

Student activism and protest politics in post-covid Assam: A study of Guwahati, Kamrup metropolitan (M)

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Abstract: Student activism has always been an important part of Assam's political landscape, especially through student organizations that were involved in movements on identity, citizenship, regional issues, education and public policy. This study investigates the evolution of student activism and protest politics in post-COVID Assam, especially in Guwahati in the Kamrup Metropolitan district. It focuses attention on the changing relationship between traditional forms of mobilization (rallies, protests and organizational politics) and new forms of engagement enabled by social media and digital communication. The article Special attention is given to the question of whether student activism after COVID-19 is a decline in participation or an adaptation to changing political, social, and technological conditions. The study concludes that student political participation remains significant, although in increasingly diverse forms, drawing on the feedback of students in Guwahati and secondary sources. The organizational involvement and the cause-oriented mobilization and the tangible demonstrations and the online communication are increasingly coexisting. The study draws attention to concerns about political parties, work, education, citizenship, identity and regional issues and argues that student engagement post COVID should be understood as a process of transformation, rather than as a disappearing act.

Keywords: Student Activism, Protest Politics, Guwahati, Assam, CAA, Digital Activism.

Introduction

Student activism has been a major force in political activism in Assam. Students have historically been involved in political issues that have gone beyond the campus and have shaped larger conversations about identity, citizenship, migration, regional interests and public policy. The political history of Assam thus provides an important background to understand the continued influence of student societies in collective efforts. Studies of Assam have shown that questions of identity, migration and political representation have been central to public mobilisation within the state (Weiner, 1983; Baruah, 2020). The Assam Movement from 1979 to 1985 is a prominent example of student-led activism in the region. The All-Assam Students' Union (AASU) provided an essential organisational conduit for the movement, connecting student politics with wider

issues of citizenship and Assamese identity. This activism culminated in the 1985 Assam Accord, which is an instance of how student mobilisation can transcend the academic domains and become a larger political movement (Weiner, 1983; Baruah, 2020).

There has been a good bit of political activity in Assam since December 2019 when the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) was passed. The anti-CAA/NRC protests started before the COVID-19 epidemic and continued in various parts of India until the pandemic disrupted public life in 2020 (Roy, 2022). In Assam, the anti-CAA was associated with the fear of identity, migration and future impact of the act on the Assam Accord (Baruah, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the traditional ways people engage in politics. Restrictions on public gatherings, school closures, and the move to online education changed the everyday environment for student interaction and organisation. Government and UGC directives in 2020 promoted online and distance education and initiated a phased reopening of educational institutions (Ministry of Education, 2020; UGC, 2020). These modifications have also fostered increased reliance on digital communication among learners.

In this context, the present research tries to find out whether the student activism in Assam has declined after the COVID-19 or it has assumed new modalities of political engagement. Guwahati is a major centre of education, administration, politics and media. It provides an important place to meet and interact for students of all institutions and from all backgrounds. The research thus examines the evolving modalities of mobilisation, the function of student organisations, the impact of social media, the persistent significance of the CAA movement, and the shifting concerns that motivate student political engagement.

Pre-COVID Era: Conventional Student Activism and Collective Mobilisation

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, student activism in Assam was primarily based on physical presence, student bodies, public gatherings, protests, demonstrations and constant street mobilisation. The historical trajectory of the Assam Movement illustrates how coordinated students can convert a particular political issue into a broader mass mobilisation. Student organisations provided a platform for leadership, a network for organisations and a means to articulate and communicate political demands (Weiner, 1983; Baruah, 2020). The pre-COVID times show that student politics in Assam was not just one issue. Issues of citizenship and identity were particularly salient, however, but student organisations also raised concerns about education, jobs, regional development and the rights of other people. The CAA demonstrations of 2019 highlighted the continued importance of physical mobilisation. The protests occurred just prior to the pandemic and were an important connection between the old school street politics and new realities that arose after COVID-19 (Roy, 2022). Student activism before COVID can thus be characterised in broad strokes as organization-oriented and highly visible. Engagement was often based on meetings, university links, grass-roots mobilisation and

public demonstrations. This is not to say that communication technologies were not present; rather, digital communication had not yet taken the central place in daily political engagement that it did during and after the pandemic.

Moreover, pre-COVID student activity created a significant environment for political socialisation and leadership cultivation among the youth in Assam. By engaging in student unions, public assemblies, and protests, students acquired chances to comprehend political matters, articulate their views, and participate in broader discussions on governance and public policy. Student associations facilitated the linkage of local issues with broader regional matters, allowing students from various educational establishments to engage in unified action. The historical impact of AASU illustrates how student associations may emerge as essential players in regional politics and shape public discourse outside academic settings.

