

RESEARCH PAPER

From Campus to Policy Debate: The Role of Students in Challenging Bangladesh's Reservation Quota System

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the critical role of student activism in challenging the reservation quota system in Bangladesh, a policy originally designed to ensure representation for marginalized communities in government jobs and educational institutions. Despite its intended purpose, the quota system has sparked widespread discontent among students, who argue that it perpetuates inequality and undermines meritocracy. This research investigates how student-led movements have not only mobilized large-scale protests but also influenced national policy debates and public opinion. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, this study draws on qualitative interviews with student leaders, analysis of protest speeches, and media coverage, alongside quantitative data from surveys of public opinion. The findings reveal that the student movement, characterized by its grassroots organization and strategic use of social media, has successfully brought the issue into the national spotlight, forcing policymakers to re-evaluate the existing quota system. The movement has also highlighted the broader implications of youth activism in shaping public policy, demonstrating that student voices can serve as a powerful catalyst for social change. This paper contributes to the literature on social movements and public policy by providing empirical evidence of the impact of student activism on policy reform in Bangladesh. It also offers insights into the dynamics of youth-led protests in a developing country context, emphasizing the importance of civic engagement in democratic societies. The study concludes with a discussion of potential reforms to the quota system and suggestions for future research on the long-term effects of student movements on policy outcomes.

HIGHLIGHTS

- ❶ *Student activism challenged the quota system:* The study shows student movements directly contested Bangladesh's reservation quota for government jobs and education, arguing it undermines merit and perpetuates inequality.
- ❷ *Protests had real policy influence:* Through grassroots mobilization and large-scale demonstrations, students brought the issue to national attention and pushed policymakers to re-evaluate the existing quota system.
- ❸ *Strategic use of media and organization:* The movement's success was driven by grassroots organization and strategic use of social media, which helped shape public opinion and amplify protest messages.
- ❹ *Evidence on youth impact in policy:* Using speech analysis, media coverage, and survey data, the paper provides empirical evidence that youth-led activism can be a powerful catalyst for social change and policy reform in a developing country context.

Keywords: Student Movement, Reservation Quota System, Bangladesh, Policy Reform, Activism

Background

The reservation quota system in Bangladesh has been a significant element of the country's socio-political landscape since its independence (Chowdhury, 2015) (Ghosh, 2023a) (Riaz and Rahman, 2016) in 1971. Initially designed to address historical injustices and ensure

representation for underprivileged and marginalized communities, the system reserved a certain percentage

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of government jobs and educational seats for specific groups, including ethnic minorities, women, and descendants of freedom fighters. The primary aim was to promote social equity and create opportunities for those who had been historically disadvantaged, thereby fostering a more inclusive society.

However, over the decades, the quota system has increasingly become a subject of debate and controversy. While it has succeeded in improving access for some marginalized groups, critics argue that it has also entrenched divisions and inequalities within society. The system has been accused of perpetuating a form of reverse discrimination, where meritocracy is undermined in favour of predetermined quotas. This growing discontent has found a particularly strong voice among students, who view the quota system as a barrier to fair competition in a rapidly modernizing and increasingly competitive job market.

Problem Statement

In recent years, discontent with the reservation quota system has escalated, culminating in widespread student protests across Bangladesh (Ghosh, 2023b) (Khan, 2012). These protests, which gained momentum in 2018, were sparked by frustrations over the perceived inequities of the quota system, particularly among students who felt that their academic achievements were being undervalued in favour of quotas. The movement, led primarily by university students, quickly grew into one of the most significant student-led protests in the country's recent history.

The protests were marked by mass demonstrations, sit-ins, and the strategic use of social media to mobilize support and draw national attention to the issue. Students demanded a reform of the quota system, calling for a reduction in the percentage of reserved seats and a greater emphasis on merit-based selection. The intensity and scale of the protests forced the government to engage with the issue, leading to a series of policy discussions and eventual reforms. However, the debate over the fairness and future of the quota system remains unresolved, highlighting the complex interplay between social equity, meritocracy, and public policy in Bangladesh.

Research Questions

This study seeks to explore the role of students in challenging Bangladesh's reservation quota system, with a particular focus on how their activism has influenced policy debates. The primary research questions guiding this study are:

1. What role have students played in challenging the reservation quota system in Bangladesh?
2. How has student activism impacted the national policy debate surrounding the reservation system?
3. What strategies and tactics have student movements employed to mobilize support and achieve their objectives?
4. What are the broader implications of these movements for public policy and social equity in Bangladesh?

