

Student Politics and Nationalism: Youth Resistance in Colonial Universities (1920-1947)

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Abstract: *This research paper examines the role of student politics in shaping the growth of nationalism in colonial India between 1920 and 1947, with a particular focus on youth resistance within universities. It argues that colonial universities, though designed to serve imperial interests, gradually became important spaces of political awakening and anti-colonial mobilisation. Students emerged as active participants who not only supported nationalist movements but also transformed their nature by introducing new ideas, strategies, and forms of resistance. The study explores how student involvement in major movements such as Non-Cooperation and Civil Disobedience contributed to the expansion of nationalism from an elite political project into a mass-based struggle. It also highlights the ideological diversity within student politics, ranging from moderate and Gandhian approaches to radical and revolutionary perspectives, which enriched the overall nationalist discourse. By analysing the interaction between education, political consciousness, and activism, the paper shows how youth challenged colonial authority and redefined the purpose of education as a tool for national liberation. Furthermore, the study emphasizes that student resistance broadened the meaning of nationalism by linking it with issues of social justice, equality, and collective responsibility. The paper concludes that youth played a decisive role in transforming both the structure and ideology of the nationalist movement, making them key agents of historical change in colonial India.*


Keywords: *Student Politics, Nationalism, Youth Resistance, Colonial Universities, Anti-Colonial Movement.*

1 | INTRODUCTION

The relationship between student politics and nationalism in colonial India (1920-1947) occupies a critical place in the intellectual and political history of anti-colonial resistance. Universities, often designed by the colonial state to produce loyal administrative subjects, paradoxically became spaces of

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23

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ideological dissent and nationalist awakening. As noted by Desai, nationalism in India emerged through a “complex interaction of social forces” during British rule (Desai, 1976, p. 432). Within this evolving framework, students emerged as a distinct political category whose engagement was not merely derivative but transformative. Their participation marked a shift from elite-led constitutional politics to mass-based resistance, where youth energy, intellectual curiosity, and moral urgency converged. Colonial education, while intended to serve imperial interests, unintentionally produced a generation capable of critiquing and resisting colonial authority. As Krishna Kumar observes, colonial education “turned many of its products against those values” (Kumar, 1985, p. 45). This contradiction is essential to understanding student politics in the period under study. Universities became sites where Western political ideas such as liberty, equality, and self-determination intersected with indigenous experiences of exploitation. Consequently, students did not remain passive recipients of knowledge; rather, they actively reinterpreted education as a tool of resistance.

The early twentieth century witnessed the institutionalisation of student politics, especially in regions like Bengal, where student organisations actively contributed to nationalist movements. The Swadeshi movement, non-cooperation movement, and revolutionary activities all saw significant student participation, indicating that youth engagement was integral to political mobilisation. These movements fostered a culture of dissent within universities, where questioning authority became both an intellectual and political act. Students organised protests, boycotts, and strikes, transforming campuses into arenas of nationalist struggle. The period between 1920 and 1947 is particularly significant as it reflects the intensification of youth-led resistance within colonial universities. According to historical accounts, students “played a vital role in the Indian independence movement” through protests and awareness campaigns. This phase also witnessed the emergence of organised student bodies and youth associations, such as those inspired by revolutionary figures like Bhagat Singh. His writings emphasised that education without political awareness was meaningless, arguing that students must develop the capacity “to think about measures to improve” the country (Singh, 1928, p. 3). Such perspectives highlight how student politics was not merely about participation but about cultivating a critical consciousness oriented toward national liberation.

Scholars have also emphasised the distinct nature of student mobilisation in the colonial context. Unlike postcolonial student movements, which often focused on local or institutional issues, colonial-era student politics was deeply intertwined with the broader goal of independence. As noted in historical scholarship, student mobilisation during colonial rule was primarily directed toward “national liberation” rather than sectional interests. This alignment with nationalist objectives gave student politics a unique ideological coherence and moral legitimacy. At the same time, student activism was not homogeneous. It encompassed a range of ideological positions, from moderate nationalism to radical revolutionary thought. The diversity of student engagement reflects the broader complexity of the nationalist movement itself. Yet, despite these differences, a shared commitment to resisting colonial domination united student groups across regions and institutions. Universities thus became microcosms of the larger anti-colonial struggle, where debates, protests, and organisational activities mirrored national political developments. This study situates student politics within the broader discourse of nationalism and resistance, arguing that youth activism in colonial universities was both a product and a driver of political transformation. By examining the interplay between education, ideology, and activism, it seeks to highlight how students redefined the role of universities from colonial institutions into spaces of resistance. In doing so, it underscores the importance of youth as agents of historical change, whose contributions were central to the making of modern India.