Nevertheless, traditional student mobilisation encountered certain obstacles. Maintaining extensive protests necessitated ongoing organisational backing, collaboration among student leaders, and vigorous involvement from the broader student body. Variations in political philosophies and methodologies may occasionally impact cohesion within organisations. Furthermore, involvement in physical protests was contingent upon students' accessibility, institutional conditions, and the current political climate. Notwithstanding these obstacles, public demonstrations continued to serve as a significant avenue for articulating opposition and seeking political responsibility. The era preceding COVID serves as a valuable basis for comprehending the later evolution of student activism. It underscores the significance of collective involvement, organisational networks, and physical mobilisation, while also providing a foundation for analysing the impact of digital communication and evolving political contexts on student engagement post-pandemic.

Student Activism in the Post-Covid Era

Since COVID, there have been big shifts in how students engage, mobilise, and work together on political activities. The epidemic led to the disruption of campus life and accelerated the adoption of online communication and digital platforms. During the pandemic, the government promoted educational policies that recommended online and remote learning. This has made digital communication an important part of the academic and social life of students (Ministry of Education, 2020). Social media offers students accelerated means of disseminating information, voicing opinions, raising awareness and supporting issue-based campaigns in the area of political activism. The digital does not necessarily replace the physical demonstration, but virtual and physical participation can co-exist. Castells (2012) posits that networked communication can enhance the establishment and dissemination of collective action, and the findings of the current study also suggest an increasing significance of social media in student activism.

The pattern observed post-COVID in the study seems to be more hybrid than exclusively digital. Protests, demonstrations, and student groups remain significant, yet they are progressively integrated with digital awareness initiatives, social media interactions, and concise, topic-focused mobilisations. This implies that a decline in extensive physical mobilisation should not be construed as political apathy.

Literature Review

The literature on political mobilisation in Assam provides the historical and regional context to understand contemporary student activism. Guha (1977) locates the emergence of political consciousness in Assam in the larger transition from colonial rule to electoral democracy. The political and demographic background of anti-immigrant movement is discussed by Weiner (1983) who also points out the significance of AASU and related organisations in the mobilisation that emerged during the Assam Movement. Baruah (2020) additionally links the political landscape of Northeast India to issues of citizenship, migration, identity, and regional matters.

A second literature concerns social movements and collective action. Oommen (1990) highlights the connection between social movements, collective identity and organisation. Jenkins and Klandermans (1995) locate protest within a comparative paradigm where political contexts and processes of mobilisation interact. Political opportunities are important determinants of collective action (McAdam, 1999). Tilly (2004) is especially important, because his notion of repertoires of contention shows how movements change the ways in which they articulate political demands. The third relates to communication and networked mobilisation. Melucci (1996) emphasises the importance of identity and communication in contemporary collective action. Castells (2012) emphasises the importance of communication networks for social movements to connect persons and circulate information. Student activism research also indicates that digital platforms can provide additional avenues for political expression and mobilisation (Byrne et al., 2021)

Existing literature therefore establishes that student activism in Assam has deep historical roots, while social movement theory suggests that collective action can change with political opportunities, organisational structures and communication technologies. However, comparatively less attention is given to how student participation in Guwahati has been reorganised after the disruption caused by COVID-19. The present study addresses this gap by examining the coexistence of organisational politics, physical protest and digitally mediated participation.

Methodology

Research Design

The present study is descriptive and analytical in nature. A research design is a plan for conducting a research study, including the methods and procedures used to collect, analyse and interpret data. The descriptive approach is used to understand the present pattern of student activism, while the analytical approach is used to interpret the changes in participation and mobilisation before and after COVID-19.

Area of the Study

The study was carried out in Guwahati, Kamrup Metropolitan (M), Assam. Guwahati was selected because it is an important educational, administrative, political and media centre of Assam and provides a setting where students from different educational institutions and political backgrounds interact.

Sampling of the Study

The study included 40 student respondents from selected educational institutions in Guwahati. The respondents included students associated with student organisations as well as students who were not directly involved in organisational politics but were aware of or had observed student political activities.

Data Collection

Data collection involved a questionnaire along with direct interaction, interviews and discussions with students. The questionnaire contained both close-ended and open-ended questions covering organisational association, political awareness, participation in protests and rallies, the CAA movement, changes after COVID-19, social media, political-party influence and issues raised by students. Secondary data were collected from books, academic journals, articles, newspapers, government documents and other relevant sources.

Analysis of Data: Data were analysed both qualitatively and quantitatively.

The close-ended responses were organised into frequencies and percentages, while the open-ended responses were examined thematically to identify recurring views and patterns. The quantitative findings are presented through percentages, and the qualitative responses are used to explain the meaning behind the observed patterns.

