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Student Politics in British India and Beyond: The Rise and Fragmentation of the All India Student Federation (AISF), 1936–1950

Tom Wilkinson

In these days of historical battle, let every university become a mighty fortress of struggle for the people. Let every student, wherever he may be, become a fearless fighter for the cause of his people. Forward to battle! Lead on, Youth of the World!¹

The All India Student Federation represented the most far reaching attempt to create a national student movement during India's colonial period.² Between its establishment in 1936 and the Federation's resolution to abandon its revolutionary approach in 1950, the AISF's organizational capacity represented a dramatic indication of student power. The student movement acquired a new significance in India's freedom struggle and for the colonial and post-colonial state during this period. By the beginning of the Second World War, the AISF boasted one thousand affiliated organizations and eighty-thousand student members.³ Its national character was differentiated, multi-layered, and reflected regional specificities.

- 1 Theories derived from the political and social sciences have dominated the study of Indian students.⁴ There is only a modest field of scholarship concerned with the history of students in India. This literature offers historical accounts of the features of Indian higher education and narratives of resistance against the British Raj (Altback 1968; Hazary 1987). Thirty years after the last scholarly intervention into this field, this historical snapshot into student politics will bring to light a largely forgotten attempt to consolidate the disparate student organizations of colonial India.

- 2 This history of the AISF also gives historiographical insights into three other schools of Indian history. Firstly, there has been a recent scholarly focus on paramilitary and youth volunteer movements in colonial India, although the student has been overlooked in these histories.⁵ This paper will argue that the trends of youth militancy and ideologies of social service converged in the Indian student movement. Secondly, I will explore the valuable role of students in the final phase of the independence movement and during the political struggles of the early post-colonial period.⁶ This movement became an arena for the competing efforts of adults and youths to mobilize students, especially by the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Congress Socialist Party (CSP).⁷ Thirdly, historians of the Second World War will, I hope, find the divergent mobilizations of students for and against the war effort insightful for understanding the social history of WWII and the Indian home front.⁸
- 3 This paper has drawn on three categories of materials. The principal source of materials for this paper has come from the student organization's official documents, pamphlets and their highly insightful weekly journal.⁹ These materials offer the narratives of AISF student leaders and student activists and reveal their shifting relationship with various political parties. The second category consists of government surveillance reports, located in the National Archives of India, that provide summaries of developments in the student movement and of the communist movement. It was useful for this researcher that the colonial and the post-colonial state considered left-wing student movements a prime object of suspicion and left detailed accounts of their activities.¹⁰ A third (somewhat heterogeneous) category comprises a range of sources this author located to further analyze the unfolding of the events. These included newspapers, letters and autobiographies.

The Struggle for Power in the AISF and Youth Identities in India, 1936-1941

- 4 The establishment of the AISF represented a far-reaching attempt to consolidate the existing student organizations and their diverse political activities at the national level.¹¹ Rajimwale's (2001) interviews with student leaders reveal that this moment of student unity sought to offset an attempt by the British to establish a state-sanctioned student umbrella organization. There had been previous attempts at the establishment of an Indian student movement but never had annual conferences been successively convened and a constitutional framework established.¹² At the first conference of the AISF, in Lucknow 1936, Jawaharlal Nehru inaugurated the proceedings while Mohammed Ali Jinnah presided (Joshi 1972:35). Jawaharlal Nehru issued a stark warning to the inaugural AISF conference, "When you are trying to build up a student's federation you cannot afford to make it narrow and shut out persons holding different views."¹³ Within only two years, however, the national student movement had begun to fragment along political and religious lines. This fragmentation of the AISF can be explained through an examination of the different ideological perspectives, political networks and religious identities that prevailed amongst the students.¹⁴
- 5 The establishment of the AISF gave rise to a wave of nationwide student activities between 1937 and 1939. The initiative of provincial student leaders together with the support of adult political leaders brought about the setting up of seven All India Student Provincial Federations (AISPF) to coordinate national campaigns during this

period. The campaign to support the Andaman hunger strikers, particularly in Bengal but also across the country, is the first notable example of coordinated countrywide student action. Moreover, groups of students organized informal networks within the AISF to support the campaigns of political parties in the provincial legislature elections of 1937. The most prominent groups to emerge were the communists and congress socialist factions. The communist students worked closely and aligned with the larger CPS group during these initial years. Both strongly anti-colonial and socialistic in character, fluidity distinguished the membership between the two factions at the student level in the years following the formation of the AISF. It became an arena that fostered political cooperation and contained competition amongst students.

