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### Online Education and Students' Politics: Collective bargaining and Political Participation of Students in Kerala, India

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#### ABSTRACT

The advancement of Communication and Technology has brought about a radical change in the tertiary sector that now, most of the services of the private as well as the public enterprises are provided in online mode. The application of this digital technology could be very widely seen in the education sector for last few decades. However, a complete shift from offline to online mode of education happened during the Covid Period. The higher education sector in Kerala, India, where the students' politics is very active, also switched over to online mode of education during the Covid period. Kerala is a state with highest literacy rate, highest digital literacy and very vibrant students' politics in India. The connection between digital literacy and active campus politics in the digital era makes the state different from the other states. This study explores the impact of the online education on Students Politics, particularly on the bargaining power and political participation. A shift in the political culture of the students will take place with the emergence of 'digital participant culture'. Similar or different influence of the new social media on other social groups, associations or trade unions could be traced in the digital era.

**Keywords:** Political Participation, Collective bargaining, Students' Politics, Digital Participant Culture .

#### INTRODUCTION

Digital revolution has a lightening pace that 3G and 4G are almost out, 5 G is running, and 6 G will occupy the space soon. Most of the services of the private as well as the public enterprises have now been provided in online mode. Lockdown, social distancing and other restrictions of Covid -19 paved the way for a complete online education. Indeed, everyone believed that the advancement of information technology was a blessing to cope with the bitter realities of Covid-19. The central Government as well as the State Governments in India issued various orders to shift the offline education system to online mode. The higher education sector in Kerala also switched over to online mode of education. Indeed, it was a need of time.

Schools and other educational institutions, particularly the peer groups, play a vital role in political socialization. The students' politics in Kerala are very agile and active, and it plays a prominent role in the political process of the state. *Students play a very vital role in social*

*movements and their involvements in social issues can bring changes in society (Babu, 2020).* Students constitute a good coercive force for group protests and collective bargaining. As an Organized group, particularly young and energetic, the students' unions have a very high mobility during various protests and supports. Indeed, they act as powerful body that pressurize the decision-making bodies. Students Unions have acted as the budding nursery of many political leaders of Kerala. Even across India we find a number of Political Leaders, moreover, Ministers who started their political career through students' unions. Not surprisingly, almost all the major political parties in India have their political student's wings in the campuses<sup>1</sup>. These Students organizations act as the rapid force for the political support as well as protests. Youthful campuses with offline education provide an ample platform for the students' unions to function. However, the lockdown and the shift to complete online education remapped the presence of students' politics in Kerala. *The influence of*

***a combination of vibrant students' politics (Kumar & Madhu, 2014) and very high digital literacy<sup>2</sup> on campus politics in Kerala during online education have to be studied.*** In the study, the impact of the new information technology on the participant culture, one of the classifications of political culture by Almond and Verb (Almond & Verb, 1969), is examined. A *digital participant culture*, which is different from the participant culture, could be traced in this digital era.

**Objective of the Study:** The study mainly aims at finding the impact of the shift from offline education to online education on the role and position of students' organizations in Kerala, more precisely, on the impact on collective bargaining power and political participation of students.

**Hypothesis:** The study mainly relays on two hypotheses. 1. Online education affects the collective action of the students and thereby reduces their collective bargaining power. 2. The online education and limited role of students' organizations make an adverse impact on the political participation of students.

## METHODOLOGY

The study is primarily based on mixed research methods. Surveys and interviews were conducted to study the impact of online education. The study made a survey where 139 students from different colleges of Kerala participated and 19 office bearers of different Students unions, including State Presidents, were interviewed. Various statistical techniques and tools are used to analyse the data. Further, existing theories are also used to derive inferences. An inductive reasoning is applied to conclude the study

