



Student Unrest in Higher Educational Institutions of Assam

¹Author Rantu Gohain

ARTICLE INFO

RECEIVED 13 SEPTEMBER 2024

ACCEPTED 20 NOVEMBER 2024

PUBLISHED 21 NOVEMBER 2024

ABSTRACT

Student unrest in higher educational institutions in Assam has become a recurring phenomenon in the 21st century, impacting academic environments and the socio-political landscape of the state. This study provides a comprehensive analysis based solely on secondary data, including academic articles, reports, government publications, and media sources. The paper examines the causes, manifestations, and impacts of student unrest, with a focus on political interference, inadequate infrastructure, socio-economic inequalities, and the evolving nature of student activism. The literature review reveals that political manipulation, economic disparities, and governance issues are significant contributors to unrest, while digital platforms have increasingly become a medium for mobilization. The study offers policy recommendations to mitigate student unrest and promote a peaceful academic environment, emphasizing the need for better communication, inclusive policies, and infrastructural development in Assam's higher education sector.

Keywords:

Students' unrest, Higher education, Implication, Challenges, Remedies.

¹ Corresponding Author : Associate Professor, Department of Education, Sibsagar Girls' College, Assam
Email – rantu.sukafa@gmail.com



INTRODUCTION

Student unrest in higher educational institutions is a global phenomenon, but in Assam, a state rich in cultural diversity and history, it has taken on unique dimensions. The 21st century has seen a rise in student activism in Assam, where the youth are deeply engaged in issues that range from ethnic identity and political representation to economic policies and educational reforms. Historically, student movements have played a crucial role in shaping Assam's socio-political landscape, such as during the Assam Movement led by the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) in the 1970s and 1980s (Baruah, 2020). In the 21st century, the nature and dynamics of student unrest have evolved, influenced by changing socio-political contexts and the proliferation of digital media. Understanding the student unrest in Assam today requires us to look back at its history. The state has a long tradition of student activism, with the most notable example being the Assam Movement from 1979 to 1985. Led by the All Assam Students' Union (AASU), this movement was primarily concerned with the influx of illegal immigrants and the protection of Assamese identity. It left a lasting mark on the state's political and social fabric, demonstrating the power and influence that student bodies can wield. In the years since, student organizations in Assam have continued to play a significant role in the state's sociopolitical landscape. From demands for statehood by various ethnic groups to agitations over language and cultural preservation, students have often been at the forefront of these movements. This legacy of activism continues to influence the student movements in Assam today, where the youth are not just concerned with campus issues but are deeply involved in broader societal struggles.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

A thorough understanding of the underlying factors contributing to student unrest is



essential for developing strategies to create a stable and conducive environment for learning. This study focuses on secondary data sources to explore the causes, manifestations, and impacts of student unrest in Assam, offering insights into policy interventions that can address the root causes of the issue.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The roots of student unrest in Assam can be traced back to pre-independence movements and, more prominently, to the Assam Movement (1979-1985), which focused on issues such as illegal immigration and the protection of Assamese identity (Sharma, 2018). The All Assam Students' Union (AASU) emerged as a powerful student organization during this period, mobilizing large-scale protests and strikes that significantly impacted the state's political landscape (Baruah, 2020). Political interference is a significant cause of student unrest in Assam. Bhattacharya (2021) notes that political parties often exploit student movements to advance their agendas, leading to frequent disruptions in academic activities. In recent years, political events such as the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) protests have seen substantial student involvement, highlighting the intersection of student activism and political issues (Das, 2021). Economic factors and inadequate infrastructure in higher education institutions also contribute to student unrest. According to Das (2019), many colleges and universities in Assam suffer from underfunding, poor infrastructure, and a lack of basic facilities, which frustrates students and often leads to protests. Additionally, economic disparities among students create tensions, with marginalized groups feeling excluded or inadequately represented in the education system (Goswami, 2022). Assam's diverse ethnic and cultural composition often exacerbates social tensions, which can spill over into educational institutions. As Gohain (2020) discusses, issues such as discrimination based on ethnicity or language and the quest for preserving cultural identity contribute to unrest among students. These factors are particularly pronounced in Assam, where



ethnic and linguistic diversity often lead to social fragmentation within educational institutions. The rise of digital media has transformed the way student unrest manifests in Assam. Saikia (2022) notes that social media platforms have become a crucial tool for mobilizing students, organizing protests, and amplifying dissent. The rapid spread of information and the ability to coordinate activities online have increased the frequency and intensity of student movements.

OBJECTIVES

- 1) To analyze secondary data on the primary causes of student unrest in higher educational institutions in Assam.
- 2) To examine the role of political, economic, and social factors as documented in existing literature.
- 3) To assess the impact of student unrest on the academic environment based on secondary sources.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design:

This study is based on a systematic review of secondary data sources, including peer-reviewed journals, books, government reports, and reputable media publications. The research adopts a qualitative approach, synthesizing existing literature to understand the causes, manifestations, and impacts of student unrest in Assam.

