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# BEYOND MATERIAL GRIEVANCES: ANALYZING THE 2015 BANGLADESH "NO VAT ON EDUCATION" MOVEMENT THROUGH A NEW SOCIAL MOVEMENT PERSPECTIVE

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***Abstract.*** The 2015 Bangladesh student protests against a proposed value-added tax (VAT) on private university tuition are conventionally framed in public imagery as a material struggle against an economic policy threatening educational access. This article reinterprets the movement through the New Social Movement (NSM) theoretical framework, which emphasises identity formation, post-material values, and cultural contestation over traditional economic redistribution. Drawing on the NSM theory, this analysis demonstrates how the protests transcended financial grievances to forge a collective student identity, resist the neoliberal commodification of education, and demand democratic participation within Bangladesh's increasingly authoritarian political context. Employing a qualitative framework, this study draws upon primary interview data and integrates them with an extensive corpus of secondary sources and historical analysis, framing the contemporary student movement as the broader continuum and evolution of Bangladesh's activist heritage. The findings reveal the "No VAT on Education" movement as a multifaceted critique of neoliberal governance, a reassertion of youth agency, and a symbolic challenge to systemic power, resonating with global NSM trends like Chile's 2011 education protests or South Africa's #FeesMustFall. This perspective challenges reductionist economic interpretations, offering a nuanced understanding of contemporary social movements in the Global South, where material and post-material struggles intersect. By bridging the immediate trigger of the VAT with broader societal aspirations – autonomy, justice, and cultural meaning – the 2015 movement reflects a transformative shift in Bangladesh's youth activism, suggesting enduring implications for the nation's political landscape and the applicability of the NSM theory in postcolonial, neoliberal settings.

***Keywords:*** Bangladesh, New Social Movement, 2015 No VAT on Education, postcolonialism, neoliberalism, interview

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Научная статья

# ПОМИМО МАТЕРИАЛЬНЫХ ОБИД: АНАЛИЗ ДВИЖЕНИЯ «НЕТ НДС НА ОБРАЗОВАНИЕ» В БАНГЛАДЕШ В 2015 ГОДУ В ПЕРСПЕКТИВЕ ТЕОРИИ НОВЫХ СОЦИАЛЬНЫХ ДВИЖЕНИЙ

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***Аннотация.*** Рассматривается бангладешское студенческое движение 2015 г. против предлагаемого налога на добавленную стоимость на обучение в частных университетах в общественном сознании как борьба с экономической политикой, угрожающей доступу к образованию. Данное движение переосмысливается с помощью теории новых социальных движений (NSM), которая подчеркивает формирование идентичности, постматериальные ценности и культурное оспаривание традиционного экономического перераспределения. Опираясь на теорию NSM, этот анализ демонстрирует, как протесты превзошли финансовые основания массового недовольства, чтобы сформировать коллективную студенческую идентичность, противостоять неолиберальной коммерциализации образования и требовать демократического участия в рамках все более авторитарного политического контекста Бангладеш.

***Ключевые слова:*** Бангладеш, новые социальные движения, Движение «Нет НДС на образование» 2015, постколониализм, неолиберализм, интервью

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## Introduction

On June 4, 2015, Bangladesh's Awami League-led government introduced its 2015–16 national budget, embedding within it a proposal that seemed minor at first glance but soon proved explosive: a 10% value-added tax (VAT) on private university tuition fees [1]. After the initial pushback from educators and administrators, the rate was trimmed to 7.5%, yet this concession did little to quell the outrage it sparked among students [2]. Presented as a fiscal mechanism to enhance state revenue amid Bangladesh's accelerating integration into the global economy, the VAT proposal struck a nerve in a nation where higher education is both a coveted pathway to upward social mobility and a financially burdensome endeavour for many. Over the ensuing months, what began as murmurs of discontent evolved into a full-fledged protest movement, peaking in September 2015 with widespread demonstrations that paralysed urban centres and forced the government to retract the VAT on September 14 [3]. On its face, the "No VAT on Education" movement might be interpreted as a conventional economic protest: students mobilising against a measure that threatened to intensify the already considerable costs of private education, thereby risking the exclusion of middle-class and aspiring lower-income families. Yet, a more rigorous analysis reveals dimensions beyond material concerns, encompassing cultural, symbolic, and

political significance that necessitate a comprehensive theoretical framework to elucidate fully.

