

Article

Student radicalism in contemporary Bengal

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Abstract

In the present paper the author seeks to examine the present state of student radicalism in West Bengal. Since mid May 2011, there has been a political change in West Bengal which has been hailed as paribartan. The ruling Left Front government was ousted from power and the Trinamul - Congress combine stormed into power. Paribartan has had a wide ranging impact on the social, political and cultural life of West Bengal. The education system has been also affected by political change. And this has also affected the student movement. The major research questions posed by the author are-1) In what direction is the student movement going? 2) Do today's students have the same ideas about radical social change as their predecessors? These questions prompted the author to do a UGC sponsored Major Research Project entitled "Student Radicalism in Post-Left Bengal". The project is now in its early stages. On basis of some primary and secondary data, collected for the project, the author seeks to answer these questions.

Key Words: Student Radicalism, UGC Major Research Project, Paribartan, Pilot Survey.

Introduction

I have been studying student radicalism since 1986 when I started my Ph.D. research as an ICSSR Doctoral Fellow at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences in Kolkata, under the supervision of Prof. Surajit C. Sinha.

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The present research is based on an ongoing UGC Major Research Project which was awarded in 2013 (Vide F No. 5-449/2013(HRP) dated 25.03.2013). The main objective of my study is to examine the impact of regime change on political attitudes of university students. On May 13, 2011, the Congress-Trinamul combine stormed into power in West Bengal, thereby ending the 34 years old rule of the Left Front. This change of guard has been hailed as paribartan (change). Since then much water has flower down the Ganga. The right-wing turn in government had its impact on society and politics in contemporary West Bengal. It has also had an impact on education, especially higher education.

Our major research questions are as follows:

In what direction is the student movement moving?

Are students in favour of radical social change?

Are males more radical than females?

Do students of contemporary rural Bengal differ in their attitudes from their urban counterparts?

Do students of different income groups differ in their attitudes?

Are there any differences among students holding different ideologies with regard to joining politics?

Finally do students of today differ in their social and political attitudes from their predecessors? More specifically, what impact did regime change in West Bengal in 2011 have on the political attitudes of university students?

The present paper is based on some early findings of my research. The author has tried to gauge the present direction of the student movement through an analysis of news reports. The primary data are from a Pilot Survey done by myself for a UGC Major Research Project "Student Radicalism in Post-Left Bengal" (Vide F

No. 5-449/2013(HRP) dated 25.03.2013). I am the Principal Investigator of this project.

A brief review of the literature

Contemporary research on student radicalism is very scanty. The majority of works are either journalistic accounts or news reports. Very few researches have been reported. The study of student power became a serious academic endeavor only since the sixties of the 20th century. Anirban Banerjee has previously carried out an exhaustive review of the literature . (Banerjee A. , 1991) (Banerjee, 1997)In the process, he has discussed relevant theories (Banerjee A. , 1998). Later ,Banerjee made an exhaustive treatment of student radicalism in the nineties (Banerjee A. , 2000)and later carried forward the survey to the early 21st century (Banerjee A. , 2003, pp. 34-38).In her doctoral dissertation, Ashima Rez studied the activities of the Student Federation of India (SFI) in Burdwan district (Rez, 2008). Her key finding is that although most of the students are members of the SFI, they are not willing to participate in politics. Research projects on student radicalism in Bengal have also been done. In his UGC Major Research Project, Banerjee (2009) distinguished between two levels of radicalism – systemic and interactional. Systemic radicalism means an attitude favouring change in the total social system in a socialist direction. The author found that compared to the session (1986-88) previously studied by him , the majority of students of Calcutta University have become conservative, i.e., totally opposed to socialism. And this had negative implications for the Left Front which was then in power (Banerjee A. , 2009). Banerjee (Banerjee A. , 2011) (Banerjee A. , 2012)studied radicalism in Hungary, a former socialist state, while participating in the Indo-Hungarian Educational Exchange Programme (2011). He found that none of the students was a radical. The majority of the students were liberal. The students were totally dissatisfied with their government and saw no merit in its policies. From this brief discussion, find that some studies on student radicalism have been done in India and abroad . But there is no systematic study of

student radicalism in contemporary Bengal. The author intends to fill this gap.

The student movement in the age of 'paribartan'

We will now try to answer our first research question, “In what direction is the student movement moving?”On May 13, 2011, the Trinamul-Congress combine stormed into power in West Bengal, thereby ending the 34 year old rule of the Left Front. This political change was hailed as paribartan. Bengal thus shifted to the right after 34 years.

