Researching Student Organisations And Activism In Darjeeling Hills, West Bengal: A Note On Some Experiences From The Field

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Student politics and activism have consistently played a vital role in influencing India's democratic processes and driving social change, as in different parts of the world. From the time of the independence movement to present-day causes, student involvement has been a powerful force. The relationship between student politics and the broader political environment in India is dynamic and often marked by tension, reflecting the intricate nature of the nation's democracy and youth-led activism. Researching such a dynamic field of student politics, organisation and activism presents unique challenges that researchers must navigate to ensure comprehensive and unbiased analyses. This is because the landscape of student activism is often influenced by a mixture of idealistic goals, personal ambitions, and political party interests. Besides, there are external political forces that frequently compromise the autonomy of student bodies, turning them into tools for larger political agendas rather than true representatives of student interests. Researchers face numerous challenges in this area, such as bureaucratic obstacles and shifting power dynamics, among others. This paper, therefore, explores the primary challenges confronting researchers in studying student politics and activism in India, although drawing significantly from my own experiences of studying student organisations, activism and politics in the context of Darjeeling Hills, West Bengal, India **Key Words:** Student Organisations, Student Politics, Student Activism, Darjeeling Hills, Researcher's Challenges, Field Experiences.

Introduction

Student politics and activism have historically played a crucial role in shaping democratic processes and social change in India. From the freedom struggle to contemporary movements, student activism has been a formidable force. The interface between student politics and the broader political landscape in India has been both dynamic and contentious, reflecting the complexities of Indian democracy and youth activism. However, researching this dynamic field presents unique challenges that researchers must navigate to ensure comprehensive and unbiased analyses. This is because student politics often begins with idealistic aspirations to address issues pertinent to students and society at large. However, it frequently devolves into a platform for personal ambitions and partisan agendas. Many student leaders, instead of being the voice

of their peers, become proxies for larger political parties, prioritizing party interests over student welfare. Secondly, while student politics has the potential to be a breeding ground for ideological debates and grassroots activism, it often lacks substantive ideological grounding. Many student leaders mimic the rhetoric of their political idols without fully understanding the underlying ideologies. This results in shallow debates and opportunistic alliances rather than genuine ideological discourse. Thirdly, the influence of external political forces on student politics is a pervasive issue. Political parties often see student unions as a means to expand their base and exert control over campuses. This interference compromises the autonomy of student bodies and undermines their ability to represent the genuine interests of students. Thus, student politics in India has the potential to be a catalyst for positive change, its interface with the broader political landscape is fraught with challenges. Hence, researching student politics and activism in a diverse and plural society like India presents a complex array of issues. This paper explores the primary challenges confronting the researchers in studying student politics and activism in India, although drawing significantly from my own experiences of studying student organisations, activism and politics in the context of Darjeeling Hills, India.

1. Contextual Complexity

The history of student activism in India is rich and multifaceted, involving various socio-political contexts. For instance, broadly in the Indian context, each period of activism, from the Indian independence movement with the involvement of student groups to the Emergency period (1975-1977) and the recent anti-corruption protests, presents unique characteristics and motivations (Jeffrey, 2010). Similarly, the historical tapestry of colonial and post-colonial Darjeeling, characterised by multiple notions of homeland (Ganguly, 2019) and subsequent protest politics, is so complex with the multiplicity of forces and factors that have sown seeds for the origin and evolution of student activism present a challenge in singling out the contextual origins of student activism. The student organisations and politics seem to have emerged since the colonial intervention in the education system and have moved through the turbulent history of quite often politically disturbed Darjeeling Hills. This historical depth wherein the student activism has roots in the Hills requires researchers to possess a nuanced understanding of different eras and specifics, which are quite often daunting. Furthermore, the controversial role of history and its place in politics in the wake of emergent subaltern histories, micro-histories and histories from below challenging the dominant practices and performances of history as Subba (2019) has subtly shown, among other concatenation factors have complicated issues of clarity in contextualising the emergence of such student organisations and activisms.