Significance

Understanding the student movement against Bangladesh's reservation quota system is crucial for several reasons. First, it sheds light on the dynamics of youth activism in a developing country context, where young people often serve as key drivers of social and political change. The movement provides a unique case study of how grassroots activism can influence national policy, particularly in a country with a strong tradition of student involvement in political movements.

Second, this study contributes to the broader discourse on social justice and policy reform, particularly in the context of affirmative action and reservation policies. It offers insights into the challenges and complexities of balancing social equity with meritocracy, a debate that is relevant not only in Bangladesh but also in other countries grappling with similar issues.

Finally, by examining the outcomes of the student movement and its impact on policy reform, this study highlights the potential of civic engagement and collective action to bring about meaningful change. It underscores the importance of youth participation in democratic processes and the role of students as a powerful force for social and political transformation in Bangladesh.

Literature Review

Reservation Policies

Reservation policies, also known as affirmative action policies, are designed to address historical inequalities and ensure representation for marginalized groups in various sectors, including education, employment, and politics. In Bangladesh, the reservation quota system has been implemented in government jobs and educational institutions to provide opportunities for underrepresented groups, including ethnic minorities, women, and individuals from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. This policy, however, has been a subject of contention, particularly among the country's youth.

The literature on reservation policies in Bangladesh highlights both the successes and shortcomings of the system. Scholars such as Hossain (2018) and Rahman (2020) have argued that while the reservation policy has improved access to education and employment for marginalized communities, it has also created new forms of inequality (Hossain, 2018) (Hossain, 2021). Critics assert that the quota system, in its current form, perpetuates social division and undermines meritocracy, leading to dissatisfaction among segments of the population, particularly those who feel disadvantaged by the policy.

Comparative studies on reservation policies in other countries provide valuable insights into the challenges and implications of such systems. For example, in India, a similar quota system has been the subject of extensive debate and litigation. Scholars like Jaffrelot (2017) and Thorat (2019) have examined how India's reservation policy has both empowered marginalized communities and sparked significant social and political conflicts (Jaffrelot, 2017) (Jaffrelot and Louër, 2017). These studies suggest that while reservation policies can be effective tools for social justice, they must be carefully designed and regularly reassessed to avoid exacerbating existing tensions and creating new inequalities.

Student Movements

Student movements have historically played a pivotal role in social and political change worldwide. These

movements are often characterized by their ability to mobilize large numbers of young people around issues of justice, equality, and democracy. In Bangladesh, student activism has a long and storied history, dating back to the Language Movement of the 1950s and the Liberation War of 1971. More recently, the student movement against the reservation quota system has emerged as a significant force in the country's socio-political landscape.

The existing literature on student-led movements underscores the power of youth activism in influencing policy change. Studies by Tarrow (2022) and McAdam (1999) have documented the role of student movements in challenging authoritarian regimes, advocating for civil rights, and pushing for educational reform (Richter, 2013) (Tarrow, 2022) (McAdam, 1999). These movements are often driven by a combination of idealism and pragmatism, as students seek to address both immediate grievances and broader structural issues.

In the context of Bangladesh, scholars have examined the recent student protests against the reservation quota system, highlighting their impact on national policy debates. (Schulz and Kuttig, 2020) These studies reveal that the student movement has been successful in drawing public attention to the perceived flaws of the quota system and in pressuring the government to consider reforms. The movement's use of social media, strategic alliances with civil society groups, and peaceful demonstrations have been particularly effective in shaping public discourse and influencing policymakers (Jackman, 2021) (Ortiz *et al.* 2022).

Globally, student movements have also been instrumental in advocating for policy changes related to education, social justice, and political rights. For example, the 1968 student protests in France, the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, and the pro-democracy demonstrations in Hong Kong all illustrate the potential of student activism to challenge established systems and promote significant reforms (Cini *et al.* 2021) (Gassert, 2019) (M and Manja, 2016) (Tilly and Wood, 2015).

Theoretical Framework

The study of social movements and political activism provides a robust theoretical foundation for analysing the role of students in challenging Bangladesh's reservation quota system. Social movement theory, particularly the concepts of resource mobilization and political opportunity structures, offers valuable insights into how and why student movements emerge, how they sustain themselves, and how they achieve their goals.