The first major election which the new government attempted to organize was the student union elections in colleges and universities of West Bengal. The function of a students' union is to train college and university students for future citizenship responsibilities. Students' union elections enable college and university students to have a taste of democratic political participation. And those student leaders who are elected to positions of responsibility, like Class Representative, Secretary of the students' union, etc., have hands on experience of running a democratic institution. Many Bengali student leaders of yesteryears, like Biman Bose, Mamata Banerjee, Gautam Deb, Ashim Chattopadhyay etc. became well known political leaders today.

But were the students' union elections in contemporary West Bengal held in the true spirit of democracy? Our answer is in the negative. We find that unprecedented violence started in all institutions of higher education from the moment students union elections were declared in 2011. This was mainly due to outside political interference. We find that during the students' union elections, anti-social elements served as storm troopers for the ruling party and intimidated students, teachers and college principals. Anyone connected with higher education was a fair target for the storm troopers. From a list prepared by Mrityunjoy Sen, we find that there were 11 incidents of campus violence between 10th December 2011 and 11th January, 2012vii. Fighting between right and left wing students also contributed to this situation. Meanwhile both left

and right-wing students won elections. For example, the Students Federation of India won in Majhdia College while the Trinamul Chattra Parishad won in Purbasthali College.

After a gap of one year, the government decided to hold elections to the student unions. The process had to be completed within January 2014. During this period (2013-14) we find growing criminalization of student politics. In Chapra Banganajhi College, bomb warfare between feuding student groups during filing of nominations, injured a passerby^{viii}. Baliachak College in Malda witnessed gang warfare between politicized students^{ix}. The students' union elections were replete with complaints of attacks on opposition student groups by the students owing allegiance to the ruling party. For example, in Bankura district, the SFI allegedly could not file nominations in any of the 27 colleges.^x In Malda Women's College, it was alleged that the TMCP forcibly occupied all 18 seats.^{xi} There was also evidence of growing infighting within the TMCP itself. In Kalna College, for example, two TMCP leaders were allegedly assaulted by their co-workers.

All these incidents show that democratic norms were randomly flouted by student activists in the students' union elections. Goal displacement occurred. Far from being educational tools to teach students the ABC of political participation and responsible citizenship, the students' union elections had actually fallen prey to the machinations of adult political leaders who saw in the students' unions nothing more than another political powerbase like trade unions, panchayats and municipalities. And they encouraged the hotheaded politicalised students to fight it out, not through democratic processes, but through violence and intimidation of political opponents and ordinary students. Whoever won in this surcharged political atmosphere vitiated by violence and intimidation of students won a pyrrhic victory at best, because, as these examples show, the student leaders did not care for popular support. They rather willy-nilly followed Mao Dze Dong's maxim-'Power comes out of the barrel of a gun'.

The concept of radicalism

Before we proceed further, let us examine the concept of 'radicalism'. The concept of 'radicalism' has had wide use in sociological and political literature. Menefee observes that radicals believe in drastic measures for improvement of social conditions. They advocate sweeping changes in the political and economic structure of society (Menefee, 1958). I have operationally defined radicalism as advocacy of drastic social change along socialistic lines. Radicalism differs from liberalism and conservatism. Liberalism advocates slow, orderly change. Conservatives, on the other hand, are distinguished from radicals in that they oppose any substantive social change.

Method of study

Here I have adopted three strategies. Firstly, to answer question 1, I have done content analysis of news reports on the student movement. Secondly, I have done a pilot survey of university students. Empirical data for the present paper is based on the pilot survey. The Pilot Survey is any small-scale test of a research instrument run in advance of the main fieldwork, and used to test the utility of the research design (Marshall, 2007). The objective of this study is not to test any hypothesis but to gain insights which will be used in the main survey. Thirdly, as part of this study, I have decided to construct an index of radicalism to determine whether the purpose of the study is being achieved.

The pilot survey was carried out in social science departments of Jadavpur University, Presidency University and Burdwan University. 72 students, who were selected through accidental sampling, were administered a questionnaire. Apart from seeking the respondents' opinion on a host of social and political issues, their advice was also sought on what to include and what to exclude in the main survey.

Determining Radicalism

To determine whether students are in favour of radical social change, we constructed an index of attitudes. Index construction is an accepted method of

measuring attitudes (Henerson, 1987, pp. 72-73). Four items in the questionnaire were scored.