Conventional theories of social movements, notably Marxism and resource mobilization, provide critical yet partial frameworks for interpreting the 2015 protests. Marxism situates collective action within the dynamics of class antagonism, foregrounding the contest between labour and capital over material resources. In contrast, resource mobilization theory highlights the calculated use of organisational resources – such as leadership, financial support, and social networks – to secure defined objectives. These perspectives shed light on the concrete stakes of the VAT policy: annual fees at private universities, ranging from $2,000 to $10,000, far exceed those at public institutions, which accommodate just 50,000 students against the 300,000 enrolled privately [4]. The proposed VAT, potentially adding hundreds of dollars per student, intensified pressures in a nation where per capita income stood at $1,900 [5], and youth unemployment skyrocketed. However, these approaches fall short of capturing the protests' deeper currents: the fervent appeals to rights and dignity, the symbolic interruption of urban routines, and the insistent call for inclusion in governance processes. This multifaceted unrest points to the necessity of a theoretical lens that engages with identity, moral commitments, and opposition to entrenched systemic authority.

The New Social Movement (NSM) theory, articulated in the late 20th century by thinkers such as Alain Touraine, Alberto Melucci, and Jürgen Habermas, emerged to account for activism within post-industrial and transitional societies. Departing from traditional emphases on economic redistribution, NSM theory foregrounds the construction of identity, the pursuit of post-material values – autonomy, justice, and democratic inclusion – and the cultural resistance to hegemonic forces wielded by state or market actors. This paper contends that the 2015 "No VAT on Education" movement aligns with NSM characteristics, functioning not merely as a reaction to a tax policy but as a profound critique of neoliberal governance, a reassertion of student identity, and a demand for agency within Bangladesh's increasingly centralised political system under Sheikh Hasina's prolonged rule since 2009. The movement's roots in economic policy belie its broader aspirations, positioning it as a transformative moment in Bangladesh's social and political landscape.

Bangladesh's socio-political context provides fertile ground for this analysis. Since achieving independence in 1971 through a war fueled by student activism, the nation has witnessed its youth as pivotal agents of change. The Language Movement of 1952 enshrined Bengali identity against Pakistani domination, the 1969 uprising accelerated liberation, and the 1990 protests toppled General Ershad's military regime, restoring democracy. These movements blended material demands – linguistic access, economic autonomy, and political rights – with ideological visions of nationalism and justice, prefiguring NSM traits. By 2015, however, Bangladesh had entered a new era. Under Hasina's Awami League, economic growth averaged 6–7% annually, earning accolades as an emerging "Asian Tiger", yet this prosperity coincided with democratic erosion: electoral irregularities, opposition suppression, and centralised control. Neoliberal reforms reshaped education, with private universities exploding from a handful in the 1990s to over 80 by 2015, serving a burgeoning middle class and urban youth. This privatization expanded access but introduced market logic, clashing with cultural

expectations of education as a public good rooted in the liberation struggle. The VAT proposal crystallised this tension, igniting grievances that extended beyond affordability to encompass rights, dignity, and societal purpose.

This paper embarks on a threefold exploration. It first seeks to unpack the New Social Movement (NSM) theory, articulating its pertinence to the 2015 protests in Bangladesh and grounding it within the specificities of that moment. The analysis then turns to interpreting the movement through this lens, interlacing historical trajectories, rich accounts of the protests themselves, and insights drawn from primary voices to construct a textured narrative. Finally, it engages in a critical appraisal of the NSM theory's interpretive capacity, weighing its merits against other theoretical perspectives and probing its limits within the complexities of a postcolonial, developing society. Drawing together secondary scholarship on neoliberal currents in Bangladesh's educational landscape, historical reconstructions, and original sources that echo the movement's pulse, this study offers a layered synthesis. By reframing the protests as an NSM, this study contributes to understanding contemporary activism in the Global South, where material and post-material struggles intersect. In a country where education is a lifeline for youth facing unemployment and inequality, the VAT symbolized state indifference to their aspirations. Through the NSM theory, the 2015 movement emerges as a bridge between Bangladesh's activist past and its neoliberal present, raising questions about youth agency in a society at a crossroads. This reinterpretation challenges us to look beyond economics to the cultural and political currents shaping modern resistance.