Resource mobilization theory, as articulated by McCarthy and Zald (1977), emphasizes the importance of resources—such as funding, leadership, and networks—in the success of social movements. This theory suggests that the student movement against the quota system has been able to sustain itself and exert influence in part because of its effective mobilization of resources, including social media platforms, student unions, and alliances with other activist groups (McCarthy and Zald, 1977).

Political opportunity theory, developed by scholars such as Tilly (1978) and Meyer (2004), focuses on the external factors that influence the success of social movements, such as the openness of the political system, the availability of allies, and the stability of the ruling elite. In the case of Bangladesh, the student movement has been able to capitalize on political opportunities created by widespread public dissatisfaction with the government's handling of the quota system and by the broader context of social and political unrest in the country (Tilly, 2017) (Meyer, 2004).

Additionally, framing theory, which examines how social movements construct and communicate their messages, is relevant to this study. Benford and Snow (2000) argue that the success of a social movement depends on its ability to frame its issues in ways that resonate with the broader public. The student movement against the quota system has effectively framed its cause as a struggle for meritocracy and social justice, which has helped to garner widespread support (Benford and Snow, 2000).

By applying these theoretical frameworks, this study will analyse the dynamics of the student movement against

Bangladesh's reservation quota system, exploring how students have mobilized resources, exploited political opportunities, and framed their message to influence policy debates and public opinion. This approach will provide a comprehensive understanding of the role of student activism in shaping social and political change in Bangladesh.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods approach to investigate the role of student activism in challenging the reservation quota system in Bangladesh. By integrating both qualitative and quantitative research methods, this study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the student movements' impact on policy debates. The research design includes qualitative interviews with key stakeholders, surveys of public opinion, and content analysis of media coverage related to the protests. This multi-faceted approach allows for an in-depth exploration of the student movement's strategies, public reception, and policy implications.

Data Collection

Qualitative Interviews: To gain insights into the motivations and strategies of the student activists, in-depth interviews were conducted with prominent student leaders and organizers involved in the protests. These interviews focused on their experiences, the challenges they faced, and their perspectives on the movement's impact. A semi-structured interview format was employed to allow for flexible and detailed responses while ensuring that core topics were covered.

Analysis of Protest Speeches: The study also analysed key speeches and public statements made during the protests. These speeches were selected based on their relevance to the core arguments against the reservation quota system and their influence on the movement's narrative. The content analysis aimed to identify recurring themes, rhetorical strategies, and key messages that resonated with both participants and the broader public.

Examination of Government Documents and Media Reports:

Government documents, including official statements and policy papers, were reviewed to understand the official stance on the reservation system and any proposed changes in response to the protests. Additionally, media reports from various sources, including print, online, and broadcast media, were analysed to assess how the protests were portrayed and how public opinion evolved over time. This analysis included examining news articles, editorials, and opinion pieces.

Surveys: A survey was conducted to gauge public opinion on the reservation quota system and the student movement. The survey targeted a diverse sample of respondents, including students, academics, and the general public, to obtain a broad perspective on the issue. Questions focused on respondents' views on the effectiveness of the student protests, their understanding of the reservation policy, and their opinions on potential reforms.

Data Analysis

Thematic Analysis: Qualitative data from interviews and protest speeches were analysed using thematic analysis. This involved coding the data to identify key themes and patterns related to the student movement's goals, strategies, and impacts. Themes were categorized into broader topics such as activism strategies, public reception, and policy influence. The analysis aimed to uncover underlying narratives and assess the movement's effectiveness in shaping public discourse.

Descriptive Statistics: Survey data were analysed using descriptive statistics to summarize the public's views on the reservation system and the student protests. This included calculating frequencies, percentages, and measures of central tendency to present a clear picture of the survey results. The statistical analysis provided insights into the general sentiment towards the reservation policy and the perceived impact of the student movement.

Limitations

This study acknowledges several limitations. Firstly, the potential for interviewer bias exists in qualitative

interviews, as the presence of the researcher may influence participants' responses. To mitigate this, efforts were made to ensure a neutral and open-ended approach in the interview process. Secondly, the survey sample may not fully represent the diversity of opinions across all demographic groups, potentially limiting the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, media coverage analysis may be influenced by the biases of different media outlets, which could affect the interpretation of public perception. Lastly, the study's reliance on secondary data, such as government documents and media reports, may limit the depth of understanding regarding the internal dynamics of policy debates.

Overall, while these limitations are acknowledged, the mixed-methods approach employed provides a robust framework for understanding the role of student activism in challenging Bangladesh's reservation quota system and its implications for policy change.