Item No. 51: The Ideal society is the socialist society.

Item No. 52: In a socialist society there are friendly classes.

Item No. 53: Socialist society abolishes private property through which people are exploited.

Item No. 54: A socialist society provides people with equal opportunities to develop.

Each question has three options: Agree / Neutral / Disagree

Scoring & Indexing

Item	Score
Agree	2
Neutral	0
Disagree	1

An index of attitudes was created on the basis of summated scores. The following is the index.

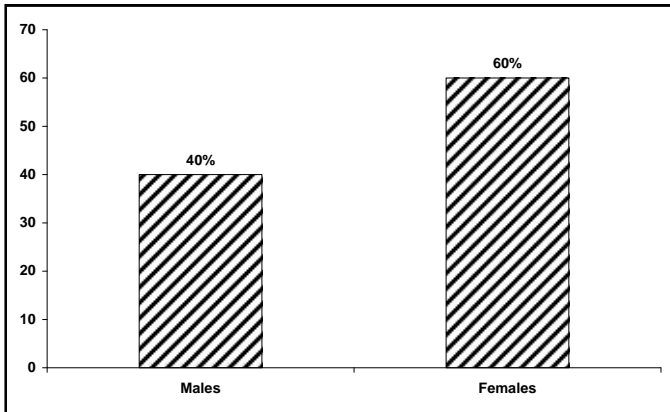
Attitude	Scores	
	0	Neutral
	1 – 3	
Conservative	4 – 5	Liberal
	6 – 8	Radical

Profile of the sample

The sample consists of 72 students.

Gender: . It is usual practice to classify people according to gender.

Accordingly we classified students into males and females. From the data, we find that, out of 72 respondents, 29(40%) are males, while 43(60%) are females (Fig. 1). Thus we find that females dominate higher education in West Bengal. This finding is consistent with the findings of my previous researches. (Banerjee A. , 1991) (Banerjee A. , 2003) (Banerjee A. , 2009)



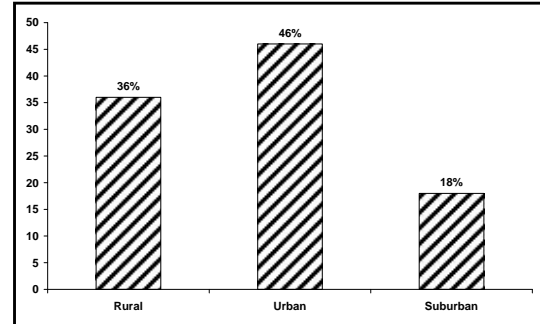
Source: Field data

N = 72

Fig. 1: Distribution of the sample by gender.

Place of Origin: Rural, urban and suburban areas differ in their ecology and social characteristics. In this sample, 26 students (36% of the sample) hail from rural areas, 33 students (46% of the sample) are urban and 13 students (18%) hail from suburban areas. (Fig. 2). Thus the sample is overwhelmingly urban in composition. Here also we find that there is a consistency with previous studies (Banerjee A. , 1991) (Banerjee A. ,

2003) (Banerjee A. , 2009)(See Banerjee 1991& 2003, 2009).

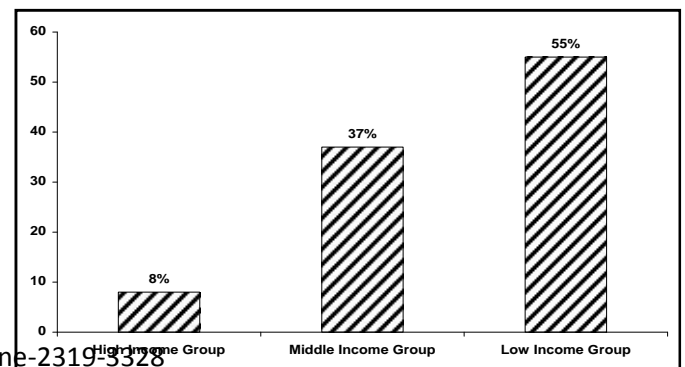


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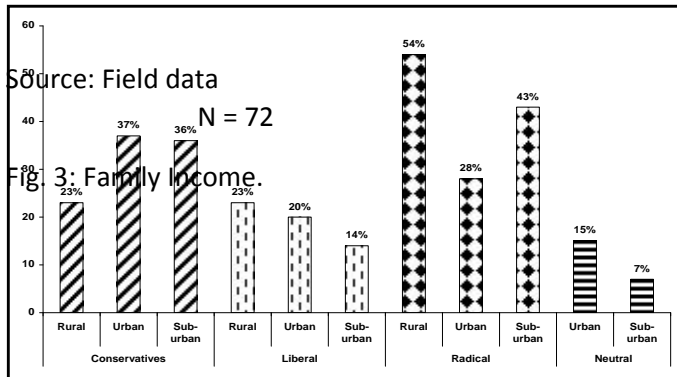
N = 72

Fig. 2: Place of Origin.