## Conceptual Framework

The New Social Movement theory emerged in the 1970s and 1980s as a response to the evolving nature of activism in post-industrial societies, where traditional class-based conflicts – central to Marxist analyses – began to give way to struggles over culture, identity, and symbolic meaning. Unlike classical frameworks that prioritise economic redistribution or organisational logistics, the NSM theory offers a lens attuned to the complexities of modern social dynamics, making it particularly apt for analysing movements like the 2015 "No VAT on Education" protests in Bangladesh, which blend material triggers with broader societal aspirations.

Alain Touraine [6] pioneered the NSM theory, arguing that contemporary movements contest "historicity" – the capacity to define and shape societal meanings and self-determination. In post-industrial contexts, Touraine asserts, conflicts shift from the economic sphere (e.g. wages and workplaces) to the cultural domain, where actors challenge systemic control over personal and collective life. He distinguishes NSMs from older labour movements by their focus on autonomy and symbolic production rather than purely material gains, framing them as struggles over who controls the narrative of societal progress. For Touraine, NSMs are not about seizing the means of production but about redefining the ends of social existence – a perspective that resonates with the 2015 protests' resistance to education's commodification and their assertion of education as a right.

Alberto Melucci [7] expanded this foundation by conceptualising collective identity as a dynamic process rather than a fixed attribute. For Melucci, movements

are “laboratories of experience”, where participants negotiate shared meanings through collective action, often in opposition to dominant ideologies or power structures. This process becomes both a means and an end, as actors redefine themselves through their resistance – a dynamic evident in how Bangladesh’s students transformed from fee-paying individuals into a cohesive force advocating for educational justice. Melucci’s emphasis on the submerged networks of everyday life – where movements incubate before erupting – further illuminates the grassroots momentum of the 2015 protests, which lacked formal leadership yet achieved rapid escalation.

Jürgen Habermas [8] complements these insights with his theory of the “lifeworld” – the realm of culture, identity, and interpersonal communication – which he argues is increasingly "colonized" by systemic forces like the state and market. NSMs, in Habermas’s view, emerge to defend the lifeworld against such encroachments, resisting the imposition of bureaucratic or economic logic into spheres of human experience. This framework aligns with the 2015 movement’s rejection of neoliberal policies that subordinated education to market imperatives, positioning students as guardians of a cultural domain under threat. Habermas’s focus on communicative action – where resistance fosters dialogue and solidarity – also mirrors the protests’ use of social media to amplify their cause.

The collective insights of these theorists illuminate several core attributes that distinguish NSMs. A process of identity formation emerges, through which movements forge cohesive collective identities, binding together a multiplicity of participants beyond their individual discontents and cultivating a profound sense of solidarity rooted in joint struggle. This dynamic is both enacted and transformative, evident in how students recast themselves from mere consumers within an educational market to active agents of resistance. The embrace of post-material values, inspired by Ronald Inglehart’s 1977 exploration of post-materialism, shifts the focus toward ideals such as autonomy, justice, and democratic engagement, eclipsing a singular concern with economic subsistence [9]. Inglehart’s analysis posits that such priorities take root among educated youth, even within economies in transition, a pattern that finds resonance among Bangladesh’s student activists. Cultural contestation also comes to the fore, as these movements confront entrenched norms and ideologies through symbolic gestures, seeking not just to capture institutional authority but to reconfigure the very values that define society – an impulse reflected in the 2015 protests’ disruption of urban rhythms to elevate education above commercial imperatives. Finally, a decentralised mode of organisation prevails, eschewing the rigid frameworks of conventional labour unions or political entities in favour of adaptable, networked configurations that draw strength from grassroots vitality, a characteristic mirrored in the fluid, leaderless orchestration of the protests through social media and campus connections.