- 6 The student movement, however, splintered along the lines of religious identity shortly after its establishment. At the first conference of the AISF, whilst presiding over the proceedings alongside Jawaharlal Nehru, Muhammad Ali Jinnah dubbed the Congress “a Hindu Body.” He referred to Muslims as a “separate entity” during his address to the students. The leader of the Muslim League went onto encourage the Muslim members to organize themselves separately to the Hindu members. The widening rift between the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League became apparent to the conference delegates. It was the last time Nehru and Jinnah would share a platform together.
- 7 The student movement increasingly became a political space where students negotiated questions of religious identity through performative language and clothing. Muslim students voiced concern about the failure to include adjournments to offer Prayers and voiced concern about the singing of *Vande Mataram*.¹⁵ Muslim students were encouraged to wear black *sherwanis* (long coat-like garment) and Jinnah caps to demonstrate their support for the Muslim League. Like those congress supporters fashioning Gandhi caps, the clothing of students projected their exclusive political identities to other students. The AISF promoted a “Muslim-Hindu Student Unity” campaign that sought to quell the rising of, what they called, “communal politics.” Figure 1. represents the AISF’s poster celebrating its acclaimed ability to unify different social groups through anti-British protest on Independence Day. However, the Muslim student leaders spurned a campaign that equated the struggle for minority rights as communal politics.
- 8 Militant students associated with the Hindu Mahasabha and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) increasingly held protests within the AISF conferences and often triggered cycles of student protests or violence.¹⁶ The rise of these anti-Muslim student movements triggered Muslim students to leave the AISF. It served to antagonize this group during a period that their social identity had become contested and fragile. Despite the AISF leadership’s rejection of Hindu nationalist politics and their campaigns for unity (see figure 1), Muslim students stressed their general sense of frustration with the national student movement. They created a discourse that represented themselves as an object of suspicion in a Hindu-dominated student movement and called the AISF the “baby of the congress” (Zuberi 1949:19). One student leader, Mukhtar Zaman, recollected his experiences of the AISF, “the right-wing Hindus dominating the congress were driving the Muslims into the corner and were not prepared to tolerate them...except on their own terms” (Zaman 1976:20).
- 9 The AISF lost a large part of its Muslim support at the moment that a group of students from Aligarh Muslim University (AMU) established The All India Muslim Student

Federation (AIMSF) in 1937. The draft resolution submitted at the AMU Student Union outlined their ambition to create a common platform for Muslim Students, and “to bring about closer social contact, better cultural, political, economic and religious understanding and a deeper sense of common relationship” (Zaman 1976:211). Thereafter, the AIMSF discouraged participation of Muslim students in AISF activities. It campaigned for separate electorates in university elections and for reserved seats in the student assemblies.¹⁷ These Muslim students also made strategic alliances with the AISF (communist) during the Second World War and after the CPI endorsed the creation of Pakistan. The Punjab Muslim Students Federation and the All Bengal Muslim Students Association benefited from the political space vacated by the Congress post-1942 and won over important pockets of support. These students developed a capacity for organization and mobilization along the lines of religious identity, that allowed them to establish a position of strength in anticipation of the post-World War II order.

- 10 Ideological and partisan disagreements between the communist and the congress student leaders resulted in the fragmentation of the AISF into two rival groups. The restrictions imposed by Mahatma Gandhi on student strikes during his individual *satyagraha* (non-violent resistance) campaign in 1940 became the central disagreement. The Congress-leaning AISF General-Secretary, M. L. Shah, supported his demand. AISF student strikes, therefore, could only proceed if the authorities closed the institutions, students decided to give up their studies entirely or they had Gandhi’s personal permission. The communist group, on the other hand, supported the escalation of strikes to curtail Britain’s war effort and supported an increasingly radical leftist agenda.
- 11 The communist and congress student factions also disagreed strongly about the AISF’s early position on the Second World War. The congress group generally sought to differentiate between the allied and the axis powers. Many supported the notion of assisting the British war effort on certain terms. Those Congress-leaning students supporting elements of the “August Offer” of 1940 were ridiculed by communist students as attempting to “establish a [Indian] government of national betrayal” (Chandra et al 1989:105). The communist group vehemently denounced the “imperialists war.” They equated British colonial rule with Germany’s fascism and rejected any cooperation with the British government between 1939 and the summer of 1941.¹⁸
- 12 The communist student leaders substituted their strategy of cooperation for one of control throughout the year 1939.¹⁹ Communist students launched a largely underground recruitment drive, organized auxiliary cells and a propaganda campaign amongst the eighty-thousand student members of the AISF. The Bombay leadership of the CPI, encouraged by The Communist International (Comintern), issued instructions to the student leadership to gain influence over the student movement.²⁰ The CPI-leadership adopted similar strategies with the national peasant movements and labor movement: The All Indian Kisan Sabha and The All Indian Trade Union Congress.
- 13 The communist student leaders successfully expanded and institutionalized their power in the AISF. It was reported by one state official in 1940, “that the communist influence among students has spread beyond all recognition compared with the pre-war period and out of all proportion to the numerical strength of the Communist

Party.” He attributed their success to “the comparative apathy of the non-communists as contrasted with the zeal and better organization of communist workers.”²¹

- 14 The communist student leaders commenced a power struggle against their congress socialist rivals at the AISF Conference in Nagpur on December 25, 1940. The extent to which the communist group planned the split is unclear. The division between the CPI and CPS aligned factions arose nominally over the question of obedience to Gandhi and the issue of student strikes. The Communist faction, led by Muqimuddin Farooqui, passed a motion rejecting the Gandhian approach,

He [Mahatma Gandhi] charged us with indiscipline and has warned us that we hinder the national cause by acting on our own and frittering away our energy on ineffective and thoughtless demonstrations...*We the Indian students are in the vanguard of the world student movement.*²²

The Nagpur split symbolized the strained relationship between Gandhi and the bulk of Indian students. The overwhelming majority of the regional delegates at the AISF conference supported the motion that directly condemned Gandhi’s approach (Bannerjee 1946:24). This occurred despite Jawaharlal Nehru and Jai Prakash Narayan’s appeal to students to obey his instructions about student strikes. Both had been widely considered to be radical Congress politicians and generally popular with Indian youths. The political authority of Gandhi amongst students had reached the lowest point since he took leadership of the Congress twenty years earlier. The newly elected General Secretary of the AISF, Muqimuddin Farooqui, subsequently refused Gandhi’s summons to his Wardha ashram to discuss the splitting of the national student movement. The Indian national movement was characterized by an often-overlooked intergenerational political tension and support for the congress movement became increasingly age differentiated during the late 1930s. After all, student hood is a transitional stage, lasting three or four years, and this generation of students had not experienced the earlier mass movements.