Family Income: Out of 72 respondents, 7 did not reply to this question, so our data is based on 65 respondents. We divided the respondents into three income groups – High, Middle and Low. 5 (8%) of the respondents come from High Income Group (Income Rs. 60,001 +), 24 (37%) come from Middle Income Group (Rs. 20,001 – 60,000), 36(55%) come from Low Income Group (below Rs. 20,000/-) (Fig. 3). Thus the majority of the respondents come from the Low Income Group. This shows that despite globalization, higher education can still be afforded by the lower income groups, thanks to the state universities which make higher education affordable for the ordinary students.



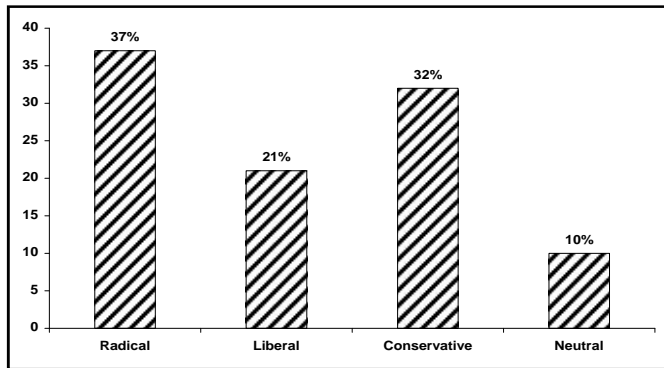
Does, radicalism vary with the place of origin of the respondents?



Major findings

Are students radical?

We will now answer one of our major queries- Are students in favour of radical social change?



Source: Field data
 N = 72

Fig. 4: Analysis of Attitudes to Social Change.

We find that 27(37% of the present sample) is radical, 15(21%) are liberal and 23(32%) are conservative. 7(10%) neutral. (See Fig.4) Thus we find that a minority of the students are radical. But if we combine the radical and the liberal we find that 58% of the sample is either radical or left-wing liberal. Thus we find that in spite of paribartan, a substantial section of the student community adheres to left-wing ideology.

Source: Field data
 N Rural = 26, N Urban = 33, N Suburban=13

Fig. 5: Radicalism and Place of Origin.

From the data we find that out of 26 rural students, 14 (54% of the rural students) are radical compared with 13 out of 33 (28%) urban students. 5 out of 13 suburban students (36%) are radical. (Vide Fig. 5) .We know that the Left Front carried out large scale land reforms in rural Bengal during its 34 year old rule. Naturally its support base lay in rural areas. Paribartan has not changed the situation. Attitudinally, rural youth continue to remain leftist in orientation. This is consistent with previous findings (Banerjee A. , 1991, p. 169)(Banerjee A. , 2003, p. 151) (Banerjee A. , 2009, p. 49).

Gender & Radicalism

Are males more radical than females? From Fig. 6 we find that this is indeed so.

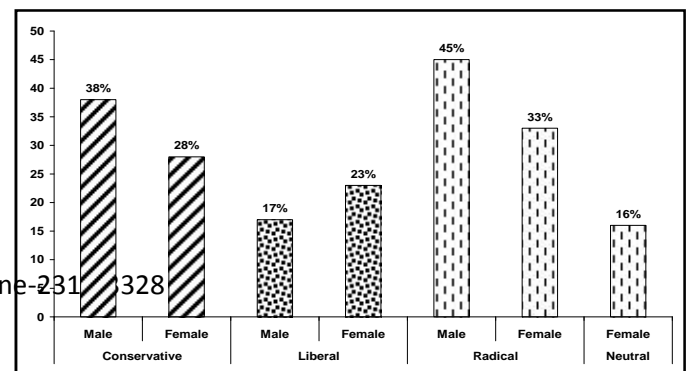


Fig. 7: Radicalism and Economic Status.