2 | COLONIAL UNIVERSITIES AS SITES OF POLITICAL AWAKENING:

Colonial universities in India between 1920 and 1947 functioned not merely as centres of formal education but as dynamic spaces of political awakening, where young minds gradually transformed into

agents of nationalist resistance. Although these institutions were originally designed by the British colonial state to produce a class of educated intermediaries loyal to imperial governance, they unintentionally nurtured critical consciousness among students. The colonial curriculum, while promoting Western knowledge systems, also exposed students to ideas of liberty, equality, and self-determination, which stood in sharp contrast to the lived realities of colonial subjugation. This contradiction created the intellectual conditions for political questioning and dissent within university spaces. One of the most significant insights into this transformation comes from the writings of Bhagat Singh, who emphasized the centrality of education in shaping political awareness. In his essay *Students and Politics* (1928), he directly challenged the colonial attempt to depoliticize students, stating that "students should not participate in political activities" was a widely imposed restriction (Singh, 1928, p. 68). He further argued that education without political awareness was fundamentally incomplete, asserting that it must include "the ability to think about reforming" the country (Singh, 1928, p. 70). This perspective reveals how universities became spaces where students began to reinterpret education not as a means of personal advancement but as a tool for collective emancipation.

The colonial state, however, remained deeply suspicious of such developments and often attempted to regulate student activity through institutional controls. Students were sometimes required to sign declarations promising not to engage in politics, reflecting the fear that universities could become centres of anti-colonial mobilisation. Yet, these restrictions often had the opposite effect, intensifying political curiosity and resistance among students. As Singh observed, such policies were designed to produce a generation "made blind of understanding" regarding national issues (Singh, 1928, p. 69). This critique highlights how colonial education sought to suppress critical thinking, even as it inadvertently fostered it. Scholars of Indian nationalism have similarly emphasized the paradoxical role of colonial education. According to A. R. Desai, the rise of nationalism was closely linked to the emergence of new social groups shaped by colonial modernity, particularly the educated middle class (Desai, 1976, p. 432). Within this framework, students occupied a unique position, as they were both products of colonial institutions and critics of colonial rule. Their exposure to modern political thought enabled them to question imperial authority and imagine alternative futures grounded in national self-rule. Universities thus became sites where ideological debates, political discussions, and organisational activities converged to produce a new form of political consciousness.

The transformation of universities into spaces of political awakening was also shaped by alternative educational initiatives that rejected colonial control. Institutions such as the National College in Lahore, established in response to the limitations of government-run education, emphasized nationalist history, global revolutionary ideas, and critical thinking. These institutions played a crucial role in fostering a generation of politically conscious students who viewed education as inseparable from social responsibility. As recent historical analysis suggests, the "future...is written in the classrooms and the political consciousness" that develops within academic spaces. This observation underscores the central role of universities in shaping the ideological foundations of the nationalist movement. Moreover, the university environment provided students with opportunities for collective engagement, enabling them to form organisations, unions, and discussion groups that extended beyond the classroom. The emergence of student unions in cities like Lahore marked a shift from individual awareness to organised political action. These organisations encouraged debate, mobilised protests, and connected students to broader nationalist struggles. As Prabodh Chandra noted in his study of the student movement, universities were no longer "ivory towers" but active arenas of political struggle (Chandra, 1938, p. 52). This shift reflects the growing recognition of students as important actors in the anti-colonial movement.

In this context, colonial universities must be understood as contested spaces where power and resistance coexisted. While the colonial state attempted to maintain ideological control through curriculum and regulation, students continuously challenged these structures by reinterpreting education in political

terms. The interaction between repression and resistance transformed universities into sites of ideological production, where nationalist ideas were debated, refined, and disseminated. This process not only contributed to the growth of student politics but also reshaped the broader trajectory of the Indian nationalist movement.