- 15 The congress group, led by M. L. Shah, held a rival conference in a different venue to protest at the rejection of Gandhi’s approach. They inadvertently handed over the official conference *pandal* (and the organizational structures) to the rival communist group. Those Congress-leaning students whose political identity was linked with Gandhi created an alternative political movement tantamount to a “rump” in student politics. Both groups had been attempting to institutionalize their respective positions within the organizational structures during the initial years of WWII. The communists successfully turned their influence into control over the direction and organs of the AISF at the Nagpur conference.
- 16 As political differences between the moderate (usually congress) and radical (usually communist) students widened, Indian youths increasingly understood their partisanship in terms of essence rather than degree. Both AISF groups claimed to be the sole representative organization of the Indian students. The communists referred to the congress group as the “unofficial” student movement. This group officially became the National Congress Student Organisation in 1945. Its constitution held, “The AISC is an organization of genuine nationalist students who have given their allegiance to Gandhiji and the Congress.”²³ This inception of new spaces of youth politics was prompted by the power configuration of political parties. The fragmentation of the AISF set in motion a process whereby student movements would be organized along party lines in early post-colonial India.

- 17 The student leaders of the AISF developed an increasingly close relationship with the youthful CPI leaders after the congress students departed in December 1940. Young men in their thirties rising through the ranks of the communist organization, such as the younger associate of Bhagat Singh and the General Secretary of the CPI after independence, Ajoy Ghosh, and B. T Ranadive, fostered close collaboration with the communist-leaning AISF leadership. Their militant approach, their support for the Soviet Union and their general youthfulness had much appeal in the student movement. The AISF consequently became a vital entry point into the public sphere because the organization remained outlawed until 1942.
- 18 The AISF's provocative resolution to fight against the British Raj during the Second World War represented a vital alignment of policy with the outlawed CPI. After the Nagpur split in December 1940, in the absence of the congress students, the communist group passed a resolution claiming, "the duty of all the students...is to drive the imperialist oppressors from our [Indian] soil."²⁴ The AISF's outright denunciation of the British war constituted a radicalization of the national student movements position. Within one year, however, the AISF (communist) substituted their revolutionary project for unconditional support for fighting Nazi Germany.
- 19 Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 revealed the close partnership between the AISF, the CPI, and Moscow. At the AISF Conference, in December 1941 in Patna, in a dramatic reversal of policy, the AISF declared its support for the British war effort. It held, "the war must be waged in defense of the land of socialism and for the purpose of crushing Hitler's fascism."²⁵ As the "imperialist's war" morphed into the "people's war" with the participation of the Soviet Union, many members felt perplexed and it lost considerable support amongst the students.²⁶ A great number joined the AISF (congress) in anticipation of mass action against the British. The rigid alignment in policy suggests strong coordination between the two communist organizations in India, and that their loyalty to Moscow trumped their commitment to fighting British colonialism, although the gap of a few months that occurred between the CPI's support for the war and AISF's decision to fully support the war effort indicates the student leaders resisted pressure to avoid the embarrassing turnaround.

27

Activism, Agitation and the Everyday Experiences of Students during the Second World War

- 20 The AISF (communist) and AISF (congress) launched divergent mobilizations during WWII. One of activism to support the war effort and one of agitation against colonial rule. The communist group's new position stressed the urgency of civil defense against the potential Japanese invasion and rejected agitation against the British. Thereafter, the CPI and the colonial state attempted to harness the energies of students for the purposes of the war effort and for social service. The congress students, on the other hand, assumed positions of leadership in the freedom struggle after the outbreak of the Quit India movement of 1942. As the colonial state rapidly arrested the leaders of the INC, students and youths launched a far reaching, intense and often violent struggle against the British. This section will explore these mobilizations at the experiential level and examine the range of penal tactics employed to check the political resistance of students.