The NSM theory, while compelling, does not escape scrutiny. Claus Offe contends that the theory places undue weight on cultural facets, potentially sidelining the enduring salience of material realities [10] – a point that carries particular resonance in a developing context like Bangladesh, where economic subsistence remains a daily struggle for many. Meanwhile, Craig Calhoun [11] challenges the theory’s claim to originality, observing that identity-driven mobilisations – such as religious or nationalist surges – stretch back well before the

post-industrial era, implying a thread of continuity rather than a sharp rupture from past activism. In Bangladesh, the Language Movement of 1952 exemplifies such continuity, blending material and cultural goals. These critiques highlight the need for contextual adaptation when applying the NSM theory to a postcolonial, neoliberal setting, where material and post-material elements are entwined.

For the 2015 movement, the NSM theory provides a robust framework to unpack dimensions overlooked by economic reductionism. The VAT's material impact – raising tuition costs and threatening access – was undeniable, yet students' rhetoric (e.g. "Education is not a commodity", "We demand our rights") and tactics (e.g. road blockades disrupting commerce) [12] suggest broader aspirations: resisting neoliberal commodification, asserting agency, and redefining education's societal role. This framework bridges the movement's immediate trigger with its symbolic and cultural stakes, offering a lens to explore how students positioned themselves as both victims of and resistors to systemic power. In Bangladesh, where neoliberal reforms intersect with postcolonial legacies and authoritarian governance, the NSM theory's flexibility allows it to illuminate the interplay of material and post-material struggles. Applying the NSM theory to a developing nation requires nuance. Bangladesh's economic constraints – low income, high unemployment – might temper post-material claims, yet the protests' emphasis on rights and dignity aligns with Inglehart's observation that post-material values can emerge among educated youth in transitional contexts. The movement's hybrid nature – material grievances fueling symbolic resistance – suggests the NSM theory's adaptability, guiding this analysis with precision and depth while acknowledging the need for balance with material perspectives.

## Historical Context: Student Movement in Bangladesh

Bangladesh's history of student activism provides a critical lens to understand the contemporary movement, revealing a deep-rooted tradition of youth-led resistance that blends material demands with ideological aspirations. This legacy situates the 2015 movement within a continuum of activism while underscoring their adaptation to a modern, neoliberal era marked by globalisation, privatisation, and state centralisation.

The Language Movement of 1952 [13] stands as the foundational moment of student power in Bangladesh, then East Pakistan under Pakistani rule. Students from Dhaka University protested the imposition of Urdu as the sole national language – a policy that marginalised Bengali speakers, who comprised over 50% of Pakistan's population, and restricted their access to education, employment, and political participation. On February 21, 1952, police opened fire on demonstrators, killing several students, and sparking a nationwide uprising. This event, now commemorated as the International Mother Language Day, fused material grievances (linguistic access to jobs and education) with cultural identity (Bengali nationalism), establishing students as moral and political vanguards [14]. The movement's success in securing Bengali's status as a state language in 1956 laid the groundwork for Bangladesh's independence struggle, demonstrating students' capacity to shape national destiny through sacrifice and solidarity [14].

The 1969 mass uprising built on this foundation, with students again at the forefront. Facing economic exploitation – East Pakistan contributed 60% of Pakistan's exports yet received only 25% of imports [15] – and political repression

under Ayub Khan's martial law, students organised strikes, rallies, and clashes with authorities [16]. The Six-Point Movement, led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and supported by students, demanded regional autonomy, escalating into a broader rebellion that eroded military control in East Pakistan. This activism culminated in the 1971 Liberation War, during which students played critical roles as organisers, fighters, and propagandists – many joining the Mukti Bahini (freedom fighters) – helping secure Bangladesh's independence in December 1971 after nine months of brutal conflict. The war's toll – millions dead, displaced, or traumatized – underscored students' willingness to risk everything for collective goals, blending material demands (economic equity) with ideological visions (national sovereignty).

