and attain it through proposing it to the general body meeting.*

The scope of general body meeting is widespread as it covers almost every issue remotely related to human rights and social justice. The general body meeting contributes to the university's role to prepare students for citizenship. Habermas (1969/1987), outlines this as one of the roles of university.

For a protest to achieve its goals and attain success, the participation of maximum number of students is required. The students need to be convinced that the protest is carried out for the right cause and persuaded to participate. Amita pointed out the importance of socialisation through on campus interactions, as a means to educate about burning issues and social causes and therefore mentally prepare students for protest organised by student unions and student political groups on campus. In her own words:

*The interaction on campus gives an opportunity to build a bond between senior and junior students. The social interaction is very necessary for creating a viable environment for protests on campus.*

The legacy of student activism in a university is disseminated through interaction. The conversations are also aimed at encouraging and preparing newcomers for joining student activism. Varun, a European Parliament's 2020 human rights defender fellow, shared that he was a political person from day one and exposure to a student political organisation led him towards activism instantly:

*In UG programme itself I got introduced to the student union. I was always interested in politics and got acquainted with a student political organisation with which my ideas matched. I got fully involved in student activism. There are violations of human rights in every institution including university and through student activism these violations can be arrested.*

It is apparent that student activism is a major source of publicising the violation of rights of students and others on campus. By making violations on campus perceptible, student activism spreads awareness among students of unfair practices and injustices done in the campus. This is the first stage in human rights education, namely disseminating awareness. This has further led to participation of students in the protests against such violations and thereby leading to the next stages of human rights education advocacy and activism as explained by Reardon (1995). Nalin saw student unions as an instrument of creating political consciousness among students:

*Student union plays the most important role in creating any kind of political consciousness be it human rights violations or political assertions anywhere around the world. It is the student union that can bring forth the narratives of individual rights violation to the larger discourse.*

Much like Varun, Nalin also believed in the efficacy of student union's in diffusing information about human rights violations and building a discourse around it. The students get acquainted not only with violations but also with the remedies devised by the unions.

Mehul outlined the role of student unions in creating awareness about human rights and mobilisation, an important instrument of agitational politics.:

*Through Student union you mobilise for a cause. The union organises lectures, seminars on national and international issues and by doing so the awareness of human rights is created.*

Student unions can be considered a progressive political force on campus. Webster and Sedlacek (1987) mentioned educational, developmental, and recreational objectives of the student union in the context of the University of Maryland. Hence, the role of student unions is not restricted to organising protests. It includes conducting national and international seminars, celebration of international days, such as human rights day, women's day, special

lectures on current affairs, and teaching the children of construction labourers employed by the university.

Vijaya admitted that she was not exposed to student activism prior to joining the university. She was not aware that the inclination for student activism was hidden in her which came out in the open during the student union elections:

*I was not into student activism while in college but when I entered university, I got introduced to student activism there. My understanding of student election developed in the university when student activists approached me and then I realised I could also become a student activist like them.*

In the above statement, Vijaya held the view that the existence of student union depended on maximum participation of the students. Hence, it becomes imperative for student union office bearers and members alike to engage with students and make them aware of the union's work and solicit their support. Student union elections every year come as an opportunity for an exercise in democracy as well educating and exposing existing and new students to the discourse of social justice within and outside the campus.

### **Student activists as pedagogues of social justice and human rights education**

The student activists are proactive and tend to engage with a range of activities on campus whether the work of student union, election, assisting new students, helping senior students with scholarship disbursement, as well as planning and organising programmes in different clubs. The student activist while performing various activities also assumes the role of a pedagogue of social justice and human rights education. When Neel is suggesting that the seniors engage with new students and encourage them for activism they are educating the new students about activism for social justice:

*Seniors on campus play a significant role in engaging new comers to student activism. They introduce the new comers with the student*

*union and issues it takes up on campus for the benefit of all the students.*

There are many stories of success and failure of the student unions. Students stay on campus for a limited period of time, hence, the memory of student activism needs to be passed on from one batch to the other continuously. Hence, senior student activists assume the role of educators while passing on the union's memories to the new students. They also appraise new students about their engagement with various social justice endeavours and participation in the protest on campus and beyond. The transmission of information drawn from institutional memory and history of the student union is an educative process and orients the future student activists.

Mehul, a student leader and committed activist, underscored his strategy of spreading awareness about issues emanating on campus and outside. He pointed out that a large number of students from his campus and other universities are on his social media platform. He is using online network to discuss issues that are affecting students, migrant labourers and poor people during and after the pandemic:

*I have almost fifty thousand followers on social media. Whatever I write or videos I post on the social media has a wide reach. Many people contact me and ask me how to get involved in various initiatives I lead. Many have joined me and became collaborators over the year for social causes.*

Mehul mentioned that in some of his initiatives especially for the relief of covid affected people, teacher's union from his university came forward and provided full support in terms of human and monetary resources. His initiatives widened the scope of activism for others to join from varied backgrounds including teachers.