### **Online Education: The Shifts in education system**

Online Education has brought about drastic changes in the education system of Kerala. Covid 19 have caused almost two years of online education. ***"The novel coronavirus which broke out in 2019 acted as a catalyst in boosting the outreach and usage of E-learning" (Sing M et al., 2021). "Though challenging, COVID-19 has created many opportunities to change from traditional teaching to a new era of digital teaching/learning" (Khaliq N et al., 2023)*** Online education was not a new method in the state that there are many online platforms like, Swayam, MOOC, Coursera etc. which provides online education. Even at normal time, a good number of students are studying online platforms. Further, there is a demand for blended

learning in future. Online education or E learning "is the system based upon anywhere and anytime learning to access educational curriculum outside of a traditional classroom" (Jogi, Gabhane & Joshi, 2022). However, a complete shift from offline to online mode of education during Covid-19 took place and it created a different experience. Many viewed this as positive and more an adaptive shift not only in imparting knowledge but in every aspect of education system. "Online education has not only proven useful to ensure continuous imparting of education to school and college-going students, but it has also transformed the way that candidates prepare for competitive exams in India" ( Radhika, 2021). Analysing the online learning experience of MBA students, some scholars content that the students viewed virtual teaming experiences as valuable for preparing them for the increasingly global business environment (Kim et al., 2005). Digital classrooms, a special feature of online education, provide any -time and anywhere access to the students. Certain Scholars argue that flexibility and convenience of online classes make it attractive option (Muthuprasad & Aditya, 2021). On the other hand, the online education system is prone to many limitations. It is less interactive, and students become rather listeners. As there is no face-to-face interaction most of the time and hence learners are bound to feel absence of direct social interaction (Jogi et al., 2021). Students could not have a social binding of their classes which they had during offline classes. "Education is not just about subject knowledge but also about developing social skills and sportsmanship among the students, which is built over years" (Karyala & Kamat, 2020). Availability of computer, bandwidth problem of Indian Internet connection i.e. lacks infrastructure can hamper this education system. Only a small part of the Indian population has access to online education right now. Interrupted power supply, weak or non-existent internet connectivity, and unaffordability to buy necessary devices are major concerns (Karyala & Kamat; 2020). A developing country like India, the technical constraints like suitability of devices and bandwidth availability pose a serious challenge (Muthuprasad et al., 2021). In online courses, students with higher computer, internet, and online communication self-efficacy perform better than those with humble digital skills. The same criteria also apply to teachers, faculty and staff (Tsai & Tsai, 2003). From the behavioral perception scholars observe that students struggled with self-discipline in online learning, they

remained optimistic and motivated to achieve their goals, and this did not appear dampened by the transition to online learning (Lemay et al., 2021).

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

**Students’ Politics during Online Education**

A survey analysis of various student unions in Kerala

revealed that online education has caused a sea change in the entire functioning of these unions. This study surveyed 139 students of different arts and science colleges and conducted telephonic interview of the office bearers of different student unions. In the survey 52.5% of the students viewed that online education has reduced the role of Students’ unions.

Table 1. Students Response to Student political Organizations During Online Education.

| Sr. | Questions                                     | Yes  | No   | May be |
|-----|---|------|------|--------|
| 1   | Members                                       | 30.9 | 69.1 | NA     |
| 2   | Office Bearers                                | 13.7 | 86.3 | NA     |
| 3   | Involving in Online Activities                | 37.4 | 62.6 | NA     |
| 4   | Interest in online activities                 | 56.1 | 43.9 | NA     |
| 5   | Online Education adversely affected           | 41.7 | 6    | 52.3   |
| 6   | Physical Platform is good                     | 72.7 | 27.3 | NA     |
| 7   | Online education reduced the role of SPO      | 52.5 | 11.5 | 36     |
| 8   | Use of New social media for activities of SPO | 4.9  | 10.1 | 46     |
| 9   | Online Meetings                               | 17.3 | 58.3 | 24.4   |

Source: Survey

Table 2. Students Union Activities: A comparison of Online and Offline Education.