- 21 The communist leaning AISF became an important instrument for the British war effort and the student acquired a novel significance for the colonial state. The AISF established *Student Patriotic Propaganda Squads* to bolster support for the British war effort, against Nazism, and to propagate the threat of a Japanese invasion. Their policy held Indian Independence both unfeasible and undesirable for the duration of the war. They engaged in *prabhat pheris* (early morning rounds), organized slogan-shouting, street corner meetings, and torch light processions to spread the pro-Soviet and British message.²⁸ The AISF also established *Student Defence Committees* on university campuses to encourage students to join civil defense efforts during their exam season and vacations.
- 22 The central government authorized the training of students in arson prevention, anti-panic and evacuation, and in Air Raid Precautions (ARP). ARP constituted the primary activity in the student's civil defense campaign. Undeterred by inadequate arrangements to protect subjects from Japanese bombing, student wardens in eastern India and the larger cities set about drilling with firefighting equipment and setting up shelters. Recruitment posters and magazines held the ideal form of the Air Raid Warden to be a young man. *The Student* proclaimed, "By virtue of our youth, our education, our organization and sense of discipline...we the students are called upon to shoulder a special responsibility in building our Air Raid Precautions."²⁹ Underlying this representation was the idea that Indian students were distinctly passionate and more willing to sacrifice for India's defense.
- 23 The authorities recruited former communist dissidents for liaison work between the army and the people.³⁰ The army trained student units in matters of civil defense, specifically for patrol duty, evacuations and air raid work, and organized limited "guerrilla training camps." The colonial state was aware of the security risks of putting communist students on a war footing. Instructions were given to military officers who had dealings with these left-wing youths to be conscious of their communist sympathies.³¹ Nevertheless, as Japanese troops approached the borders of India throughout 1942, the colonial state opted to strengthen relationships with those organizations who pursued a policy of cooperation during the war. It recognized the potentiality of this leftist student movement to agitate against the Japanese in the event of an invasion.³²
- 24 The student movement sought to mobilize students for relief work during the Bengal famine between 1942 and 1944. The *Peoples Food Committee* collected cash, food and clothes from across the country, and sent relief delegations to the affected areas. Through propaganda campaigns they sought to promote awareness about the scale of the famine and to promote student solidarity. Figure 3 is an AISF poster depicting a woman and her baby, the personification of Bengal, lying on the land of Bengal with a menacing Japanese invader portrayed as a hog lurking in the background. The campaign urges Indians to "Unite...To Feed the People and to Save the Nation." Mother Bengal, it implies, can only be saved from the horrors of invasion and famine through the unity of Indians (for the British war effort). Figure 2 represents an emotive sketch of a starving student from Chittagong and reveals the terrible effect of the famine on Bengali students.
- 25 The AISF and the All Indian Muslim Student Federation established the Joint Relief Board to dispatch squads of medical aid to the affected areas (see figure 4). Indeed, as the INC went underground post-1942, such opportunities for new combinations of

student politics arose between the groups. This student relief and civil defense work were largely concentrated in Bengal. For this reason, the AISF called for a return of “the old and glorious *Seva Samiti* tradition of service.”³³ There has been much focus on the volunteer movements in India, yet the latently political social service of the student movements has been forgotten in these histories.³⁴

- 26 On August 8, 1942 the All-India Congress Committee’s endorsement of the “Quit India Resolution” triggered an alternative mobilization of Indian students against the British. The following day, Gandhi issued his instruction: “Do or Die. We shall either free India or die in the attempt” ([1942]1997:181). He said, “If the students want to join the struggle only to go back to their studies after a while, I would not invite them to it...In all fights for freedom, the world over, the students have made very large contributions” ([1942]1997:186). Gandhi requested students to profess to their university academics their loyalty to Congress and, if determined enough, leave their studies.
- 27 Student leaders, having limited communication with the jailed congress leadership, took the initiative to escalate the militant nature of Congress’s underground struggle. Lord Linlithgow, the Viceroy of India, believed that students, had “deliberately seized control and exceeded the instructions of the congress...*What matters now is that youth is in command and has been putting into existence a revolutionary programme.*”³⁵ Recognizing the increased possibility of a congress-led struggle and disillusioned by the AISF (communist) support for the British, students had been joining the congress group in larger numbers. Student leaders harnessed this growing (yet unofficial) organizational network of the Congress-leaning AISF group.
- 28 A wide range of anti-British activity intermingled violent and non-violent protest, especially throughout August and September 1942.³⁶ Narratives of these AISF (congress) struggles are sadly missing because journals and pamphlets ceased to be published at the moment the students went underground. The non-violent protest generally included the boycotting of colleges and almost daily mass processions or sit-ins on university campuses. The violent protests included acts of sabotage at railway stations, telegraph offices, and clashes with the police.³⁷ These clashes escalated in a dialectical way: that is, the state’s attempt to exact reprisals were quickly met with increased student violence.³⁸ This culture of student-state violence intersected between local campus networks, the political structures of the AISF or Congress, and the coercive apparatus of the state.
- 29 The most militant year of the student movement was 1942. The youthful groundswell of anti-British activity represented an unprecedented exhibition of student politicization. It is estimated that ten percent of the student population of India was involved in the day-to-day organizational work of the anti-colonial struggle (Altbach 1968:256). This included a swelling of women students that challenged the political norms of respectability in India. The scale of the protest succeeded in closing most of India’s universities throughout 1942. University attendance in Bombay, for example, dropped to less than twenty percent in September 1942 (Khan 2015:181). A great many students no doubt pursued less obvious forms of intransigence or “everyday resistance” throughout the Quit India movement that targeted imperial authority. These acts of popular sedition included reading anti-imperial student propaganda, observing processions or boycotting the university timetable. In the year of 1942, however, the

limited coordination and lack of a unified program amongst the students became especially apparent.