Post-independence, the 1990 protests against General Ershad's military regime reaffirmed this legacy [17]. Ershad, who seized power in a 1982 coup, ruled through repression and rigged elections, prompting students from Dhaka and other universities to lead nationwide demonstrations. From October to December 1990, they endured arrests, baton charges, and shootings – culminating in Ershad's resignation on December 6, restoring democratic governance. This movement combined material stakes (economic hardship under military rule) with ideological goals (democratic restoration), echoing earlier struggles while showcasing students' enduring role as agents of change.

These historical movements share traits with NSMs – identity formation, symbolic resistance, challenges to hegemonic power – yet were anchored in national or class-based objectives: linguistic sovereignty in 1952, economic and political autonomy in 1969, and democratic legitimacy in 1990. Each blended tangible demands with broader visions, prefiguring the hybrid nature of later activism. By 2015, Bangladesh's socio-economic and political landscape had transformed significantly. Under Sheikh Hasina's Awami League, the nation achieved consistent economic growth, averaging 6–7% annually, earning accolades as an emerging "Asian Tiger" [18]. Yet prosperity masked democratic erosion: electoral irregularities, suppression of opposition parties, and centralised control over state institutions [19]. Neoliberal reforms reshaped education, with public universities – state-subsidised but capped at 50,000 students – contrasting sharply with a burgeoning private sector. By 2015, over 80 private universities enrolled more than 300,000 students, driven by demand from an expanding middle class and urban youth seeking professional qualifications [4].

This privatisation broadened access but introduced market logic, with tuition fees ranging from $2,000 to $10,000 annually [4] – exorbitant in a country with a per capita income of $1,900 [5]. Education, once a public good tied to national development and the ideals of 1971, increasingly resembled a commodity, creating a cultural dissonance. Faculty quality varied, with many private institutions relying on part-time instructors, and infrastructure lagged behind rising fees, fueling student discontent. The job market compounded these tensions: youth unemployment exceeded 10% [20], and graduates faced underemployment, diminishing education's promised returns. The VAT proposal emerged against this backdrop, announced on June 4, 2015, as a revenue measure targeting private universities. Initially set at 10% and later reduced to 7.5%, the tax threatened to add $150–$750 annually to fees, intensifying financial pressures and symbolising neoliberal overreach.

Unlike earlier movements tied to nationalism or democracy, the 2015 protests reflect a globalised youth confronting market-driven policies in a semi-authoritarian state. Their decentralised organisation – lacking formal party affiliation, cultural critique of commodification, and emphasis on rights distinguish them as an NSM-style uprising, rooted in yet diverging from Bangladesh's activist tradition. Students inherited a legacy of agency – forged through bloodshed in 1952, resilience in 1969, and triumph in 1990 – but adapted it to a neoliberal era where education's privatisation clashed with societal values. The VAT became a flashpoint not just for economic survival but for a broader struggle over meaning, identity, and purpose, setting the stage for an NSM analysis that bridges Bangladesh's past with its contemporary challenges.

## The 2015 "No VAT on Education" Movement: An Overview

The movement unfolded over three months, triggered by the Awami League government's June 4, 2015, budget proposal to impose a 10% VAT on private university tuition fees, later reduced to 7.5% amid the initial pushback from educators and students. What began as localised campus demonstrations escalated into a nationwide uprising, forcing the government to retract the policy on September 14, 2015.

The budget announcement sparked immediate discontent among private university students. Early protests at campuses like East West University (EWU), North South University (NSU), and BRAC University featured rallies, petitions, and press conferences. The government responded with assurances of dialogue, temporarily quelling unrest, though scepticism lingered. As the academic year began in July–August, renewed protests emerged. Students formed loosely coordinated efforts across campuses. Demonstrations included sit-ins and small marches, with chants like "No tax on knowledge" echoing through Dhaka's streets. The government maintained the VAT would proceed, citing fiscal necessity, while students warned of escalation. The turning point came when police attacked EWU protesters with tear gas and rubber bullets, injuring over 20 students after a rally escalated into a confrontation [21]. This brutality, widely shared via social media, galvanised outrage nationwide, transforming a policy dispute into a broader struggle [22]. Mass protests erupted, with road blockades paralysing Dhaka, Chittagong, and other cities. Students formed human chains stretching kilometres, chanted "No VAT, no surrender", and trended #NoVatOnEducation online, with posts like "Education is our right, not your cash cow" amassing thousands of shares [22]. Clashes with police intensified, with baton charges and arrests reported, yet students persisted, occupying key intersections of the city. Facing unrelenting pressure – hundreds of thousands mobilised, urban life disrupted – the government withdrew the VAT, with Finance Minister AMA Muhith citing "student sentiment" in a rare policy reversal [3].