|      | Online Education |  |   | Offline Education     |                        |  |
|------|------------------|--|---|-----------------------|------------------------|--|
|      | Activities       | Membership   | Methods   | Activities            | Membership             | Methods  |
| KSU  | Off Campus       | Online-using social media- Google forms                | Using social media- Posts, reels, comments etc. Off campus in regional area | On campus& Off Campus | Campus based-on campus | Hybrid-but Mostly on campus- Also use Extreme methods like-strike & <i>bandh</i> |
| SFI  | Off Campus       | Online-using social media- Google forms                | Using social media- Posts, reels, comments etc. Off campus in regional area | On campus& Off Campus | Campus based-on campus | Hybrid-but Mostly on campus- Also use Extreme methods like-strike & <i>bandh</i> |
| ABVP | Off Campus       | Region based + Online-using social media- Google forms | Using social media- Posts, reels, comments etc. Off campus in regional area | On campus& Off Campus | Campus based-on campus | Mostly on campus- Also use Extreme methods like-strike & <i>bandh</i>            |
| MSF  | Off Campus       | Region based + Online-using social media- Google forms | Using social media- Posts, reels, comments etc. Off campus in regional area | On campus& Off Campus | Campus based-on campus | Mostly on campus- Also use Extreme methods like-strike & <i>bandh</i>            |
| AISF | Off Campus       | Online-using social media- Google forms                | Using social media- Posts, reels, comments etc. Off campus in regional area | On campus& Off Campus | Campus based-on campus | Mostly on campus- Also use Extreme methods like-strike & <i>bandh</i>            |

Source: Interview with Office Bearers of Various Students Unions of Kerala

Though around 44% of these students supported the new social media as alternative, nearly 73% of them contented that physical platform is good for smooth functioning of Students unions. From the interview of the office bearers, it was found that online education completely altered the modus operand of their organizations. Digital platforms like WhatsApp, face book and Google forms were used for membership campaign. Google meet, zoom etc. were used for meetings. The methods and techniques had to be changed. They no were in position to use the traditional techniques and methods such as campus Strike, Picketing, Street play, Processions etc. They used the new social media to express their discontents and support on various issues. Definitely, social media is a very powerful tool to organizations and is used for organizational agenda, to recruit, inform and mobilize (Kulshreshth, 2023). However, this digital platform could not serve so effectively as the physical platform. The activities of the members of the union were confined to liking and sharing of various posts of discontent and support by the leadership. Passive members were more, and digital divide alienated many students. Unlike the physical movements and protests by the students, these online activities could not have effective role in many issues. Indeed, the Student's unions and their activities were silenced to certain extent. Students' unions leaders also have expressed their concern about the censorship on new social media.

### **Collective Bargaining and Students Politics**

Collective bargaining provides political power to groups. Collective bargaining enables the union to speak with a single voice as representative of those holding opposing views and gives the union increased political effectiveness (Summers, 1974). As a group in collective action, the students unions also indulge in various processes like negotiation, discussion, and mediation etc. of collective bargaining. ILO Convention No. 154 defines collective bargaining as referring to: "all negotiations which take place between an employer, a group of employers or one or more employers' organisations, on the one hand, and one or more workers' organisations, on the other, for: (a) determining working conditions and terms of employment; and/or (b) regulating relations between employers and workers; and/or (c) regulating relations between employers or their organisations and a workers' organisation or workers' organisations." Though such a legal framework is not available for the students' union, the students' unions engage in collective