- 30 The colonial government responded to this widespread tendency amongst students to politically agitate with a range of penal tactics. Fearing the dangerous possibilities of the student movement, the student became a convergence point for the colonial state's coercive network.³⁹ The imperial strategies towards students, rarely coordinated or cohesive, oscillated between the employment of state violence and sanctions using the educational state. The violent repression aimed at student agitation included arrest, imprisonment, tear gas and lathi-charges. Elements within the state were inclined to limit the excesses of the violent response against young people because it often served to spur further cycles of protest.
- 31 The Intelligence Bureau routinely labeled these students "political agitators."⁴⁰ The student movement, neither militaristic or uniformed, however, occupied a grey area of the law. They were not outlawed like many other youth organizations had been for the duration of the war. The authorities utilized the Seditious Meetings Act and Criminal Law Amendment Act to crack down on elements within the organization. Under the Defence of India Act in 1939, the colonial state introduced additional provisions that allowed for the interrogation of communist student leaders who were detained on the outbreak of war. Students could receive these punishments on the orders of the local District Magistrates without any right of appeal although these processes, quasi-judicial in nature, were unsymmetrical across India. Universities often resisted on the grounds of the severity of the punishment.
- 32 The state aimed to prevent large-scale protests through their control of the educational state and aspects of everyday student life. Students that engaged in political activity could be disqualified from sitting their exams or dismissed from their place of study at college or university. The scale of 1942 rendered these sanctions redundant. Moreover, the colonial state had a record of threatening to reduce the government grants of universities that failed to sanction their politically active students or even closing the universities in the event of political agitation. Banaras Hindu University became the target of such threats because of proclaimed excessive political activities by its students.⁴¹ These efforts to reduce the boundaries of the political in India by punishing an entire group ran contrary to the self-proclaimed colonial philosophy of governing individuals.

Figure 1.



This AISF Student Unity campaign poster depicts a moment of unity that occurred in the Bengal Province on Independence Day 1945 where the AISF, the All India Muslim Student Federation, The National Congress Student Organisation, and the women students of the AISF came together for a protest. The specific location is unknown.

The Student: February 1945

Figure 2



A sketch of a starving student from Chittagong during the Bengal famine.

The Student: March 1943

Figure 3



"To Feed the People and Save the Nation," a slogan of the AISF's *Peoples Food Committee* campaign to collect cash, food and clothes from across the country.

The Student: October 1943

Figure 4



This poster represents the coming together of the Bengal Provincial Students Federation and the All-Bengal Muslim student League to form the *Student Joint Relief Board*, the headline read "Bengal Student's Federation and Muslim League—Unity Achieved"

The Student: February 1944

Figure 5.



Four young women, probably students, shouting slogans during the Quit India movement, August 1942.

Courtesy of GandhiServe

The AISF, the Transition to Independence and the Post-Colonial State, 1946-1950

- 33 In a dramatic reversal of categorization, after WWII the colonial government's much-needed ally became the post-colonial government's feared adversary. The National Congress Student Organisation, established in 1945, committed to the idea of supporting the transitioning to political freedom. The communist-led AISF, on the other hand, became the object of the state's coercive techniques during an intense period of student agitation and industrial strife. In the post-colonial period, the communist AISF constructed and propagated a novel anti-imperial and anti-government discourse, and the women's activist networks increasingly mobilized their own political campaigns separate to the male students. As the post-colonial elite constructed the discourse of the "undisciplined student," the state's repertoire of control enlarged throughout the shift from British rule to independence.
- 34 During the final two years of colonial rule, the leadership of the CPI and the AISF became more radical and the relationship between the two organizations tightened.⁴² The growth in AISF militancy is linked to the dramatic increase in support for armed revolution that occurred in the Indian communist movement. The increasingly militant leadership provoked a radicalization of various political struggles after the Second World War. Two notable examples include the Royal Indian Navy Mutiny of 1946 and the Telangana Rebellion between 1946 and 1951.⁴³ In December 1947, the radical B. T. Ranadive replaced the more moderate P.C. Joshi as General Secretary of the CPI. The CPI's official position became one of armed struggle against the independent Indian state. The focus here is on the AISF student campaigns although this was closely linked to the large upsurge in union strike activities that followed the Second World War and the Nehruvian state's crackdown that followed.⁴⁴
- 35 The AISF's militant activity increased together with the Indian state's deployment of coercive techniques during the transition to independence. Many of the provincial governments banned the CPI making little attempt to differentiate the student movement from the political party. In Autumn 1948, Bombay police officers raided the AISF headquarters and the student leaders were arrested (although released shortly after).⁴⁵ The Bombay Province imposed a ban on the AISF weekly newspaper *The Student* and their other publications printed by the New Age Printing Press. The authorities prohibited the convening of the national AISF conference. It had been an annual event since the Nehru-Jinnah inception in 1936. The surveillance techniques of intercepting telegrams, letters and circulars and spying on student processions and public meetings continued seemingly unabated. The transition to independence witnessed a powerful continuity in the state-student interaction, and the coercive functions of the surveillance network altered little.⁴⁶
- 36 Police violence targeted at the student movement prompted distinct outrage in newspaper articles. The Indian youth had been central to the nationalist discourse on imagining the future nation state. On December 31, 1948, the national newspaper, *The Free Press Journal* asked, "Is the Bombay public to believe that the student delegation had to be *lathi* charged, tear-gassed, and fired at for the peace of the city and the security of the students themselves?"⁴⁷ Police violence against students was often depicted as less justifiable than against other social groups. This clash occurred after

the AISF attempted to convene their conference illegally. The National Congress Student Organisation, on the other hand, generally eschewed protest in favor of activity that promoted the congress governments. For this the AISF designated the NCSO as “shameless agents of the bourgeois government and its police” in 1949.⁴⁸