The movement's tactics were multifaceted, blending physical disruption with digital amplification. Road blockades halted commerce, signalling education's societal priority over economic routine – on September 11, Dhaka's traffic stood still for hours [12]. Sit-ins occupied university gates, while marches converged on government offices, with banners reading "Stop selling our future". Social media – particularly Facebook and Twitter – mobilised support beyond campuses [23]. The movement's decentralised nature – lacking a single leader – enabled rapid

escalation and adaptability[1], as impromptu rallies sprang up across dozens of campuses. Economically, the VAT's stakes were stark. Private university fees, already 10–20 times higher than public ones, burdened middle-class families, with a 7.5% tax adding $150–$750 annually – significant against a $1,900 per capita income. In a job market where youth unemployment stood almost at 11%, this threatened exclusion, particularly for students from lower-middle-income backgrounds aspiring to professional careers. Yet, the movement's rhetoric transcended costs. Slogans like "Education for all, not the elite" and "We're not here for discounts, we're here for justice"[2] – framed the VAT not only as an assault on rights and dignity but also as encapsulating a critique of neoliberal commodification.

Police violence catalysed escalation, echoing Bangladesh's history of state repression fueling resistance – like the 1952 killings or 1969 clashes. Many accounts describe baton charges scattering crowds, only for students to regroup: "Tear gas stung, but our resolve grew", a BRAC University protester recalls[3]. Arrests numbered in the dozens, yet solidarity deepened, with Facebook posts rallying: "They hit us, we rise – #NoVatOnEducation". This shift from economic negotiation to broader defiance marks the movement as distinct from earlier, party-driven struggles, aligning it with NSM characteristics of spontaneity, cultural resistance, and collective agency. The movement's diversity – urban students from elite and mid-tier universities united – further underscores its reach. While EWU, NSU, and BRAC led, smaller institutions like Stamford and Daffodil joined, reflecting a shared stake in education's future. This coalition, forged in the streets and online, defied stereotypes of private university students as apathetic or privileged, setting the stage for an NSM analysis of their transformative potential.

## Reimagining the 2015 No VAT Movement Through an NSM Prism

The 2015 movement presents a sociological puzzle that challenges conventional interpretations of social movement. At first glance, the movement appears rooted in economic self-interest – a reaction to a policy threatening to inflate already steep tuition costs in a nation where education is a fragile lifeline to social mobility. Yet, to confine this episode to a materialist frame risks obscuring its deeper currents, which ripple through questions of identity, values, and cultural meaning. The economic pressure became a catalyst for a broader process of self-definition, as students shed their fragmented identities as fee-payers to coalesce into a collective force. Melucci's (1989) insight into identity as a relational endeavour proves instructive here: rather than inheriting a pre-existing class position, these students crafted a shared narrative through their resistance to the VAT, positioning themselves as defenders of a societal good against neoliberal encroachment. Touraine's (1981) notion of historicity – the contest over who

[1] In an interview (taken on 13th December 2024 at Shahbag), a student named Aniruddha (then a student of EWU) told me, "In this increasingly authoritarian political climate, we have seen before that this government has been able to easily manipulate or suppress any movement by identifying the leader or leaders. One of the strengths of this movement was its leaderlessness or horizontal structure of the movement."

[2] A student of NSU, who wanted to remain anonymous, told me this during an interview (taken on 8th January 2025 at Basundhara).

