CHANGE & CONTINUITY IN STUDENT RADICALISM: FINAL REPORT OF A UGC MAJOR RESEARCH PROJECT
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INTRODUCTION

. Sociologists have recognized that Indian society is rapidly changing. And Indian college and university students are playing an important role in ushering in these changes. The aim of the present research project is to study the change and continuity in attitudes of university students to radical social change. It is a trend study.

ORIGIN OF THE STUDY & ITS SIGNIFICANCE
The origin of the present study lay in a project proposal submitted to the University Grants Commission in 2006.The Principal Investigator's main research query was concerned with knowing *whether the students of Calcutta University in 2008, have the same ideas about radical social change as those who were earlier studied in 1988*.The project was designed to answer this specific question. Here we have studied student radicalism as a *sociological construct*. A review of the extant literature shows that though scholars have done much work on student radicalism in the twentieth century and also some work in the twenty-first century, no systematic empirical study of student radicalism was done in the 21st century. The present study attempts to fill the gap. It will contribute to the growing national and international literature on student radicalism.

MAJOR RESEARCH QUESTIONS
The present research project seeks to answer the following research questions.
a) Are students in favour of radical social change?
b) Are boys more radical than girls?
c) Are rural students more radical than urban students?
d) Are students of lower classes more radical than students of upper classes?
e) Are students of lower income groups more radical than those of higher income groups?
f) Are politically active students more radical than politically non-active students?
g) Are students who support the Left Front Government more radical than those who do not support its policies?
h) Finally, is there any change in the attitudes of students to radical social change in the last twenty years?

DIFFICULTIES IN IMPLEMENTING THE PROJECT

The Principal Investigator faced the following difficulties while implementing the project.1) The effective date for starting the project was 1.04.2007.But due to a nine month delay in arrival of funds from the UGC , the project could be implemented only from 1st January, 2008.2) The Project Fellow who was appointed for the projects resigned after two months .Having failed to get another, Project Fellow the Principal Investigator was compelled to work as the **sole investigator** in order to complete the project.3) An important letter in connection with a meeting on the project at the UGC office was delivered to the Principal Investigator many days after the meeting actually took place. In the full text, I have suggested steps for better management of research projects in the future.

CONCEPT OF RADICALISM

The term *radical* is widely used in political and philosophical literature, though not always in an identical sense. In its sociological application, as Selden C. Menefee has pointed out, "the term applies in general to those who believe in drastic measures for the improvement of social conditions, and in particular to those who believe in and / or advocate sweeping changes in the political and/or economic structure of society." I have used the term **radicalism** in this sense.

To empirically study student radicalism, our analysis will proceed at two levels. At the *systemic* level, we will examine the phenomenon of student radicalism on the basis of the students' response to three items –namely, I) whether *private property should be abolished*, ii) *whether there can exist friendly classes under socialism who can make life peaceful,* and iii) *whether the respondent supports a socialist revolution in India.* At the *interaction* level, there were three questions, namely, whether the respondent is i) *willing to marry an untouchable,* I) *willing to marry a widow/widower* and iii) *willing to marry a divorcee*. Indexes were developed to measure conservatism, liberalism and radicalism.

METHODOLOGY

Following Marx, we divided the method of study into two parts-the *method of inquiry* and the *method of presentation*. In our method of inquiry, we adopted a longitudinal research design. More specifically, we used the repeated cross sectional design. Our *research strategy* was the social survey.

The *domain* of our study included students studying for the Masters degree in Calcutta University. A quota sampling method was adopted. From each of the three streams-Science, Humanites and Professional, we chose 50 students. A total of 150 students participated in the survey. Data collection was done in Alipore, College Street, and Science College (Rajabazar) campuses.

The *survey instrument* consisted of a *semi-structured questionnaire* consisting of a mix of factual and attitudinal questions. Prior to actual administration of the questionnaires in the field, experts were consulted; pilot surveys and pre-test were done. Data was processed through the **SPSS Package Programme (Version 10)**

The *method of presentation* involved presenting the data in tabular form, and drawing inferences. Photographs and cartoons were also used to give an idea of the socio-political context in which the study was done.

CHANGING SOCIAL BACKGROUND OF STUDENTS

Comparing two sets of data (1988and 2008), we find that

1) The students of the 21st century are younger in age than their twentieth century counterparts.

2) The representation of non-Hindus (Muslims, Christians, etc.) in higher education has increased in the 21st century, compared to the 20th century.

3) More students are coming to higher education from nuclear families.

4) Unmarried students have increased at the Masters level in the 21st century compared to the 20th century.

5) Politically active students in higher education have declined in the 21st century

MAJOR FINDINGS

Based on the criteria given above, we find that, of the 150 respondents surveyed, 73(48.7%) are conservative, 46(30.7%) are liberal and 31(20.7%) are radical at the *systemic* level. At the *interaction* level, we find that 83 (55%) are conservative, 45(30%) are liberal, and 22(14.7%) are radical. Thus we find that the majority of the respondents are conservatives at both the levels, followed by the left-wing liberals. However, the liberals and radicals are in a slender majority. The ideology of the students may be best described as *Left-wing Liberalism with a strong conservative undertone.* The radicals are in a significant minority. We have therefore answered our first question. The data clearly show that radicals are in a minority at both the systemic and interactional levels. So, we find that *the majority of our respondents are not in favour of radical social change*.

From now on, our analysis of radicalism will be at two levels-**systemic** and **interactional.** We will first analyze systemic radicalism.