bargaining. The collective action of student unions empowers each individual student in different areas, otherwise where the individually each student is incapable of doing. Collective bargaining procedures must assist those groups which are least able to exert significant influence in the normal political process (Summers, 1974). The collective bargaining becomes effective when agreements and settlements are reached between both the parties, the students unions on one side and government or authority on the other side. ***'Collective bargaining is process of negotiation which involves any form of discussion, formal or informal, with a view to reaching an agreement' (ILO 2015).*** Again, from another perception, the collective actions of the unions must be powerful enough to influence the policies and decisions of the government. Collective bargaining is a unique and distinct form of social dialogue by virtue of both the nature of the process and the intended outcome, namely a collective agreement (ILO, 2022). The definition of ILO Convention No154 defines collective bargaining of the labour unions. This, in fact, speaks about the activities Labour force. Though such a legal framework is not available for the students' union, the students' unions also engage in collective bargaining. Further, bargaining power of the student's groups must be more powerful than the other groups or unions like trade unions and associations. The power of collective bargaining will be different in physical and online platforms. The power of bargaining, particularly, depends on the methods and techniques they use in the process of collective bargaining. Examining the collective bargaining power of the students unions in online education it could be found that the students are in an adverse position in online education. Perhaps, online platforms provide them with wider area to act in, but the effectiveness of it, especially due to shift in the powerful methods and techniques have to be discussed here. Online movements, support and protests are merely individual action rather than group action. An individual student, probably in leadership, posts demand, support or protest and others including non-students likes, shares or forwards the same individually. There isn't any powerful collective action to influence the decision-making body. However, in this digital era one must think about the possibilities of 'digital strike'<sup>3</sup>. Especially, students' community, who can take advantage of digital technical know-how, can effectively utilize the digital platforms. Conversely, some of the studies point out that digital strike is not so effective. "The

increasing dispersal of workers as a result of remote working will render unionization less easy to organize... Also, in general, digital transformation as a process has not yet been fully integrated in collective bargaining” (<https://www.eurofound.europa.eu> ; 2021 ). “Workers are unable to negotiate their data rights with platforms and are thus forced to exist in unequal relationships in which technology companies exert power through data” ( Kapoor, 2021). The situation is quite different in offline education, where they more effective processes like strike, picketing etc., **even very violent methods are also used by the students. There were many incidents of very violent and brutish actions by the students of Kerala on political issues (Menon, 2016).** In the interview, the leaders of different students’ unions of Kerala opined that they were unable to influence the decision-making bodies, unlike they could do in offline education. Compared to the bargaining power of other

groups, the students’ union could make effective results. If we examine the bargaining power of the students’ unions using Chamberlain Bargaining Model, the bargaining power will be less than one. The students’ unions are in a disadvantaged position during online education and the cost of disagreement on the demand of the students’ union for the authority is less than the cost of agreement.

According to Chamberlain Bargaining Model, ***the bargaining power of Students’ Union = presumed cost of disagreeing with the students’ union ÷ Presumed cost of agreeing with the students’ union.*** The bargaining power of the union is more than one, for example 10/5 is 2 it is greater than one. In the above figure, Fig.2, the line is moving upward at a faster rate showing slope above one. Here, the perceived cost of agreement is more than perceived cost of disagreement.

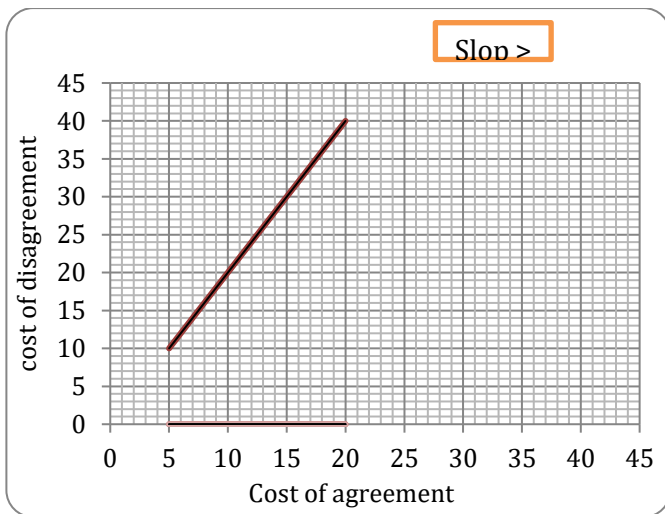


Figure 1. Collective bargaining in online education.