- 37 The Government of India ordered that passports not be granted or be confiscated from communist youths in their attempt to curtail their involvement with the communist world. Moraji Desai, the Chief Minister of Bombay, revealed his government’s policy aptly, “I am not going to allow anyone to go out of the country to make propaganda against the government.”⁴⁹ Communist students could not enter India either. The visas of foreign students it considered “dangerous,” especially those from the USSR, were rejected.⁵⁰
- 38 The women’s student movement developed a widespread organizational capacity during the years following independence. In the year 1948, for example, the students of Delhi’s women’s university, Indraprastha College, went on strike to demand the reinstatement of teachers who had been dismissed. The women students in Guwahati, Tezpur and Sylhet also came out onto the streets to support the women of Delhi. The Meerut women students led processions to support the strike action in the Modi Mills. In Madras, student activists collected money for the female workers participating in the mill strikes. After an attack on the women students in Lucknow in 1948, Aligarh Muslim women, “hitherto kept in purdah and under medieval feudal restrictions,” came out to demonstrate.⁵¹ The AISF conference declared “In every major struggle, the girl students stood shoulder to shoulder with boys, faced tear gas bombs and bullets.” The AISF created political awareness among women students and ensured their participation in left-wing struggles in the years following independence.
- 39 These women activists, challenging the norms of respectability in India, faced discrimination in the male-dominated AISF. *The Student*, for instance, claimed the women students attending the national conference did so in their “holiday mood.” It was claimed they spent the sessions visiting relatives, drinking cold coffee, or taking manicures whilst the male students would be “half starving” in the conference hall. These accounts reveal the women student was subjectivized as gossiping, family oriented and unenthusiastic in contrast to the debating, country oriented and enthusiastic male student.⁵² These discursive pronouncements, however unfavorable, give glimpses into the political spaces of female youth and of their laudable acts of resistance against the male-dominated student movement. A great many of these young women may have taken personal risks, perhaps by disobeying their families, to join left wing student politics. It is, however, difficult to decipher the attitudes of the women youth because although they appear in the historical documents of the AISF, their voices are rarely heard.⁵³
- 40 The communist AISF constructed and propagated novel anti-state discourses after independence. The narrative shifted from one of supporting independence to one about the failure of India’s democracy and economy. The ideas of the freedom struggle, the AISF Annual Conference 1949 declared, “are being belied and expectations are being shattered.”⁵⁴ As hundreds of communists jailed by India’s first government for trade union activities went on hunger strikes, the AISF launched a campaign to support their comrades and protest about their conditions under which they were incarcerated. The communist prisoners were not, however, classified as “political prisoners” in jails like the congressmen had been by the British. The definition of “political prisoner” had

been settled during the establishment of the post-colonial nation state. The CPI and the AISF were not freedom fighters in independent India. Moreover, the AISF propaganda sought to locate the struggle of the Indian student during India's economic downturn. It highlighted the rising costs of stationery and college fees in addition to the high youth unemployment that distinguished the years following 1947. The conference noted, "with education for girls still looked at as a luxury, girl students are generally the first victims of the rising cost of living and increasing fees."

- 41 Deeply rooted in anti-imperial ideology, the AISF turned its energies to supporting the independence struggles in Southeast Asia. They launched nationwide campaigns to protest the French and Dutch attempts to reassert colonialism in Vietnam and Indonesia after 1945. As AISF students protested outside the Dutch embassy, the ambassador repeatedly complained to the Indian government that the police were failing to provide security to the building. These protests culminated in a group of AISF students commandeering the Netherlands' Coat of Arms from the embassy doorway.⁵⁵ The emergence of this post-colonial pan-Asian collective student identity and solidarity can be understood as an anti-imperial internationalism that improvised a distinctly future-oriented politics where the youth was an embodiment of the horizon of future possibilities (Goswami 2012:1). The central role of the student in the independence movements in Southeast Asia gave new meaning to this life stage in these colonial and post-colonial nations. It came to embody the universalist aspirations of nationalism in the collective political imagination of other struggles. As *The Student* recorded in 1949, "today the progressive youth of every country looks at the heroism of the youth of the Asian countries with admiration."⁵⁶
- 42 Underlying the shift from colonial rule to independence was the rise of a discourse on the indiscipline of students and its alleged implications for politics in independent India. Politicians and state officials collectively framed the Indian student as "rowdy" and "undisciplined" as leftist students continued to pursue radical politics. Chakrabarty (2007) held that efforts to discipline young citizens ran against the history of what constituted the political in colonial India. Jawaharlal Nehru explained in a letter to his Chief Ministers in 1954 that "unrest and turbulence has characterized student activities in different parts of the country in recent years." He claimed, "the indiscipline amongst students, the fall in standards and the general deterioration in universities is largely due to party factions and political intrigues which disfigure academic life."⁵⁷ The CPI-dominated AISF no doubt qualified as such a menace in their capacity as a leading national student movement. Indian youth had been a social force to be mobilized against the colonial state during the freedom struggle. After independence, the congress political elite rhetorical approach to this social group depicted the militant tactics of the AISF as fundamentally unsuitable for an independent and democratic country.

Conclusion

- 43 Between 1948 and 1950, the membership of the CPI fell from around ninety thousand to around nine thousand and the AISF's membership also diminished substantially.⁵⁸ The CPI committed itself to participate in the forthcoming general elections and to operate within the democratic boundaries of the Republic of India after the ousting of General Secretary B. T. Randative in 1950. It was by this year that the AISF had been reduced to a

rump of communist youths. The lack of mass appeal of its left-wing adventurism coupled with the government's crackdown on its activities had pushed the organization to the fringes of campus politics. The AISF no longer functioned as a truly national movement nor published its pamphlets or journal. Ten years earlier, at the start of WWII, it had been a mass movement claiming eighty-thousand student members and represented an indication of dramatic student power at the national level. This article has given a historical snapshot into the Indian student movement by exploring this rise and decline of the AISF between its establishment in 1936 and its disappearance in 1950.