Result & Findings

1. Association with Student Organisations

Thirty out of 40 respondents (75 percent) reported that they were associated with a student organisation, while 10 respondents (25 percent) were not. This indicates that student organisations continue to provide an important structure for political participation among the students covered by the study.

2. Following Student Political Activities

Thirty respondents (75 per cent) stated that they followed student political activities, while 10 respondents (25 per cent) did not. The finding suggests that political engagement is broader than direct organisational membership because students may remain politically interested even without formal association.

3. Participation in Protest, Rally or Demonstration

Twenty-four respondents (60 per cent) reported that they had participated in a protest, rally or demonstration, while 16 respondents (40 per cent) had not. This shows that direct physical participation remains relevant, although it is lower than general political interest or organisational association.

4. Student Participation during the CAA Movement

Thirty-five respondents (87.5 per cent) reported that they had observed student participation during the CAA movement, while five (12.5 per cent) did not. The finding highlights the continuing visibility of the CAA movement in students' understanding of political activism in Assam.

5. CAA and Political Awareness

All 40 respondents stated that the CAA protests increased political awareness among students. This should be understood as the perception of the respondents rather than as evidence that awareness increased among every student in Assam. Nevertheless, it shows the strong political significance attached to the movement within the field sample.

6. Changes in Student Activism after COVID-19

Thirty respondents (75 per cent) reported that student activism had changed after COVID-19, while 10 respondents (25 per cent) did not perceive a significant change. The open-ended responses associated this change with greater use of social media, shorter and issue-specific campaigns, and a combination of online awareness and offline mobilisation.

Discussion

The data indicate that student activism in Guwahati has not disappeared after COVID-19. Instead, the form of participation appears to have changed. The relatively high levels of organisational association and political interest, together with continued participation in protests, suggest that conventional activism remains relevant. At the same time, the reported importance of social media and issue-specific mobilisation points towards a more flexible and hybrid form of participation. The comparison between the pre-COVID and post-COVID periods is therefore important. Before COVID-19, student mobilisation was more strongly associated with physical meetings, campus networks, rallies and demonstrations. The CAA protests of 2019 were an important example of this form of visible mobilisation. During and after the pandemic, restrictions on physical interaction and the expansion of online education increased the importance of digital communication. In the post-COVID period, students appear to combine online communication with offline action rather than choosing one form exclusively.

The findings also reveal an important political tension. While student organisations continue to structure participation, a large majority of respondents perceive influence from larger political parties. This raises questions about autonomy, representation and the ability of student organisations to articulate student concerns independently. At the same time, the range of issues identified by respondents shows that student activism remains connected to both broader political questions and everyday concerns such as education, employment and recruitment.

Conclusion

Historically, student activism has played a very important role in shaping the politics of Assam. From the Assam Movement of 1979–1985 to the protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), students and student organisations have been active participants in debates on issues of identity, citizenship, regional interests and governance. The present study is an attempt to explore the evolution of this tradition in the post-COVID period with special reference to the Guwahati, Kamrup Metropolitan District. The findings suggest that student activism has not disappeared but has changed. Of the 40 respondents, 75 per cent said they were members of a student organisation, and 60 per cent had participated in a protest, rally or demonstration. Also, all of the respondents agreed that social media influences student activism. These results suggest that students remain politically engaged, but in different shapes and forms. Issue-based campaigning and digital communication are now part of the mix, along with traditional activities such as rallies and demonstrations.

The CAA movement continues to be a significant instance of students' participation in the political sphere of Assam. Thirty-five respondents said they saw students taking part in the movement, and all 40 said the protests

raised political awareness among students. This underlines the continued significance of citizenship, identity and regional issues in the formation of political consciousness. At the same time, contemporary student activism has widened to include issues such as unemployment, delays in recruitment examinations, education infrastructure, corruption and environmental issues. These issues suggest that students are concerned with wider political issues and dilemmas that affect their everyday lives. But the study also highlights concerns over the autonomy of student bodies. Around 82.5% of the respondents were of the opinion that student politics in Assam is influenced by bigger political parties. It calls into question the independence of the organisation and the ability of student leadership to represent students' interests free from political pressure.

The study is limited to 40 respondents of Guwahati, and therefore the results cannot be generalised for all the students of Assam. Future research with other districts and educational institutions could offer a broader insight into changing political participation.

To summarise, student activism in post-Covid Assam is still politically relevant, but its forms and priorities are changing. This transformation is seen in the mix of organisational politics, physical protests and digital participation. The future of student activism will depend on student organisations' ability to remain independent, inclusive and responsive to emergent concerns. Consequently, student activism remains a major space for young people to articulate grievances, develop political consciousness and engage with democratic processes in Assam.

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