Source: Field data N Male = 29, N Female = 43

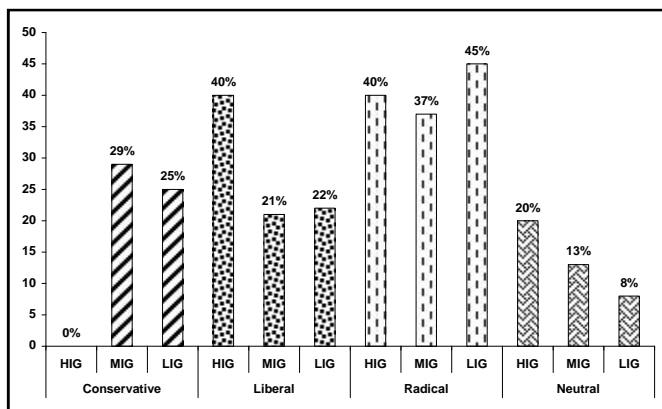
Fig. 6: Radicalism and Gender.

Out of 29 males, 13(45%) are radical. In contrast, out of 43 females, 14(33%) are radical. I think that the socialization process contributes to a differential in the attitudes of males and females. While males are socialized to achieve, to change their existential circumstances, the females are socialized in terms of accommodation and adjustment. This contributes to a difference in attitudes. Our findings are consistent with the findings of previous studies. (Banerjee A. , 1991, pp. 165-167) (Banerjee A. , 2003, pp. 149-150) (Banerjee A. , 2009, p. 49).

From Fig. 7 we find that students from the Lower Income Group are the more radical. 16 out of 36 respondents (45%) are radicals. They are followed by Higher Income Group. 2 out of 5 respondents from the Higher Income Group (40%) are radicals. 9 out of 24 Middle Income Group students (37%) are radical. We find that there is little variation in attitudes in the three income groups. This shows that, in this case, economic status has little impact on attitudes. Previous studies (Banerjee A. , 1991) (Banerjee A. , 2003) show that there is an association between radicalism and economic status.

Radicalism & Economic status

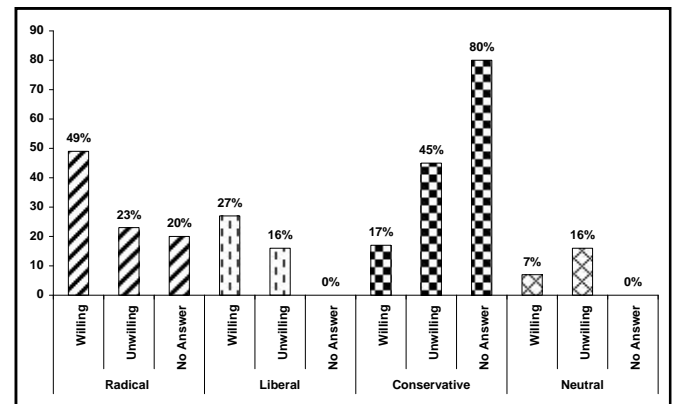
Does radicalism differ with economic status?



Source: Field data
 LIG = 36, MIG = 24, HIG = 5

Student radicalism & political participation

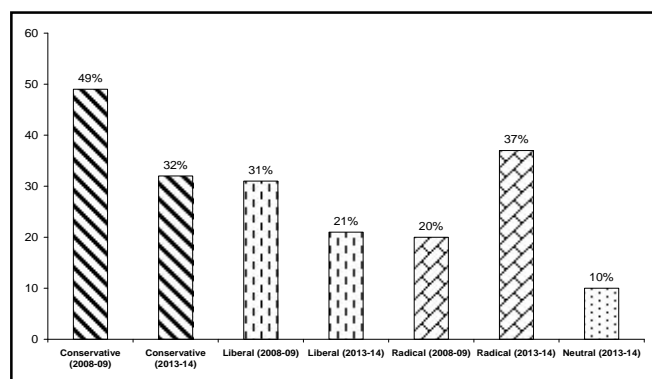
How far do radical attitudes have an impact on political participation?



Source: Field data N Willing = 41, N Unwilling = 26, No answer = 5

Fig. 8: Radicalism and Political Participation.