- 44 The initiative of provincial student leaders together with the support of adult political leaders brought about the inception of the AISF in 1936. This moment of national unity was quickly dissipated by the fragmentation that occurred along the lines of religious and political identities. As political parties sought to harness the energies of youth, the AISF shattered into conflicting organizations that created divergent pathways of youth. I have argued partisanship intensified amongst students in India. Their identity increasingly coalesced around political and religious identity. The "other" belonged to the alternative struggle. The fallout from the attempt to consolidate the existing student movements initiated the most militant period of the student movement during 1942 and between 1945 and 1950. The AISF arena gave a space for students to play a larger role in political life in India and the organization represented a vital shift in the importance of student politics in India.

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NOTES

1. Communist Party of India Archives. May 1942. *The Student, The AISF Newspaper*. (Hereafter, referred to as *The Student*: month year).
2. I am grateful to Taylor Sherman, Radhika Singha and Anil Rajimwale for their supportive enquiry and comments on versions of this essay. I am sincerely thankful to the editors of this special issue and the anonymous readers of SAMAJ for offering comments.
3. *The Student*: December 1943.
4. Addressing the most pronounced trends: For the marginalisation of youth see (Jeffrey 2010); on effect of India's liberalisations on youth see (Gooptu 2013); on youth and electoral politics see (Kumar 2014); and there is also a growing exploration of campus politics, see (Martelli 2017; Garalyte 2016)
5. See (Watt 2005; Roy and Zachariah 2013; Raza and Roy 2015).
6. See (Hazary 1987; Pandey 2002)
7. For literature on communist youth, see (See (Cornell 1982; Chattopadhyay 2011; Cornell et al. 2012)
8. See (Singh 2014; Khan 2015)
9. These documents can be found at Ajoy Bhavan, the Communist Party of India Archives, and at P.C. Joshi Archives, Jawaharlal Nehru University.
10. The student and youth loomed large in the minds of the colonial official because of their role in anti-colonial politics. Roy and Zachariah (2013) uncover the state's (disproportionate) fear of losing control of youths and students, and the repressive reaction to leftist students throughout the 1920s and the early 1930s. Maclean (2015) foregrounds the important role of violent youth activism in provoking colonial responses and introducing urgency into the project of constitutional reform. The injection of youth radicalised by nationalist colleges into the nationalist struggle (s) increased after the events of 1919 and continued until the 1940s.

11. The constitution of the AISF established that any person, between the age of 14 and 30, studying in a university institution that subscribed to the aims of the ASIF could join the national student movement (pending payment of two *annas* per year). The Provincial Federations elected delegates onto the All Indian Students Council and to attend the All Indian Student's Conference. The working committee was the executive authority, led by the General Secretary, that had responsibility for putting into effect the policy and programme laid down by the AISF and the Conference. See, *The Constitution of the All India Students Federation (As amended at the Indian Students Conference at Calcutta 1939)*, Ajoy Bhavan.
12. There had been a previous, short lived, attempt to create an Indian student organisation, called the All Indian College Student Conference (AICSC). Established in Nagpur in December 1920, its creation represented the first coalescing of regional Indian student movements. *The Bombay Chronicle* recorded, "The Nagpur Conference is thus the first step forward of Indian college students as a whole into the field of politics." (Author unknown, *The Bombay Chronicle*: November 20, 1920. The momentum of the non-cooperation movement gave impetus to their successive conferences, often held alongside the Indian National Congress's annual conferences, although by the mid-1920s the student organisation had lost momentum and cease to exist. For the AICSC, See (Rajimwale 2005)
13. *The Student*: December (2nd edition) 1944.
14. For a critique of factions as a form of "traditional" patron-client relation, see Hardiman (1989).
15. See the reports of the Dacca Student riots 1943 for a comprehensive narrative: *The Student*: February 1943
16. It was not until 1949, however, that the RSS-aligned Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) came into existence.
17. *The Student*: January 1943
18. Central Committee. 1941. "War and the World Situation." 1941. Report of the 6th AISF Conference: Delhi. January.
19. In another blow to the AISF's wholeness, the All India Students Bloc was formed in 1939 by Subhas Chandra Bose after his resignation from the Presidency of the Congress. Unlike the AISF or the AIMSF, however, this never became a national organisation. The Forward Bloc supporters generally remained in the AISF (communist) until the Quit India movement of 1942 triggered the majority to join the AISF (congress).
20. The Comintern instructed the CPI to focus their efforts on educated youth and gain control of their student movements; and it deemed this course of action to be "peculiarly necessary and significant." The Indian student was designated to be central to the revolutionary vanguard. Their educational background, and their perceived propensity to intellectual change, made them targets of young communist workers. Indeed, during the militant "BTR" period of the CPI 1948-1950, the earlier attempts by the CPI to focus their energies on students were held to have displaced the centrality of class to the communist ideology (Rajimwale 2001:404). See: Monthly Surveys outlining Communist Activities of the CPI, January 1941, Home Department Political, HD/7/1/41, National Archives of India (hereafter, HDP and NAI)
21. DIB's note on Communism in India—A Survey of Recent Developments, November 1939, HDP, 7/7/39, NAI
22. Monthly Surveys outlining Communist Activities of the CPI, January 1941, HDP, HD/7/1/41, NAI. Italics added for emphasis.
23. *All India Student Congress Bombay Students Activities in the Freedom Struggle*. August 22 1946. All India Congress Committee, 22/46, The Nehru Memorial Museum & Library (hereafter, NMML)
24. Monthly Surveys outlining Communist Activities of the CPI, January 1941, HDP, HD/7/1/41, NAI
25. *The Student* (Conference Number) February 1942