3 | STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN NATIONALIST MOVEMENTS:

Student participation in nationalist movements between 1920 and 1947 represents one of the most dynamic and transformative dimensions of India's anti-colonial struggle. Far from being passive observers, students actively engaged in political movements, bridging the gap between intellectual discourse and mass mobilisation. Their involvement signified a decisive shift in the nature of nationalism—from an elite-driven political project to a broader, socially embedded movement. As noted in historical analyses, during the phase of the freedom struggle, "students joined hands with the masses and contributed to the national effort to overthrow colonialism" (Banerjee, 1998, as cited in). This statement highlights the collective character of student participation, where youth became integral actors in shaping nationalist politics. The rise of student activism must be understood within the broader socio-economic and intellectual transformations of colonial India. Modern education created a new class of politically conscious youth who were increasingly dissatisfied with colonial rule. A. R. Desai argues that nationalism emerged through the interaction of multiple social forces during British rule, particularly among the educated classes (Desai, 1976, p. 432). Students, as part of this emerging intelligentsia, were uniquely positioned to translate ideological awareness into political action. Their participation was not limited to symbolic gestures; rather, it involved active engagement in protests, boycotts, and revolutionary activities that directly challenged colonial authority.

One of the most compelling articulations of student involvement comes from Bhagat Singh, who viewed students as essential agents of political transformation. In his writings, he argued that students must go beyond academic pursuits and engage with the realities of their society. He asserted that education should enable students "to think about the problems of the country" (Singh, 1928, p. 70). This perspective underscores the idea that student participation was rooted in a sense of moral responsibility toward national liberation. Singh's call for political engagement inspired many young people to participate in movements such as the Non-Cooperation Movement, Civil Disobedience Movement, and various revolutionary activities. The Non-Cooperation Movement (1920-22), led by Mahatma Gandhi, marked a significant turning point in student participation. Thousands of students boycotted government schools and colleges, choosing instead to join national institutions that promoted indigenous values and anti-colonial consciousness. This act of withdrawal from colonial educational institutions was both a symbolic and practical form of resistance. It demonstrated that students were willing to sacrifice personal advancement for the larger goal of national freedom. Similarly, during the Civil Disobedience Movement, students played a key role in organising protests, spreading nationalist ideas, and mobilising public support.

Student participation was not confined to non-violent movements alone. Revolutionary organisations also drew heavily from student populations, particularly in regions like Bengal and Punjab. Young revolutionaries used universities as spaces for recruitment, discussion, and planning. Their activities reflected a more radical interpretation of nationalism, one that emphasised direct action against colonial rule. Despite differences in ideology, both moderate and radical student groups shared a common commitment to ending colonial domination. Scholars have also pointed out that student participation in colonial India was distinct in its objectives and orientation. Unlike post-independence student movements, which often focused on institutional or local issues, colonial-era student activism was primarily directed toward national liberation. As Ghanshyam Shah observes, in the colonial context, student mobilisation was oriented toward "Independence" rather than sectional interests (Shah, 2004, p. 105). This broader focus gave student movements a sense of unity and purpose that transcended

regional and social divisions. At the same time, the role of students has often been underestimated in mainstream nationalist historiography. As one historian notes, students have been treated as “minor figures or passive participants” in many historical accounts. This marginalisation obscures the extent to which student activism contributed to the success of nationalist movements. In reality, students played a crucial role in sustaining political momentum, particularly during periods of repression when other forms of mobilisation were restricted.

4 | IDEOLOGICAL DIVERSITY AND RADICALIZATION OF YOUTH POLITICS:

The ideological diversity and gradual radicalization of youth politics in colonial universities between 1920 and 1947 reflect a complex and evolving political landscape shaped by intellectual exposure, social contradictions, and colonial repression. Student politics during this period was not ideologically uniform; rather, it encompassed a wide spectrum ranging from liberal nationalism and Gandhian non-violence to revolutionary socialism and militant anti-colonialism. This diversity was not a sign of fragmentation but a reflection of the vibrant political consciousness emerging within university spaces, where competing ideas interacted, debated, and often radicalized one another. At the core of this ideological transformation was the growing realization among students that colonial rule could not be challenged through a single unified approach. While many students initially aligned with moderate nationalist politics, the experience of repression, failed negotiations, and political setbacks led sections of youth toward more radical ideologies. As A. R. Desai argues, Indian nationalism developed through “diverse social forces and conflicting ideologies” (Desai, 1976, p. 432), indicating that ideological plurality was intrinsic to the nationalist movement itself. Students, as active participants in this process, became key agents in negotiating and redefining these ideological positions within universities.