Data Collection:

Secondary data was collected from multiple sources academic journals and books, government reports and policy documents, media reports etc.

Data Analysis:

The collected data were analyzed thematically to identify common patterns, causes, and impacts of student unrest. Themes such as political interference, economic challenges, social and cultural issues and institutional governance were used to



categorize and interpret the findings.

Limitations:

The study is limited by its reliance on secondary data, which may not capture the full scope of contemporary student experiences or the nuanced dynamics of unrest in all institutions. Moreover, secondary sources may reflect biases or selective reporting, which should be considered when interpreting the findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Causes of Student Unrest in Assam:

1. Ethnic Identity and Regionalism:

Assam is a melting pot of various ethnic groups, each with its own distinct language, culture, and traditions. In such a diverse setting, the assertion of ethnic identity often leads to tensions. Students, who are at a formative stage of their lives, naturally become champions of their communities' rights and recognition. This has led to movements where students demand autonomy and the preservation of their cultural heritage. For instance, the agitation by Bodo students for a separate Bodoland state is one of the many examples where the struggle for ethnic identity has led to student unrest. Similarly, there is a strong sentiment among Assamese students to protect their language and culture, especially in the face of perceived threats from non-indigenous groups. These movements reflect deep-seated fears of marginalization and cultural loss, making them emotionally charged and, at times, volatile.

2. Political Influence and Manipulation:

In Assam, as in many parts of India, student organizations often find themselves intertwined with the political machinery. Political parties sometimes see student bodies as instruments to advance their own agendas, leading to the politicization of what should ideally be independent student movements. This can blur the lines between genuine student grievances and political maneuvering, complicating the situation further. The involvement of students in state and national politics is not just a matter of concern but a reality in Assam. University elections often mirror the larger political



dynamics of the region, with various student factions receiving backing from different political parties. This has created a competitive, sometimes hostile, environment where the focus shifts from educational and social issues to political power struggles.

3. Educational Infrastructure and Quality:

The state of higher education in Assam has long been a cause for concern. Students often find themselves in institutions that lack adequate infrastructure, are short on qualified faculty, and offer outdated curricula. This has led to widespread disillusionment among students, who feel that their educational environment is not conducive to learning or future employment. The disconnect between the education system and the job market is particularly glaring. Many students graduate only to find themselves unemployed or working in jobs that do not match their qualifications. This mismatch contributes to a growing sense of frustration and anger, which can easily turn into unrest. The students' demand for better education is not just about their immediate academic needs but about their future prospects and the value of their degrees in a competitive job market.

4. Economic and Social Inequality:

Economic disparity and social inequality are other significant factors fueling student unrest in Assam. Many students come from marginalized communities, such as Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes, and face systemic discrimination and limited access to opportunities. The rising cost of education, coupled with the economic struggles of their families, exacerbates these inequalities. The privatization of education and the increasing influence of corporate interests in higher education have also played a role in alienating economically disadvantaged students. The perception that education is becoming a commodity, accessible only to those who can afford it, has led to widespread discontent. This feeling of injustice and exclusion often manifests in protests and demands for a more equitable education system.

5. National Policies and Globalization:

National policies and the forces of globalization have also had a significant impact on



student unrest in Assam. The introduction of new educational reforms, such as the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, has been met with mixed reactions. While some view these reforms as necessary for modernizing education, others fear that they could lead to further centralization and undermine regional autonomy. Globalization has changed the landscape of employment, placing a premium on skills and competencies that are not always covered by traditional academic programs. This has created anxiety among students about their ability to compete in a globalized job market. The uncertainty surrounding these changes has often led to protests, particularly when students feel that their future prospects are under threat.

B. Implications of Student Unrest:

1. Impact on Academic Environment:

One of the most immediate effects of student unrest is the disruption of the academic environment. Protests, strikes, and shutdowns often lead to the suspension of classes, delays in examinations, and a general atmosphere of uncertainty on campuses. This not only hampers students' academic progress but also undermines the overall quality of education. When the focus shifts from learning to activism, students may find their academic performance suffering. They may struggle to balance their involvement in protests with their studies, leading to lower grades and diminished future prospects. Furthermore, frequent disruptions can make it difficult for institutions to attract and retain qualified faculty, which further compromises the quality of education.

2. Social and Political Polarization:

Student unrest often mirrors the broader social and political divisions within society. In Assam, issues related to ethnic identity, regionalism, and political affiliation contribute to a polarized environment. This polarization is particularly evident on campuses, where different student organizations represent competing ideologies and interests. The fragmentation of student communities along ethnic, religious, or political lines can lead to a breakdown in social cohesion. As mistrust and hostility grow, the chances for dialogue and cooperation diminish, making it harder to resolve conflicts peacefully. The long-term implications of such polarization are significant, as it can hinder the



development of a more inclusive and tolerant society.