2. Diversity, Fluidity and Transience in Student Bodies

India's student population is incredibly diverse, encompassing different religions, castes, linguistic groups, and socio-economic backgrounds. Similarly, Darjeeling Hills in West Bengal, India, represents a vibrant socio-cultural ethnic, linguistic and political mosaic. This diversity means that student politics and activism are not monolithic but are fragmented along various lines. For instance, student organisations like the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) have distinct ideological positions compared to the Students' Federation of India (SFI) or the National Students' Union of India (NSUI) (Lukose, 2009). Similarly, in the context of Darjeeling, we have experienced a host of student organisations from colonial times to the present. In Darjeeling, Kurseong and Kalimpong Hills of West Bengal, a deluge of student organisations existed and some are still there like the Student Federation of India (SFI), Chhatra Parishad (CP), Sanjukta Bidyarthi Sangh (SBS), Independent Student Union (ISU), Darjeeling District Student Union (DDSU), Gorkha Democratic Student Front (GDSF), Gorkha National Student Front (GNSF), Parbatiya Bidyarthi Sangh (PBS), Democratic Revolutionary Student Front (DRSF), All Gorkha Student Union (AGSU), Akhil Bharatiya Gorkha League Bidyarthi Sangathan (ABGLBS), Gorkha Janmukti Vidyarthi Morcha (GJVM), Kalimpong Student Union (KSU), United Student Front (USF), Hill Trinamool Chatra Parishad (HTCP), among others. There has been the emergence of new associations and organisations with the emergence of a new contextual setting or a political space. Shifts in memberships, objectives, strategies and ideological orientations of the student bodies could be discerned through different phases of Gorkha History in Darjeeling Hills, for instance during phases like 1907 to 1949 the colonial context of the demand for right to self-determination of the Gorkhas under the leadership of Hillmen's Association and the All India Gorkha League (AIGL) , 1949 to 1960s the period of Linguistic Reorganisation of the States, 1960s to the late 1970s the formative phase of the language Movement, the 1980s- the period of the Violent Gorkhaland Movement under the leadership of Subhash Ghising, 1990s to 2007- the Post Darjeeling Accord- 1988 and the period of the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) under the Chairmanship of Ghisingh, 2007 to 2011 – the inception of Gorkha Jana Mukti Morcha under Bimal Gurung and the Gandhian movement under his leadership culminating in Gorkhaland Territorial Administration Agreement (GTA), 2011 to 2017 –the Post GTA Agreement to the 105 days Strike under Bimal Gurung, and the period after 2017 under the leadership of Binay Tamang and Anit Thapa. This reveals that student organisations often undergo and have undergone rapid changes in terms of organisation, membership, ideology, leadership, goals and strategies, and many times, these transitions have been characterised by complex overlapping. Furthermore, Gorkhas of Darjeeling Hills have resorted to both covert

and overt mechanisms of political communication in building solidarity for an organized identity movement, the most prominent covert form being the use of music in the wake of the Gorkhaland agitation in the mid-1980s (Nepal & Waiba, 2010), during which one could discern a broad participation in mostly underground solidarity building strategies by the youths and student groups in Darjeeling Hills. This fluidity and transience make it challenging for researchers to establish stable units of analysis and track developments over time. Moreover, student activists frequently graduate or move out of the location to other pursuits, complicating longitudinal studies. Thus, capturing the full spectrum of student political activities requires comprehensive fieldwork and a deep understanding of complex contextual origins and diverse identities and ideological affiliations they entangle with.