One of the most powerful voices representing the radicalization of youth politics was Bhagat Singh, whose writings articulated a clear shift from emotional nationalism to a more structured, ideological approach. In his essay *Students and Politics* (1928), he challenged the dominant view that students should remain apolitical, noting that “there is a great noise...that students should not take part in political work” (Singh, 1928, p. 2). He rejected this argument by asserting that education must cultivate critical awareness and political engagement. Singh further emphasized that students must develop “criticism and independent thinking” as essential tools for revolutionary change. This insistence on rational inquiry marked a departure from purely emotional or symbolic forms of nationalism and encouraged students to engage with broader ideological frameworks such as socialism, Marxism, and anti-imperialism. The influence of global political ideas played a significant role in shaping this ideological diversity. Universities became spaces where students encountered international revolutionary thought, including the Russian Revolution and socialist theories. These influences contributed to the emergence of left-leaning student organisations that viewed nationalism not only as a struggle for political independence but also as a movement for social and economic transformation. As Bhagat Singh himself argued, revolution was not merely about replacing colonial rulers but about ending the “exploitation of man by man”. This perspective expanded the scope of student politics beyond nationalism to include questions of class, inequality, and social justice.

The radicalization of youth politics was also shaped by specific historical events that exposed the limitations of moderate approaches. Incidents such as the repression of protests, the failure of constitutional reforms, and the violence faced by demonstrators led many students to question the effectiveness of non-violent resistance alone. As noted in contemporary historical analysis, events like the Simon Commission protests acted as a “turning point” that pushed sections of youth toward more militant forms of resistance. This shift did not occur uniformly but reflected a growing frustration among students with the pace and nature of political change. At the same time, ideological diversity within student politics often led to internal debates and tensions. Students aligned with Gandhian principles emphasized non-violence, moral discipline, and mass mobilisation, while others, inspired by

revolutionary leaders, advocated direct action and armed struggle. These debates were not merely theoretical; they shaped the strategies and forms of student participation in nationalist movements. Universities thus became arenas of ideological contestation, where different visions of freedom and nationhood were actively discussed and negotiated.

Scholars have also highlighted the importance of organisational structures in channelling this ideological diversity into collective action. The formation of student unions and federations provided platforms for ideological exchange and political mobilisation. As Prabodh Chandra observed, the student movement evolved into a “disciplined and organised force” capable of influencing broader political developments (Chandra, 1938, p. 52). These organisations played a crucial role in transforming individual radicalization into collective political action, thereby strengthening the overall nationalist movement. Importantly, the radicalization of youth politics did not imply a rejection of intellectual engagement; rather, it was deeply rooted in it. Students increasingly viewed political activism as an extension of their intellectual pursuits. As Bhagat Singh famously argued, “logic and free thinking are the twin qualities” necessary for a revolutionary (Singh, 1931, p. 1). This emphasis on critical reasoning ensured that student politics remained grounded in ideological clarity rather than mere emotional fervour.

5 | YOUTH RESISTANCE AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF NATIONALISM:

Youth resistance in colonial India did not merely support the nationalist movement; it fundamentally transformed its meaning, direction, and scope. Between 1920 and 1947, students and young political activists redefined nationalism from a largely elite and constitutional demand into a mass-based, ideologically rich, and socially conscious struggle. This transformation was driven by the active participation of youth who brought new energy, radical ideas, and a sense of urgency to the anti-colonial movement. One of the most striking features of this transformation was the shift from moderate nationalism to a more assertive and radical vision of freedom. Early nationalist politics often focused on constitutional reforms and negotiations with the colonial state. However, as young people became increasingly involved, they began to question the limitations of such approaches. Their resistance was shaped by direct experiences of repression, economic hardship, and political exclusion. As a result, nationalism evolved into a more confrontational and action-oriented movement. Bhagat Singh, one of the most influential youth leaders of the time, clearly articulated this shift when he argued that “revolution is an inalienable right of mankind” (Singh, 1931, p. 1). This statement reflects how youth resistance redefined nationalism as not just a political demand but a moral and universal right.

