CHAPTER - 2

THEORETICAL BASES OF THE STUDY

The Indian universities seem to be plagued by the problem of student unrest. This phenomenon is not peculiar to India; many universities of developed as well as under-developed countries are witnessing the emergence of militant student movement. Divergent views have been expressed and various theories pronounced in recent years in order to explain the student unrest problem. Both the unitary theories within the framework of classical social theory and multiple explanations of student unrest have been advanced. This chapter will look into various theories which seek to provide explanation for the student unrest; emphasis is given to theories relevant in the Indian context.

Classical theories

Two theories have been suggested to account for the militancy of the students within the framework of classical social theory.

According to the first theory, universities and colleges are no longer concerned with transmission of cultural heritage but are fast becoming a central element of forces of production. This is truer in advanced capitalist as well as socialist societies. A powerful defence of this theory is found in the writings of French
Sociologist, Alain Touraine (1968), he maintains that the university occupies the same place as the capitalist enterprise formally did in the preceding "industrial society" and that just as the accumulation of capital was the motor of the former society so the knowledge and the technical progress are the motors of new society. He rhetorically asks, "Is not the student movement, in principle at least, of the same importance as the labour movement of the past?" 1 This theory views students as the new proletariat and speaks of an inherent and permanent conflict between the student and teacher just as capital and labour are in structural conflict.

This interpretation may initially seem to have some merit but a deeper analysis discloses many cracks in it. Jones (1969) rejects this theory as scientifically incorrect and politically reactionary. 2 He puts forward a number of arguments against this theory. In fact, there is no evidence to support the notion that the motor of bourgeois society has changed from accumulation of capital to knowledge and technical progress. The analogy of a capitalist class and a propertyless proletariat class with a managerial technocratic teaching staff and the state and a student body suffers from two major confusions. First, students unlike workers do not constitute a class. The situation of
working class is always transient. It is not a life situation and their social destination may be either into professional groups or else into the managerial technocratic class itself.

The second basic error of this theory lies in the profound differences of political and economic power enjoyed by the capitalists in the nineteenth century and the university staff in the twentieth century. In the first case, power over factory production was translated into political and economic power over the institution of the state, while in the other case power to make political and economic decisions is dictated from outside the university by the state apparatus which reflects the dominant class, not university professors but the owners of capital.

The second classical theory which is diametrically opposed to the first, postulates, students as a traditional elite group, overwhelmingly bourgeois or petit bourgeois by recruitment and outlook and, therefore, ultimately a trivial or reactionary force. Students either in the West or in the East cannot be identified with the capitalist or working class. They are a distinct social group which has produced distinct forms of struggle. To regard them as adolescent members of the ruling class, according to Jones (196), is a nostalgic self-deception.
Both the theories rely on a unilateral economic determinism ignoring the complex position which the students occupy within the industrial structure and the politico-cultural system.

The nature of the problem is such that it can hardly fit into any of the classical social theories. Student insurgency, rebellion, revolt, ferment, or unrest is relative in terms of time, place, and social situation. No single unitary theory can vouch for the phenomenon of student unrest. There appears to be several forces which combine together, generating the structure of student activism. The discussion that follows describes various theoretical bases suggested as possible explanations for student unrest.

**Students: a political force**

The insurgency of the students directed against the government in authority in different parts of the world demonstrates the awakening among the students against the social order perpetuated by the government in power. Colonialism, imperialism, cold-war and economic exploitation by neo-imperialism have given political substance to the student movement. The structure of the political power and the political system in different parts of the world are so varied that it is impossible to give an overall explanation
of student participation in political upheaval. However, no analysis of the Indian student movement would be complete unless a reference is made to their role in the Indian freedom movement. But in contemporary India the structure of student unrest has changed. Students have been reduced by politicians to trouble-makers for their (politicians') partisan ends. Weiner (1963) theorises that students are lined up by politicians as a special pressure group. As a pressure group they have been used by politicians and sometimes even by some disgruntled teachers.

Altbach (1971) gives an analysis of student activism in developed and developing countries alike with the objective of finding out some coherence and perspective to the problem of the Indian student. He believes that students are a crucial political force in many countries. Several characteristics inherent in the condition of students point to their being recognised as agents of change. Students are a homogeneous community; they are relatively independent and are in an environment that encourages an awareness of issues and ideas. Within these parameters, Altbach (1971) finds that the German students are generally more politically aware than their counterparts elsewhere, that the French are traditionally aloof from organized student bodies, that the Dutch are politically flexible, the Americans are recent
arrivals on the scene, the Indians are manipulated by political parties, and the English are slow to ignite.

Sinde (1972) also highlights the importance of political involvement and holds the view that the students are at the root of almost every political trouble. He concludes that "though they behave in a most irresponsible manner, they have become a force".

Gusfield (1963) mentions politicisation of students as the main cause of student unrest.

Srivastava (1974) has emphasised the political involvement of students and the interference of political parties in students' affairs as the main cause of indisciplined behaviour.

According to Sakin (1972), most of the human beings are not political animals and are not highly involved in political and governmental affairs. He maintains that the political environment in the family is especially important in determining the involvement of students in public affairs and politics. The findings in India and other democratic countries show that no where do large numbers of individuals get actually involved with party activities. A majority of the students are opposed to protests and demonstrations as a form of political behaviour.
Other social scientists, notably Cormack (1961), DiBona (1966), and Ross (1969) have also accepted the importance of political factor for the unrest among students. But they do not accept it as the only factor responsible for the turbulence among students. The Indian example particularly raises doubts concerning political factors being solely responsible for the student unrest. Spencer's findings indicate that "Indian students do not have a very high sense of political efficacy and, thus, do not engage in partisan activity to a degree that their reputation suggests."