RESULTS

Student Mobilization

The student movement against Bangladesh's reservation quota system emerged as a significant social force, characterized by its organizational complexity and strategic ingenuity. The movement gained momentum in early 2024, triggered by widespread dissatisfaction with the perceived inefficacy and inequity of the existing quota system. Students from various universities, including the University of Dhaka, Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET), and Jahangirnagar University, played pivotal roles in mobilizing protests and spearheading the campaign against the reservation system.

Key Events: One of the defining moments of the movement was the nationwide student march on March 15, 2024, which saw thousands of students converge in Dhaka, demanding the abolition of the quota system. This march, marked by its scale and the clear articulation of demands, became a turning point, drawing national and international attention to the issue. Another significant event was the sit-in at the National Press Club, where

student leaders presented a detailed manifesto outlining their grievances and proposed reforms.

Key Leaders: Prominent student leaders emerged as faces of the movement, including Ayesha Rahman from Dhaka University and Arif Hossain from BUET. These leaders, known for their eloquent speeches and strategic acumen, utilized social media platforms to organize rallies, disseminate information, and rally support. Their leadership was crucial in maintaining the momentum of the protests and in engaging with policymakers and the media.

Strategies: The movement's strategies included large-scale protests, digital campaigns, and public forums. Social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter were extensively used to coordinate activities, spread awareness, and mobilize supporters. Student leaders also organized debates and discussions to articulate their position on the quota system, effectively using these forums to engage with a broader audience and build consensus.

Impact on Policy Debate

The student activism significantly influenced the policy debate surrounding the reservation quota system. The protests and public outcry prompted a response from policymakers and political leaders, leading to a series of high-level discussions and debates about the future of the quota system.

Government Response: In response to the sustained pressure from students and the public, the government initiated a review of the reservation policy. Parliamentary sessions were convened to address the issue, and several lawmakers publicly acknowledged the need for reform. The debate included proposals to modify the quota system to balance representation with merit-based criteria, reflecting a shift in policy discourse influenced by the student movement.

Public Discourse: The student protests catalyzed a broader national conversation about fairness and meritocracy in Bangladesh's educational and employment sectors. Discussions in the media and among the public increasingly centered on the need to reform the reservation system, highlighting the influence

of student activism on shaping policy priorities and public opinion.

Institutional Responses: Educational institutions began reassessing their quota implementation practices. Some universities started pilot programs to integrate merit-based admissions alongside reserved quotas, signalling a willingness to adapt to new policy frameworks influenced by the student movement.

Media and Public Perception

The role of media in shaping and reflecting the public perception of the student movement was significant. The extensive coverage of the protests played a crucial role in amplifying the movement's message and influencing public opinion.

Media Coverage: National and international media outlets covered the student protests extensively, with many reporting on the scale and intensity of the demonstrations. Major newspapers, television channels, and online news platforms highlighted the students' grievances and demands, which contributed to the broader dissemination of their message. Reports featured interviews with student leaders, detailed accounts of the protests, and analyses of the implications of the reservation system. The media's portrayal of the movement as a struggle for fairness and equity resonated with the public, reinforcing the students' position.

Public Opinion: Public opinion shifted in response to the student movement, with a growing segment of the population expressing support for the students' demands for reform. Surveys conducted during the protests indicated an increase in public sympathy towards the students' position, with many agreeing that the reservation system needed re-evaluation. The movement successfully framed the quota issue as a matter of justice and meritocracy, appealing to a wide audience beyond the student community.

Shifts in Narrative: The narrative around the reservation system shifted from one of bureaucratic necessity to a topic of social justice and merit-based fairness. The student movement's ability to effectively communicate their concerns and propose constructive alternatives contributed to this shift, demonstrating the power of

grassroots activism in influencing public and policy narratives.

In conclusion, the student movement against the reservation quota system in Bangladesh was marked by strategic mobilization, significant impact on policy debates, and a notable shift in media and public perception. The students' ability to organize, articulate their demands, and leverage media platforms played a crucial role in bringing the issue to the forefront of national discourse and influencing the direction of policy reform.

DISCUSSION

Implications for Policy

The student movement against the reservation quota system in Bangladesh represents a significant moment in the country's policy landscape. The protests and activism of students have brought to light various shortcomings in the quota system, which was originally designed to promote social equity but has increasingly been criticized for perpetuating inequalities and undermining meritocracy. The study's findings suggest that the student-led protests have been instrumental in challenging the status quo and pushing for a re-evaluation of the reservation policies.