Youth activism also transformed nationalism by emphasizing the central role of ideas and critical thinking in political struggle. Unlike earlier phases that often relied on emotional appeals, young revolutionaries stressed ideological clarity and intellectual engagement. Bhagat Singh famously stated that “the sword of revolution is sharpened on the whetting-stone of ideas” (Singh, 1931, p. 2). This insight highlights a crucial shift: nationalism was no longer seen as merely a patriotic sentiment but as a consciously developed political ideology. Universities and student organisations became key spaces where such ideas were debated, refined, and disseminated among the wider population. Another important aspect of youth resistance was its role in broadening the social base of nationalism. Students actively connected nationalist politics with the concerns of workers, peasants, and other marginalized groups. This expansion of focus transformed nationalism from a narrow political objective into a broader movement for social and economic justice. As noted in historical reflections, youth movements in the late 1920s increasingly demanded “radical social and economic change” alongside political independence. This integration of social justice into nationalist discourse marked a significant departure from earlier approaches and contributed to the emergence of a more inclusive and transformative vision of the nation.

The role of youth resistance was also evident in the organisational changes within the nationalist movement. Students formed independent unions and associations that operated with a degree of autonomy from established political parties. These organisations enabled young people to articulate their own perspectives and strategies, often pushing the broader movement in more radical directions. Bhagat Singh himself emphasized that student movements should not simply “follow the tail” of political parties but develop independent paths of action. This insistence on autonomy allowed youth organisations to act as catalysts for change, challenging both colonial authority and conservative tendencies within the nationalist leadership. Moreover, youth resistance transformed the emotional and symbolic dimensions of nationalism. The willingness of young activists to sacrifice their careers, freedom, and even their lives gave the movement a powerful moral force. Their actions inspired wider participation and created a sense of collective responsibility among the population. As Bhagat Singh powerfully declared, “they may kill me, but they cannot kill my ideas” (Singh, 1931, p. 3). This emphasis on the enduring power of ideas reinforced the notion that nationalism was not dependent on individual leaders but was sustained by a shared commitment to freedom and justice. At the same time, youth resistance introduced a critical and questioning spirit into the nationalist movement. Young activists were not afraid to challenge established leaders or dominant ideologies. They engaged in debates over methods, goals, and the future of the nation, thereby enriching the intellectual content of nationalism. As Singh argued, “merciless criticism and independent thinking are the two necessary traits of revolutionary thinking” (Singh, 1931, p. 4). This approach ensured that nationalism remained dynamic and adaptable, capable of responding to changing political conditions.

6 | CONCLUSION:

In conclusion, the study of student politics and nationalism in colonial universities between 1920 and 1947 clearly shows that youth were not passive participants but active creators of political change. Students transformed universities from controlled colonial institutions into vibrant spaces of debate, resistance, and ideological development. Through their participation in movements, their engagement with diverse political ideas, and their willingness to challenge authority, they played a crucial role in shaping the direction and intensity of the nationalist struggle. The research highlights that student activism was not uniform but marked by ideological diversity, ranging from moderate reformist approaches to radical revolutionary ideas. This diversity strengthened the nationalist movement by allowing multiple strategies and perspectives to coexist and evolve. At the same time, the growing radicalization of youth politics reflected a deeper dissatisfaction with colonial rule and a stronger demand for complete independence and social justice. Importantly, youth resistance also expanded the meaning of nationalism. It was no longer limited to political freedom but became connected with broader concerns such as equality, justice, and collective responsibility. Students helped bridge the gap between intellectual thought and mass action, making nationalism more inclusive and socially relevant. Overall, this study emphasizes that the contribution of students was central to the success of the anti-colonial movement. Their energy, critical thinking, and commitment turned nationalism into a dynamic and transformative force. Understanding their role not only deepens our knowledge of the past but also reminds us of the continuing importance of youth in shaping political and social change.

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