3. Complexity of Power Dynamics, Political Sensitivities and Risks

Student organisations often operate within broader power structures, such as university administrations or national, regional or local identity and political movements. These power dynamics have influenced students' behaviour and the outcomes of their activism; for instance, the entire history of the student organisations and activism in Darjeeling Hills centres around the broader history of linguistic, cultural, ethnicity-based identity and autonomy movements. As revealed in the preceding sections, the transient nature of student bodies given the various contextual settings implies the moulding of the orientation, objectives and strategies of the student bodies by different political forces through different phases of the history of the student bodies. The student organisations in the different phases have quite often remained as sister organisations of the parent political organisations dictating either the political dispensation or opposing status quo during the said period, barring one student body, the AGSU, which, according to Puran Thami, one of its founding members in an interview with the present researcher, claims to have survived thirteen long years without affiliating itself to any political party. Hence, a study of student organisation, activism and politics in contexts like Darjeeling Hills involves researching power structures, power configurations and power dynamics across historical time-space specifics. The truth that politics involve harshly competing interests, bitter power struggles, and fundamentally conflicting values is evident in Darjeeling Hills through the observed phenomena of rapid fragmentation of student bodies, the emergence of multiplicity of organisations and the rarely uniform nature of student demands. This, as revealed in the field study, owes significantly to the chain of voice, representation and influence being frequently cut by either discrimination or elite capture of the organisation and its demands, or both. Moreover, even running a student organisation was difficult because of power play and ideological differences; for instance, as Rangu Sauriya would remark in an interview with the present researcher: "*Falam ko Cheura Chabaunu jasto thiyo*" (akin to chewing flattened rice of iron). Hence, the nature of power configuration and power dynamics at the local power-structure level constrains a chronological, systematic mapping of the evolution of student organisation and activism and a systematic analysis of student issues and demands over time. Thus, researching student activism involves significant political sensitivities. Given that student movements often challenge established political structures or policies, researchers face resistance from political groups and government entities, which manifests as denial of access, surveillance, or even intimidation, as Rao (2014) has revealed in some other contexts. Additionally, the volatile nature of student protests, which can sometimes lead to violent confrontations, poses risks to researchers in the field.

4. Institutional and Bureaucratic Barriers

Conducting research within Indian educational institutions is challenging due to bureaucratic hurdles. Gaining access to campuses, securing permission to conduct interviews or surveys, and navigating college and university politics have been significant obstacles. This politically sensitive nature of the research area limits researchers' ability to gather data (Pathania, 2018). This limitation is frequently felt while conducting field visits and data collection endeavours in Darjeeling Hills. The major hubs of student organisation and activism are Government and Government Aided Colleges in the Hills, the attempts have been made to collect data from student union councils of Darjeeling Government College, Kalimpong College and Kurseong College. However, it has been found that these educational institutions do not maintain detailed records of student union councils and their political activities. When whatever records are available, they are usually not systematically organized or accessible. Furthermore, the district and sub-divisional record rooms do not have sufficient data on such organisations and activities. Wherever a minuscule amount of information is available, bureaucratic barriers limit its accessibility.

5. Methodological Challenges

The dynamic and often spontaneous nature of student activism brings in methodological challenges. Movements erupt abruptly, making it difficult for researchers to plan systematic studies. Participant observation, a common qualitative method, requires researchers to be present during protests, which, however, is highly unpredictable and risky (Blee & Taylor, 2002). Furthermore, the use of new digital and social media by students to organize and communicate in recent years adds a layer of complexity, requiring researchers to be adept at digital ethnography. The course of the study also revealed that gaining access to student

organisations and building trust with members can be difficult because the students seem to be wary of researchers' intentions or concerned about potential repercussions for their activism. Building rapport and maintaining ethical boundaries are not just essential but also challenging tasks for researchers in this field. It is also noticed that for insider researchers like me studying student activism within my own location and locale, the tendency of the student leaders to assume and identify researchers with certain political ideologies as being either sympathetic or antagonistic by student activists, potentially affecting the openness of their responses. Under such circumstances, efficiency in choosing appropriate tools and techniques of data collection, compilation, cleaning, analyses and interpretation stands as a big challenge. While interviews, surveys, and participant observation are common techniques, researchers must consider how these methods may affect participants' willingness to engage and the depth of insight they provide. Additionally, the use of digital platforms and social media presents new opportunities and challenges for data collection and analysis. The recent situations characterised by the wide and rampant use of digital media require a researcher's thorough knowledge of digital ethnography.