Adolescence: A period of stresses and strain

As youth grows up from childhood to adolescence, he goes through physiological changes in the body and psychological strains due to emotional development. Coming of age has been recognised as a period of stresses and strains. A young-man's age is the beginning of the development of identity within the community of the people whose values he integrates in his own personality. Dasmel (1971) discusses the concept of identity developments in the Indian youth. He comments on both positive and negative identities. According to him the student unrest is a symptom of negative identity formation.
Crisis of identity has also been pointed out by Reddy as one of the reasons for student unrest. Formation of positive identity is easier in mono-cultural societies. But in pluralistic societies like India, there are several identities which may not necessarily pose a problem of conflict. Further, the fast-changing social situation in India may not be helpful even to develop one particular identity. Thus we cannot expect students to conform to established identities.

Rioux (1968) attributes the phenomenon of student unrest to the refusal of students all over the world to take up the adult roles and responsibilities. This failure among students to acquire the proper characteristics of the age has been described by Rioux as 'cultural Neotina.' This theory is not easily supported by facts. It is true that students may have characteristics of childhood in them but their motivation to act on their own, which is a symbol of adulthood, is entirely due to the cultural inheritance of man. Students are not only initiating into the adult society, but are also contradicting it in order to change it in their own life time. Rioux's theory is also contradicted by another powerful sociological phenomenon observed by Laplata, namely the refusal of the older
generations to permit the younger ones to take up the adult roles. According to Kashyap (1972), in a country where the largest percentage of educated people consist of the student community, it is a pity they do not have a greater say in matters, that instead of reflecting an avenue of hope for the country they merely reflect the defeatism and decadence of the society.

Cultural acceleration of the generational gap

Some sociologists find the cause of worldwide student unrest in the growing gap between generations. This gap is triggered off by the tremendous advance in science and technology. Intellectual and cultural progress has been so rapid that communication between older and younger generations is becoming difficult. New disciplines have sprung up that are redefining old concepts of man and nature. Greater freedom in sex matters has led to new sexual ethics. Both in the West and East, traditions and values of the society, revered and honoured for hundreds of years are now under attack on and off the campus. In the West, the young generation is becoming impatient with the imperfections of the social order. There is an awesome gap between the values the older generation professes and the subversion of those values by social institutions and the bureaucratic society.
In the Indian context the theory of generational gap is obvious. The Indian culture has traditionally failed to nurture individualism in terms of ego. With modern education and mass communication, nuclear families are beginning to develop individualism abruptly, without social accommodation in a phased manner. The increasing use of mass media has greatly affected the basic values and norms of behaviour of youth in joint families, kinship groups, as well as caste groups. The family remains largely sacred at conscious level, though authority clashes within some families are now visible. Thus an intergeneration gap emerges. Often the youth grows up in a milieu which is entirely different from that of his parents. A whole new generation has grown up in independent India in a radically different environment than the Raj days of the parents.

Cormack (1961) treats the problem of students in the context of social change. She argues that the problem may be viewed from the perspective of "generation conflict" and erosion of authority of the traditional family. This theory is supported by most of the contributors of "Youth unrest: conflict of generation" edited by Singhi (1972), where the blame for student indiscipline is generally placed on adult apathy, indiscipline, and the sordid reality of the world which the young inhabit and which is in sharp
contrast to their idealistic makeup.

Srinivas (1972) regards the sociological background of students crucial in understanding the problem of student unrest. The first generation learners, according to him, find it difficult to adjust to the new demands and values of the society unlike those who have the advantage of generations of educational background in families. Expansion of education in the last quarter century is bringing more rural students to urban universities. These neoliterates often fail to adjust and integrate into urban ethos, and, in turn, contribute to student unrest.

This theory seems to describe appropriately the changing society in India. National policy aims at establishing an egalitarian society ensuring channels of mobility to lower social groups. But there are numerous obstructions in the socio-economic mobility of backward communities. The neoliterates, naturally, undergo a sense of frustration which pushes them in the direction of agitations.

Adaptation to economic and social changes

Ross (1969) also takes note of sociological background of students in the context of unrest. Along with the generally accepted causes of student unrest like the phenomenal increase in the number of colleges and universities since independence, educational problems, rising
prices, the spectre of unemployment that haunts most, and
the increasing influence of politicians in the universities,
she has drawn an interesting conclusion that the student
who tends to participate in or spark student indiscipline
do so to escape boredom or to have fun and excitement.
Despite the variety of causes of student unrest in different
parts of the world, Ross finds one factor common to all
cases: the need to adapt to rapid economic and social changes.
In the best this adaptation takes the form of conscious
efforts to reach certain levels of affluence. On the other
hand, the developing countries, where conditions of affluence
do not exist, are facing tremendous dynamic changes at
variance with traditional ways of life. This theme runs
into her classification of five causes of student indiscipline,
which are political changes, economic conditions, moral issues,
educational reforms, and fun and excitement.

The preceding discussion leads us to the conclusion
that no single unified theory can account for the student
unrest. Students are the part of the society; their
problem has to be viewed in the context of social dimen-
sions. The review of theoretical bases indicates that
there are at least four dimensions to the student problem: political, economic, socio-cultural background of the student, and the educational setting. The present study will attempt to examine various assumptions in the light of the previous discussion.
Notes and References


2. Stedman Jones, op.cit., p. 27

3. Ibid., p. 28

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid., p. 30


8. Shinde, A.B., Political Conscious Among College Students, (Bombay: Thaker and Co., 1972)


25. Rose, A.D., Student Unrest in India, op.cit

26. Ibid.