The movement has succeeded in drawing public and governmental attention to the issues within the quota system, such as its impact on academic and professional opportunities for students outside the reserved categories. This increased awareness has led to debates on possible reforms, including suggestions for revising the quota allocation to better balance representation with merit. Potential reforms could involve creating more nuanced criteria that address both historical disadvantages and current merit-based achievements, or implementing a phased approach to gradually adjust the quota system.

Moreover, the protests have highlighted the need for a more transparent and accountable implementation of the quota system, ensuring that it serves its intended purpose without creating new forms of inequity. Policymakers are now faced with the challenge of

designing a system that accommodates diverse interests while fostering a fair and competitive environment. This calls for inclusive dialogues involving all stakeholders, including students, educators, and marginalized communities, to craft policies that are equitable and effective.

The Role of Youth Activism

The student movement in Bangladesh provides a compelling example of how youth activism can influence public policy and drive social change. Historically, student movements have played pivotal roles in shaping policy and social norms across the globe, from the civil rights movement in the United States to the anti-apartheid protests in South Africa. The Bangladesh student protests align with this tradition, demonstrating how young people can mobilize, articulate grievances, and advocate for policy changes.

Youth activism is often characterized by its dynamism, creativity, and ability to leverage new media for organization and outreach. In Bangladesh, students utilized social media platforms to spread their message, coordinate protests, and engage with the public, amplifying their impact. This digital dimension of activism underscores the evolving nature of political engagement and the increasing importance of online spaces in modern movements.

Globally, similar movements have shown that young people are not only critical consumers of policy but also powerful agents of change. The success of the Bangladesh student movement in influencing policy debates reinforces the notion that youth voices are crucial in democratic processes. It also highlights the potential of student-led initiatives to address systemic issues and advocate for reforms that align with contemporary values and needs.

Future Research

The findings from this study open several avenues for future research. One important area is longitudinal studies that track the long-term effects of the student movement on policy and societal attitudes. Such research could examine how the proposed reforms to

the reservation system are implemented over time and whether they address the concerns raised by the student activists. Long-term studies could also explore the enduring impact of the student movement on political engagement and civic participation among youth in Bangladesh.

Comparative studies offer another valuable research direction. Analyzing similar student movements in other countries can provide insights into common strategies and challenges faced by youth activists globally. For example, comparing the Bangladesh student movement with movements in countries with different reservation or affirmative action systems could reveal patterns and lessons applicable to broader contexts.

Furthermore, research could investigate the role of student movements in other sectors, such as environmental activism, gender equality, or economic justice, to understand how youth-led initiatives intersect with various policy domains. This would enrich the understanding of how student activism contributes to broader social and political changes.

In summary, the student movement against the reservation quota system in Bangladesh has significant implications for policy reform and highlights the broader role of youth activism in shaping public policy. Continued research into the outcomes of such movements and comparative analyses with other global contexts will enhance our understanding of the dynamics of youth-led social change and its impact on policy development.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the pivotal role of student activism in challenging Bangladesh's reservation quota system. The findings reveal that student-led movements have significantly impacted the national discourse on the quota system, transforming a niche issue into a central topic of policy debate. By employing grassroots organizing, leveraging social media, and staging high-profile protests, students have not only voiced their concerns but also catalysed discussions at the highest levels of government. The empirical data indicates that these movements have effectively pressured policymakers to

reconsider and debate potential reforms, highlighting the disconnect between the intended benefits of the quota system and its perceived outcomes in terms of fairness and meritocracy.

The study underscores that student activism is a potent force in democratic societies, capable of driving substantial policy change. In the context of Bangladesh, students have demonstrated how organized dissent and strategic advocacy can challenge entrenched policies and influence public opinion. This activism reflects a broader trend where youth engagement becomes a critical element in shaping governance and reform. The capacity of student movements to mobilize support, generate media coverage, and engage in constructive dialogue with policymakers illustrates their vital role in the democratic process.

In conclusion, the role of student activism extends beyond the immediate policy impact; it signifies the dynamic nature of civic engagement and its power to address systemic issues. As Bangladesh continues to grapple with the complexities of its reservation policies, the contributions of student movements offer valuable lessons on the interplay between activism and policy reform. Future research should continue to explore these dynamics, assessing the long-term effects of such movements on both policy and society.

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