6. Ethical Considerations

First and foremost, the ethical challenge an insider researcher of my sort faces is the issue of objectivity of research because one dominant positivist perspective outlines that objectivity can be obtained only in research conducted by an 'outsider' (Chavez, 2008; Hellawell, 2006) as an insider, research studies would not conform to the same standards of rigour because of the researchers' personal position being 'too close' for objectivity (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007). It is also believed that insider researchers may have restricted access to critical information due to their relationship with the participants (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007), which proved true in our context. Researching student organisations and politics raises various ethical concerns, particularly regarding confidentiality, informed consent, and the potential impact of research findings on participants and their communities. Balancing the need for transparency and accountability with the protection of participants' rights and privacy requires careful attention throughout the research process. Ethical considerations are paramount when researching politically active groups. Ensuring the anonymity and safety of student activists is crucial, especially in a context where dissent can lead to legal repercussions or social ostracization. Researchers must navigate these ethical dilemmas carefully, balancing the need for accurate data with the responsibility to protect their subjects (Burgess, 1982). Obtaining informed consent is a foundational ethical requirement in research involving human participants. This process is incredibly complex in the context of student politics and activism. Many student activists may belong to vulnerable groups, such as minorities or marginalised communities, where trust in institutions (including researchers) might be low. Researchers must ensure that participants are fully aware of the research purpose, methods, potential risks, and their right to withdraw at any time without repercussions (Wiles et al., 2007). Informed consent becomes even more challenging in a diverse society where language barriers and varying levels of education can impact participants' understanding. Researchers need to provide clear, accessible information and consider employing translators or cultural mediators to facilitate comprehension (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Maintaining confidentiality is critical when researching politically active students, as disclosure of their identities could lead to repercussions from their institutions, peers, or even state authorities. The political climate and the level of freedom of speech in the society where the research is conducted significantly impact the measures needed to protect participant identities (Burgess, 1982). Researchers must employ robust data protection strategies, including anonymizing data and securely storing research materials. The use of pseudonyms and altering identifying details in publications is essential to prevent potential harm (Israel & Hay, 2006), which we were required to resort to in the present context to avoid political harm to the subjects. Research in the field of student politics and activism can expose participants to various risks, including social ostracism, academic penalties, or legal consequences. Ethical research practices demand a thorough risk assessment and the implementation of strategies to minimize potential harm (Orb et al., 2001). Ensuring the reliability and validity of data collected from student activists can be challenging. Activists may provide biased or exaggerated accounts of their activities and impacts. Additionally, the polarized nature of student politics can result in conflicting narratives from different groups, complicating the task of presenting an unbiased analysis (Polletta, 2002). Researchers must employ rigorous triangulation methods to validate their findings.

Concluding Observations

Researching student politics and activism in India in general and Darjeeling Hills in the present context is fraught with challenges that span historical complexity, diversity, institutional barriers, political sensitivities, methodological issues, ethical considerations, and data reliability. Studying student politics and activism in Darjeeling Hills presented before me such challenges quite different from similar efforts in other contexts, especially for an insider researcher of my sort, who is, at the first instance, looked upon with suspicion on the grounds of ideological orientation, associational affiliation, position in power structure dynamics, and for the want of reasons for data and information solicitation. It required elaborate conversations and long time frames to establish the mere academic reasons for such data solicitation from various stakeholders alike. Overcoming these challenges required a nuanced, flexible, and ethically grounded approach to ensure that the rich and vibrant history of student activism is accurately documented and understood because the Darjeeling Hills

context too presents various institutional challenges, including political sensitivities, data accessibility issues, and ethical concerns. Addressing these challenges required a multi-faceted approach, involving collaboration with diverse stakeholders, employing robust research methodologies, and maintaining high ethical standards, which my larger project intends to innovate. However, the present research in the field taught us the fact that studying student organisations and activisms requires unfolding of how formal and informal power is distributed in society and what types of hidden dimensions of power exist, especially but not only relating to such organisations and activisms, how do belief systems and cultural practices legitimize and reinforce material power structures, and location of the institutional channels and arenas for effectively voicing these concerns, as in case of Student Organisation and activism in Darjeeling Hills. However, future research on such themes in such contexts as Darjeeling Hills should continue to innovate methodologically and ethically to navigate these challenges effectively. Researching student politics and activism in a diverse and plural society requires a careful and ethical approach. Key issues include ensuring informed consent, maintaining confidentiality, avoiding harm, respecting cultural differences, and managing researcher bias. Addressing these ethical challenges is essential to conduct research that is not only methodologically sound but also respectful and protective of participants' rights and well-being.

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