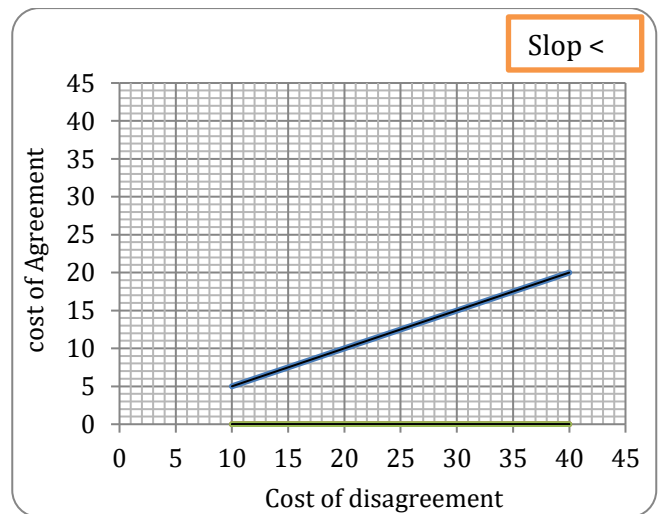


Figure 2. Collective bargaining in offline Education.

The bargaining power of the union is less than one, for example 5/10 is 0.5 and it is lesser than one. In the above figure, Fig.3, the line is moving upward at a slow rate showing slope below one. Here, the perceived cost of agreeing is less than the perceived cost of disagreeing. Another notable aspect is the collective bargaining power influences their political culture. ***Analysing the power relation Prof. Allen Flandrs observes that, collective bargaining is a political process***. From a study on the political perceptions of collective bargaining Flavin and Hartney points out that collective bargaining is a political process and it boosted political participation ( Flavin &

Hartney, 2015, 896). This, in fact, shows a direct relation between collective bargaining power and political participation. Therefore, the shifts in the collective bargaining will be reflected in political participation of the students.

**Online Education and political culture**

Online education will bring forth shifts in the political culture of society along with reducing the collective bargaining power of the students’ unions. Educational institutions, more precisely, institutions of higher educations and students’ peer groups are major agents of political socialization. Due to the minimized role of

students' organizations, the educational institutions may not be in a position to act as a powerful agent of political socialization. On the other hand, other agents of socialization- the new media, communities and religions, will be in better position to influence the formation of political culture. The space for the youth to form political group and involve politically in community, caste or religious basis will affect the secular culture of society. This change will also be reflected in the political culture as political culture is created through the process of political socialization. Students involving various political activities of the campuses are brought into the political process like political discussion, discourses, movements, protests, picketing; both constitutional and extra-constitutional, legal and illegal, violent and non-violent ways and means. Educational campuses are the cradle of politics in Kerala. Many political leaders, including ministers, members of parliament and state legislatures, started their political career through students' politics. In fact, these institutions they studied and the peer groups they were part-off, have played a good role in the formation of their political life and culture. Online education will pave the way for a 'digital participant culture' by the students which will eventually shift the students' political culture into a parochial one.

The digital participant culture provides a very limited role for the students in the political process, especially in response. In the figure below, Y' axis represents the digital participant culture and X' axis represents online education. The curve in the figure is initially upward sloping with a fast increase in the digital participant culture. This is because of the assumptions that students are digitally equipped and there are high level digital actions and reactions taking place. Further, there is not much interference by the government or authority in the communication arena of the students. The digital space provides better platform for the students to receive large volume of information as well as a very good position for response. However, their online responses to the decision-making units are not effective as offline responses and in turn, it creates a kind of political apathy among them. Again, unlike in the initial phase, the government and the authorities will interfere in the communication channels of the students and will make reasonable restrictions through media censorship which will cause alienation of the students from political milieu. Therefore, due this Political apathy and alienation, the participant culture will fall down which is shown in the figure as downward sloping of the curve.