26. Monthly surveys outlining Communist Activities of the Communist Party of India, August 1940
27. Like the ferocious debates that occurred over student strikes despite the CPI-CPS cooperation pact (the "United Front Policy"), student conflicts regarding support for the war effort did not always align directly with the political parties. Student-level conflicts often had a life of their own. Student political groupings in the AISF expressed their own ideological agendas and interests.
28. *The Student*: May and June 1942
29. *The Student*: (National Defence Number) June 1942
30. *Proposed Use of Military of the A.I.S.F.*, 1943, HDP, 69/43 NAI
31. *Proposed Use of Military of the A.I.S.F.*, 1943, HDP, 69/43 NAI.
32. Meeting of the National Defence Council, 1942, HDP, 15/9/42 NAI
33. *The Student*: (National Defence Number) May/June 1942
34. See (Watt 2005; Raza and Roy 2015).
35. Secret Telegram from Viceroy Linlithgow to Secretary of State for India Amery, August 22, 1942, Quit India Collective, 6664, NMML. Italics added for effect.
36. Secret Telegram from Viceroy Linlithgow to Secretary of State for India Amery, August 22, 1942, Quit India Collective, 6664, NMML. Moreover, the Forward Blocists had remained closer to the AISF (communist) but after August 1942 they also joined the M.L shah-led AISF (Congress).
37. For Quit India see (Hutchins 1973; Singh 2014; Khan 2015)
38. See Miscellaneous Reports on Student Activities, 1941, HDP, 246/1941 NAI
39. See (Sherman 2010:3).
40. Meeting of the National Defence Council, 1942, HDP, 15/9/42 NAI
41. Proposal to Withhold the Government Grant to the BHU in view of Political Activities of its Students, 1933, HDP, 141/33
42. P.C. Joshi Archives. 1949. "Report of the AISF secretariat at the 12th Conference." Calcutta: Jawaharlal Nehru University. July 23-27.
43. Firstly, the CPI in Bombay "fanned the flames" of the naval mutiny, the subsequent civilian rioting, and solicited wider rebellion. Secondly, the CPI encouraged an armed "socialist revolution" in Telangana after the Nizam of Hyderabad had been overthrown in September 1948 by Indian troops (See Spence 2015).
44. The Congress leaders about to take state power sought to demobilise and control the labour unions to quell the upsurge in strikes. The government enacted tough labour laws (such as the Industrial Disputes Act of 1947) that undermined collective bargaining. They also devising a split in the union movement, with the Congress launching its own rival union federation to face down the increasingly CPI-led AITUC. See (Chibber 2006)
45. *The Student*, April 1948
46. Scholars have examined the surveillance of Indian student revolutionaries in the UK, and London's significance as the most liberal centre of anti-colonial student agitation within the Empire, although the spying networked aimed at Indian students and in postcolonial India has been largely overlooked (Popplewell 2008:56-76; Schaffel 2012).
47. Free Press Journal, Daily Indian Newspaper, January 1, 1949
48. P.C. Joshi Archives. 1949. "Report of the AISF secretariat." 12th Conference Calcutta: Jawaharlal Nehru University. July 23-27. In the same year an important fragmentation of the student moment occurred along political and religious lines. A student movement aligned to the RSS, The Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad, was established in 1949 to promote Hindu nationalist politics on campuses.
49. *The Student*, October, 1948.
50. *The Student*, October, 1948.

51. P.C. Joshi Archives. 1949. "Report of the AISF secretariat." 12th Conference Calcutta: Jawaharlal Nehru University. July 23-27.
 52. *The Student*, January 1943
 53. For discussion on the girl-activist see (Taft 2011)
 54. P.C. Joshi Archives. 1949. "Report of the AISF secretariat." 12th Conference Calcutta: Jawaharlal Nehru University. July 23-27.
 55. Indian student protest at Dutch aggression in Indonesian, 1949, Department for External Affairs, 40-FEA, NAI
 56. *The Student*, August 1949
 57. Letter from Jawaharlal Nehru to his Chief Ministers. August 28 1954, Foreword in (Kabir 1956: 4)
 58. See (Rajimwale 2005)
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ABSTRACTS

This article will examine the rise and fragmentation of the All India Student Federation (AISF), 1936–1950. The AISF initially represented a successful attempt at consolidating the existing student organizations in colonial India and a dramatic indication of student power at the national level. This student movement became an arena for the negotiation of political and religious youth identities during the final decade of the British Raj. Indian students and their student leaders responded to wider political change, especially the power configuration of political parties, with a search for distinct political spaces for youth. The struggle for control and secessions from the organization, however, brought about its fragmentation. During WWII, student and adult political leaders competed to mobilize the splintered student movements for the purposes of civil defense, social service and for the Quit India movement. I will also argue these AISF groups became the convergence point for the colonial and early-post colonial state's coercive network.

INDEX

Keywords: Indian student politics, youth identity, student mobilization, state-student interaction, Second World War

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