By the term *systemic radicalism*, I mean *a belief in revolutionary change of the social system in a socialist direction*. A *conservative* at the *systemic* level may be operationally defined as one *who does not believe in radical change in the social system*, towards *a socialist direction. A liberal* at the systemic level is one who *partially believes* in socialism. We will call them *Left-wing Liberals*. A *radical* at the systemic level is one who *fully believes in socialism and supports radical social change at the systemic level.* We have also found that at the **systemic** level i) more boys are radical than the girls; ii) more rural students are radical than urban students; iii) students coming from lower income groups are more radical than those coming from higher income groups; iv) students belonging to the lower social classes are more radical than those belonging to the upper classes; v) politically active students are more radical than non-active students. The data support the findings of a previous study, *Students & Radical Social Change* (2003). But, in this study, we have asked the respondents whether they support the policies of the Left Front government. *We have come across a strong association between systemic radicalism and support for the Left Front government*. We found that the majority of those those who do not support the government are conservative. The opposite is true about those who do support the government. They are the mostly radical.

At the **interaction** level, we find that i) more females than males are radical; ii)urban students are more radical than rural students; iii)students belonging to the lower

income group are more radical than other groups; iv) Among the social classes studied, workers are more conservative and middle middle classes are mostly radical; v)non-political activist are more radical than political activists; vi) those who do not support the Left Front government are more radical than those who support it.

We find that *there is a contradiction between our findings at the systemic level and our findings at the interaction level.* Further research needs to be undertaken to understand *why* it is so. But we may hypothesize that *systemic radicalism* is more a *theoretical construct* than *a construct based on protean experience.* In the real life, one has to breach established social codes in order to qualify for being a radical. Very few youths are willing to try that. Only those students who are in a position to face the social consequences of their acts regarding marriage can afford to be radical at this level.

We are now in a position to answer the basic research question which we posited at the end of an earlier work on student radicalism: **"Would the students of 2008 have the same ideas about radical social change as those who were interviewed in 1988?"** This boils down to some more specific questions. We will discuss these questions only at the *systemic* level because *radical social change* means *changing the social system lock stock and barrel in the direction of a more advanced socio-economic formation.* These questions are as follows:

❑Do male students continue to be more radical than the female students?

❑Do the students living in rural areas continue to be more radical than the urban students?

❑Do politically active students continue to be more radical than politically non-active students?

❑Does changes in economic status have a bearing on change in radical attitudes?

In the following pages, our discussion will focus on the above questions.

The changing attitudes of students towards radical social change

How far have the attitudes of students towards radical social change changed? Previously, 7.6% of the 314 students interviewed in 1988-89 were **conservative**, i.e., they were opposed to radical social change, 57.6 % were **Left wing liberals**, i.e, they were partially in favour of radical social change.34.6% of the students were **radicals,** i.e, they supported radical social change.Twenty years later, the situation has drastically changed. In the last two years of the first decade of the 21st century, we find that 48.7% of the 150 students surveyed in 2008-09 were conservative, 30.7% were liberal and 20.7% were radical. Thus, we find that the conservatives, who were previously a microscopic minority (7.6%), are now in a majority (48.7%). In the previous sample, radicals constitutes about one third of the sample, but now they have been reduced to about one fifth of the sample. Left-wing liberals constituted the majority of the sample (57.6 %) in my previous study, but they are now in a minority (30.7%). In fine, the degree of conservatism has vastly increased among twenty-first century youths and radicalism has substantially declined. We find that the conservatives and left-wing liberals are equally divided on the issue of radical social change.

If we adopt a dichotomous classification, based on ideology, we will find that about 51% are left-wing liberals and 49% are conservatives. We can say that the ideology of the present day students is left-wing liberalism with strong conservative undertones.

We also found that:

❑ Males continue to be more radical than females despite increase in conservatism between both the sexes.

❑ Rural students continue to be more radical than urban students though they exhibit marked conservatism now.

❑ Political activists continue to be more radical than political non-activists, despite the increase in conservative attitudes.

❑ Students from the Lower Income Group continue to be more radical than other income groups.

Thus change and continuity is found in the attitudes of the students to radical social change. While the attitude of students to radical social change changed, its attendant social and economic concomitants have remained the same.

CONCLUSION

From the above discussion, we find that there has been a decisive shift towards conservatism among youths. Probable reasons behind this phenomenon are 1) disenchantment with socialism,2) disenchantment with the policies and functioning of the Left Front government in West Bengal,3)the increase in the number of affluent students coming to higher studies and 4) failure of the student movement to give proper political education to the university youth.

Prescriptions for future research

Apart from answering a number of research questions, this study has also raised a number of significant research questions and made prescriptions for further research. These are as follows.

❑ Will there be any differences in the attitudes of students to radical social change among students who are spatially separated but belong to the same state? For example, a study comparing Calcutta University students and North Bengal University students can be done.

❑ Inter-regional comparative studies between students will also unearth a wealth of data.

❑ International comparative studies on student radicalism may be made.

❑ Do political events, like the outcome of General Elections, have an impact on political attitudes of youths?

❑ Our study and future studies on the subject may pave the way for a new middle range theory on student radicalism in future.

Contribution to knowledge

To conclude, this study has shown that radicalism is not a static sociological construct. It changes with the passage of time. This study has contributed to an understanding of change and continuity in the attitudes of students to radical social change. In doing so, it has advanced the frontiers of our knowledge with regard to student radicalism. More empirical studies should be done on student radicalism, which, to my mind, is still a neglected field of sociological enquiry. *The ultimate aim of all research is to theorise.* It is only after a substantial number of empirical works on various aspects of student radicalism in India appear will we be in a position to formulate a middle range theory on Indian student radicalism.