Figure 3. Political culture of students in online education

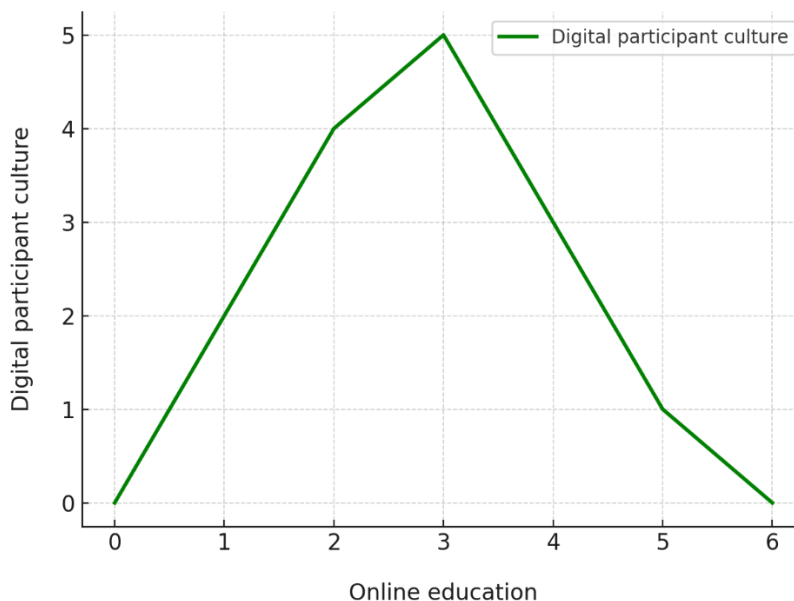


Figure 3. Political culture of students in online education.

The question which is very relevant here is- what role of students' organizations if there are no on campus activities.

From the interviews and the survey, it was found that the students' unions could not make any fruitful involvements

in on campus activities. Conversely, they actively engaged in off-campus activities during online education. Perhaps, the lockdown might not have given them a better space for productive involvement there too.

## CONCLUSION

Analyzing the impact on the students' politics, it could be perceived that online education would create a situation where the students' unions will have to compromise their collective bargaining power and their new role would lead to a major shift in the political culture of the students. In this digital era there is a 'Digital participant culture', where there is an increase in the participation in the early phases and it will fall in the later phases. Moreover, this shift in their political culture would be reflected in the overall political culture of society. If students as a group as well as their associations undergo this major shift, a similar or a different influence of the new social media would be reflected in other groups. Collective bargaining power and political participation of other groups, namely Trade Unions and Associations, will have to be redrawn in this digital era.

## ENDNOTES

1. Students' political organizations in Kerala are students' wings of major political parties. ABVP- BJP, KSU- Indian National Congress, SFI- Communist Party of India (Marxist). AISF- Communist Party of India. Hence, we find an affiliation of most of the students' unions to a political party and involvement in party politics.
2. Kerala has the highest digital and computer literacy rate among the states in India. It is also having the highest literacy rate in Indian States. <https://mospi.gov.in/literacy-rate-india-state-wise-rgi-nssso>, <https://sansad.in/getFile/loksabhaquestions/annex/1712/AU3258.pdf> & Muthyanolla, Sai, Krishna (2023): <https://factly.in/data-southern-states-on-the-top-kerala-outperforms-all-other-states-in-ict-skills>. This provides the state of Kerala with a more advantageous position in students' politics in the digital era.
3. 'Digital strike' is a strike using the digital platform. In the case of workers, it is "The conduct of a strike, that is, a collective, planned cessation of work by a large number of workers without the employer's consent, is usually accompanied by certain (publicity-boosting) actions by the trade union. If these actions

take place digitally, this is described as a 'digital strike'" (Lus Laboris, 2022).

4. Allan Flanders (1975), in his work on *Collective bargaining*, argues that collective bargaining is not economical, it is more political. He describes collective bargaining as a power relationship between a trade union organisation and the management organisation. The agreement arrived at is a compromise settlement of power conflicts. MHRD, Govt. of India: <https://epgp.inflibnet.ac.in/epgpdata/uploads/epgp>, <https://www.egyankosh.ac.in/bitstream/123456789/70972/1/Unit-10.pdf>

## STATEMENTS AND DECLARATIONS

This is to disclose that no financial or non-financial interests are directly or indirectly related to the work submitted by me for publication. I am the sole author of the article.

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