3. Influence on State and National Politics:

The role of students in shaping state and national politics in Assam cannot be overstated. Student bodies like the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) have historically been powerful forces in the state, capable of mobilizing large numbers of people and influencing policy decisions. Their activism has often brought critical issues to the forefront of public debate. However, the politicization of student movements raises concerns about the potential for manipulation by political parties. While student activism can be a catalyst for positive change, it can also be co-opted for narrow political gains. This highlights the need for a careful balance between students' roles as activists and their primary responsibilities as learners.

ADDRESSING STUDENT UNREST- POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

1. Strengthening Educational Infrastructure and Quality:

One of the most effective ways to address student unrest is to improve the quality of education and address infrastructural deficiencies. This means ensuring that institutions have adequate funding, qualified faculty, and modern facilities that support effective learning. . Investment in educational infrastructure is essential, including the expansion and modernization of classrooms, libraries, and laboratories. Additionally, curricula need to be regularly updated to keep pace with global trends and the evolving job market. Ensuring that education is aligned with the needs of the economy will help students feel more confident about their future prospects. Moreover, there should be a greater emphasis on research and development, particularly in areas that are crucial to Assam's regional context. By encouraging innovation and providing students with opportunities to engage in meaningful research, educational institutions can foster a more engaged and motivated student body, reducing the likelihood of unrest stemming from feelings of academic disillusionment.

2. Enhancing Dialogue and Communication:

Open and effective communication between students, faculty, and administration is



crucial for addressing grievances before they escalate. Institutions should establish formal channels for dialogue, such as student councils or grievance redressal committees, where students can express their concerns and be part of the decision-making process. Ensuring that students feel heard and valued can help prevent feelings of alienation and frustration that often lead to unrest. Regular town hall meetings, open forums, and workshops can also be effective in fostering a culture of transparency and mutual respect. Engaging students in discussions about educational policies, institutional changes, and other relevant issues can build trust and reduce the likelihood of misunderstandings and conflicts. Moreover, encouraging dialogue on sensitive issues such as ethnicity, identity, and regionalism can help address underlying tensions and promote a more inclusive campus environment.

3. Depoliticizing Student Organizations:

While student activism is an essential part of democratic engagement, there is a need to safeguard student organizations from undue political influence. This can be achieved by implementing regulations that ensure student bodies operate independently of political parties. Universities and colleges should promote a culture of academic freedom where students can engage in activism without being co-opted by external political agendas. Institutions can also provide training in leadership and civic engagement, helping students develop the skills needed to participate in constructive activism. By focusing on issues directly related to their academic environment and future prospects, students can channel their energy into initiatives that contribute positively to their institutions and society at large.

4. Addressing Economic and Social Inequality:

To address the root causes of student unrest related to economic and social inequality, there needs to be a concerted effort to make education more accessible and equitable. This includes providing scholarships, financial aid, and other support mechanisms for students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Ensuring that no student is denied education due to financial constraints can reduce feelings of exclusion and resentment. Additionally, educational institutions should implement policies that



promote diversity and inclusion, creating an environment where students from all backgrounds feel welcomed and supported. This could include affirmative action policies, diversity training for faculty and staff, and the establishment of resource centers for marginalized students. By addressing these inequalities, institutions can help mitigate one of the key drivers of unrest.

5. Re-evaluating National Policies:

The impact of national policies on student unrest cannot be ignored. Policies that affect education, employment, and regional autonomy need to be carefully considered, particularly in a diverse state like Assam. Policymakers should engage with students and other stakeholders to understand their concerns and incorporate their feedback into policy decisions. For example, the implementation of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 in Assam should be done with sensitivity to the state's unique cultural and linguistic context. Ensuring that educational reforms are inclusive and considerate of regional identities can help prevent the kind of backlash that often leads to unrest. Furthermore, national policies should prioritize the creation of job opportunities for graduates, aligning education with the demands of the job market to reduce the anxiety and frustration that can fuel protests.

CONCLUSION

Student unrest in Assam's higher educational institutions is a multifaceted issue rooted in historical, social, political, and economic factors. While student activism has played a vital role in shaping the state's identity and politics, it has also led to significant challenges for the academic environment. This study, based on secondary data, provides an in-depth analysis of the causes, manifestations, and impacts of student unrest in higher educational institutions in Assam. The findings highlight that political interference, inadequate infrastructure, socio-economic inequalities, and social justice issues are the primary drivers of unrest. Addressing the causes of unrest requires a holistic approach that includes improving educational infrastructure, fostering open communication, depoliticizing student organizations, addressing inequalities, and re-evaluating national policies. By taking these steps, Assam can create a more stable and



inclusive educational environment where students can thrive academically and engage in constructive activism. Ultimately, the goal should be to empower students as active participants in society while ensuring that their educational journey is not disrupted by the challenges of unrest. Through careful management and proactive engagement, it is possible to harness the energy of student activism for positive change while minimizing the disruptions and negative consequences associated with unrest.

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