From the data we find that out of 72 respondents, 41 students (56.94%) expressed willingness to participate in politics. 26 students (36.11%) were not willing to participate in politics. Five (6.94%) did not answer the question. Of the 41 students who expressed willingness to participate in politics, 49% were radicals, 17% were conservative, 27% were liberal and 7% neutral (Fig. 8). Conversely, more conservatives (45%) than radical (23%) were not willing to participate in politics. This shows that there may be an association between radicalism and political participation. (Fig. 8) This finding is consistent with findings of previous studies (Banerjee A. , 1991, pp. 181-182) (Banerjee A. , 2003, pp. 159-160) (Banerjee A. , 2009, p. 50). Règeime change & student radicalism



Source: A. Banerjee (Mimeo) Change & Continuity in Student Radicalism (Session 2008-09)

Field data (Session 2013-14) N Session 2008-09 =150, N Session 2013-14=72

Fig. 9: Règeime Change and Student Radicalism.

Finally, let us have a look at the impact of règeime change on student radicalism. Prior to the present study the author did another study on student radicalism (Banerjee A. , 2009) (. In this study, Calcutta University was considered to be a typical university of Bengal and its students representatives of Bengali university students. Comparing the two sets of data we find that:

In the session 2008-2009 49% of the 150 respondents were conservative. In contrast 32% of the 72 respondents in the session 2013-2014 were conservative. Thus conservatism declined.

Liberalism also declined. 31% of the 150 respondents of session 2008-2009 were liberals. In contrast, 21% of the 72 respondents of 2013-2014 session were liberals.

Radicalism has, however, increased. In the session 2008-2009, only 20% of 150 respondents were radical. But in the session 2013-2014, 37% of 72 respondents were radical. Thus we find that despite the apparent right-wing turn taken by Bengal post-May 2011, radical attitudes are held by a significant section of the students.

Concluding remarks

The main objective of our study was to examine the impact of règeime change student politics and on political attitudes of the university students of Bengal. For examining this and related issues, we did an analysis of news reports of the period December 2011-January 2013. A pilot survey was done to know the nature of their social and political attitudes, and whether a more extensive research involving a larger and more inclusive sample will yield tangible results. We found that there has been a right-wing deviation in the student movement. The student movement has lost its democratic moorings. It has become entrapped in adult power politics. Criminalization of student politics has occurred. So, the basic objective of conducting student union elections, namely to train students in democratic political participation, has been defeated.

In this paper we presented some tentative empirical findings based on the pilot survey. I am aware that since we have taken a non-random sample, there is a possibility of bias creeping in to vitiate the findings. But we now have some data which indicates that a wider study of student radicalism may be fruitful. We found that a significant minority of the students to be radical. Previous studies (Banerjee A. , 1991; Banerjee A. , 2003; Banerjee A. , 2009) also show that radicals are a minority. So, radicals have always been a minority. But

they are a powerful minority. Prior to Paribartan we find that 49% of the 150 students studied had become conservative, i.e., totally opposed to socialism. This was also reflected in the outcome of the Parliamentary elections (2009) where the Left could win only 15 seats out of 42 (Banerjee A. , December 2011 – March, 2012). The outcome of that election indicated that the Left Front may have lost support from some sections of Bengali society including students and youth. After the 2011 Bidhan Sabha elections, our assumptions were confirmed. The Left Front lost power. The people had made their dissatisfaction with the Left known. This was hailed as paribartan.

But two years after paribartan, it appears that left-wing radicalism is on the rise among university students. And the reason may be dissatisfaction with the prevalent state of affairs in Bengali society, polity and the educational institutions among them. We have also seen inter-alia that males are more radical than females. Rural students are more radical than urban students. Radicals are more willing to participate in politics than liberals and conservatives. My findings, which are based on the session 2013-14, have been corroborated by previous studies (Banerjee A. , 2003; Banerjee A. , December 2011 – March, 2012).

To conclude most of our major research questions have been answered in the affirmative. Our findings indicate that a powerful minority of the students studied (37%) favour socialism. And, if we add the left-wing liberals (21%), who are in sense inconsistent radicals, we find that 58% of the students in the sample are leftist in orientation. Therefore, despite régime change, our data does not indicate a right-wing shift in political attitudes among university students of Bengal despite the student movement in contemporary Bengal being dominated by right –wing elements. This study was a small Pilot Study. But it has thrown up interesting leads which we can follow to unearth the true state of student radicalism in post-Left Bengal. Here lies its significance and utility.

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[Kalabibhage (Rashtrabijnan) Ph.D. degree janya Bardhaman bishwabidyalayer nikat upasthapita gabeshana patra) Nirdeshak : Dr. Nimai Pramanik, Professor o Bibhagiya Pr. Bardhaman.