Student activists generally do better academically being mostly intelligent students (Bay, 1967). They are excellent orators and good writers. Azad reported that student activists

frequently contribute their articles on student's issues or other socially relevant issues in various media. The student activists reach their audience through print and social media:

*Students are writing in the university newsletter, local newspapers, other online news magazines, Facebook, and social media platforms. The students themselves are inspired by the activism around the world.*

The student activists also look for inspiration from all over the world and keep extending their support to student movements elsewhere. Azad pointed out that student activists were inspired by black lives matter and supported #metoo as well. The engagement of student activists with the larger discourse on activism broadens their understanding of complex international issues and to communicate it to their fellow students.

Another interesting resource at the disposal of the student activists is study circles where they read and discuss the revolutionary and reformist literature. The study circles are joined by students from all castes, and invite experts in the field. Namit admitted that reading the texts of social and political reformers, such as Ambedkar, Phule and Periyar in the study circle was an eye-opening experience:

*The Ambedkar-Phule-Periyar study circles are emerging in almost all the universities. These study circles study the literature by social reformists and debate the ways to address caste-based discrimination. The study circles particularly raise several issues about Dalit and women issues.*

Namit was outraged that Dalits, tribals, women, and minorities still bear the brunt of caste discrimination of the worst kind. These study circles provide a platform to develop a consciousness and to get empathetic with the plight of the marginalised section of the society.

Ishita believed in a collective approach to address the issues of immediate concerns whether of students or staff or faculty members:

*I am a very indignant person when it comes to issues of human rights or gender rights specifically. I easily get infuriated. Gradually, I realized that the issues of my immediate concern cannot be addressed by individuals and a collective approach is necessary. Collectively we have pushed to concerns of teachers, workers and others in the campus. Our concern was to transform the campus and make our experiences more meaningful. I think the collective effort is the most effective way to engage with issues requiring urgent attention.*

University is a microcosm of society and hence, every individual whether on campus or outside is linked with each other. It might seem that an immediate issue may not be relevant to but it surely becomes a matter of concern for all. Moreover, things that are happening in one country are affecting other nations. Therefore, Ishita's activism educate all students to take up a collective approach to address individual problems near and afar.

Stuti compliments Ishita's view point of the power of collective concern in bringing the voice of the voiceless to the forefront. Stuti is in tune with Spivak (2004) and Freire (1998) when she underscores the need of voiceless to stand up for her/himself and become their own voice:

*Activism makes you feel the pain of the other who is voiceless. You try to become the voice of the voiceless. But then gradually you realise that the voiceless needs to raise her/his voice, too. As movement cannot be built by a few and need support of all those whose rights have been violated.*

Stuti described how difficult was the process of convincing the affected student to come out and be vocal about her plight. It required umpteenth number of counselling

sessions. Unlike, student activists, regular students are not vocal about issues that affect them or their friends. To convince regular students to muster the courage to speak up for themselves or for others is a critical contribution of student activists as educators and wielders of social justice and human rights.

## **Conclusions**

The study observed that the historical-cultural background, experiences of caste, class or race based discrimination, parental exposure to student activism and university spaces were the major sources of human rights consciousness among student activists. Family backgrounds such as caste, class and the region shaped their thinking over human rights and lived discriminatory experiences strengthened the view. The activists were genuinely inspired by the previous generations, and family history indeed exercised their imagination and enthused them to join student activism.

The study observed that student activism had potential to generate a discussion around issues that have greater implications, such as citizenship bill in India. The student community came together from different parts of the country to understand the repercussions of the bill for migrants or refugees coming to India and agitated against its implementation. This created consciousness among students about human rights and social justice in the backdrop of the citizenship bill. The study also found that through student activism a collective consciousness among students has been created as they committed themselves to the cause regardless of the consequences. The collective consciousness is absolutely necessary for developing respect for human rights.

The study also discussed the efficacy of student activism in preparing students for future citizenship roles. The process of electing a student union involves many stages that are similar to political procedures at the national or provincial level and offers an effective orientation to university students. The existence of social justice and human rights can be

ensured by democratically enlightened citizens, and the training in participatory democracy through student election is a crucial step.

The study also examined the role of student activists in promoting human rights consciousness in their fellow students. The study observed that student activists are proactive in establishing contacts with freshers as well as old students and persuading them to participate in the activities organised by the student political groups.

The study revealed that student activists are dynamic in using the social media to promote the ideas of social justice among their followers. Some of them have a large following on social media and therefore their ideas have greater reach. They also use social media for mobilisation as in the case of helping people during the pandemic and ensured that maximum number of people joined the drive for social cause.

Finally, based on the study, student activists are found to be quite inquisitive and always ready to acquire knowledge that would help them to better understand and communicate the ideas of equality, freedom, social justice, and human rights. Towards this end, they came up with an idea of study circle focused on the works of eminent social reformers. This intellectual activity helped them to grow into better activists and connect with other students to build consciousness germane to the programme of human rights. In a nutshell, student activists played a critical role in educating and encouraging students to participate in the struggle for the rights of students, faculty, employees of the universities and civilian population.

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