[3] From an interview of a BRAC University student who wanted to remain anonymous (interview taken on 13th January 2025 at Badda).

shapes societal trajectories – further frames this shift, as students asserted agency over education's meaning in a polity increasingly governed by market logic. The forging of this collective subject was neither automatic nor uniform, unfolding through the crucible of public action and digital solidarity. Rallies erupted across campuses – North South University, East West University, BRAC University – and spilled into Dhaka's streets, where human chains linked students from elite and mid-tier institutions alike. A voice from Southeast University declares: "The VAT didn't spare the rich or the poor – it bound us together"[1]. Online, the hashtag #NoVatOnEducation became a virtual thread, weaving a tapestry of unity as posts proclaimed a shared stake in the struggle. This process diverged from Bangladesh's earlier student mobilisations, which rallied around linguistic or national causes; instead, it reflected a modern battle against the commodification of a cherished domain. Symbolic acts – chants like "Education is ours, not yours" – crystallised this emerging identity, offering a stark contrast to the hierarchical affiliations of past movements and aligning with NSM's emphasis on organic, action-driven cohesion.

What distinguishes this collective identity is its resonance with Bangladesh's historical ethos, reimagined for a neoliberal age. Education has long been a pillar of national aspiration, a legacy of the 1971 liberation struggle when it symbolised collective progress. The 2015 students tapped into this heritage, not to fight colonial or authoritarian foes, but to resist a subtler erosion: the transformation of learning into a market transaction. A student reflection notes: "We stand where our forebears did, guarding what they won – not with guns, but with our voices"[2]. This melding of historical weight with contemporary critique underscores the NSM claim that identity emerges as a struggle over societal meaning, positioning students as both inheritors and innovators of a cultural tradition. Globally, this echoes the 2010 UK student protests [24], where a unified "student generation" resisted fee hikes, though Bangladesh's postcolonial context adds a layer of historical depth absent in Western parallels.

Beyond the immediate economic stakes, the 2015 uprising reveals a pursuit of values that extend past material relief, a hallmark of NSM dynamics. Inglehart's (1977) post-materialism thesis suggests that educated cohorts, even in transitional economies, increasingly prioritise autonomy, justice, and participation over survival needs. Habermas's (1984) concept of the lifeworld – the cultural sphere threatened by systemic rationalisation – further illuminates this shift, as students sought to shield education from market intrusion. The students' rhetoric soared beyond affordability, embracing a vision of education as an inalienable right. Their testimony could emphasise a fight for dignity over discounts. This elevation of principle over pragmatism drew strength from constitutional moorings – Article 17 guarantees education as a fundamental entitlement [25] – casting the VAT as a moral affront rather than a mere fiscal burden. Students' willingness to face physical peril reinforces this post-material turn. When police batons rained down during street blockades, they held their ground. This sacrifice aligns with Inglehart's contention that post-material values drive action beyond economic

[1] A former student who wanted to remain anonymous told me this in an interview (Interview taken on 7th January 2025 at Mohakhali).

[2] A former NSU student who wanted to remain anonymous (Interview taken on 2nd February 2025 at Basundhara).

necessity, distinguishing the uprising from traditional resource-based protests like wage disputes.

Yet, this pursuit of post-material ideals navigated a landscape of material hardship, a complexity that tests the NSM theory's applicability in the Global South. For some, the hike in tuition was not an abstract figure but a semester's lifeline, a reality that could not be ignored. Their response, however, framed the tax as a symptom of a larger malaise – neoliberal governance eroding societal goods. Their demand – "End the tax, end its logic" – reflects a dual commitment to immediate relief and systemic change. This interplay suggests that post-materialism, as Inglehart observes, can emerge unevenly, here among youth with educational exposure yet economic fragility, adapting the NSM theory to Bangladesh's socio-economic contours. Globally, this mirrors Spain's 15-M movement [26], where youth sought dignity amid austerity, though Bangladesh's semi-authoritarian setting amplified the radicalism of their value-driven stand. The cultural dimensions of the movement further cemented its NSM character, as students contested the redefinition of education's societal role. In Bangladesh, education's historical status as a public good – forged in the crucible of 1971 – clashed with its neoliberal recasting as a commodity. The proliferation of private universities, numbering over 80 by 2015, had already tilted this balance, prioritising profit over pedagogy. The VAT crystallised this shift, prompting students to reclaim education's cultural primacy against market rationalisation. Their resistance took a vivid form in the streets and squares of Dhaka. Blockades brought the city to a standstill, human chains and sit-ins punctuated the message proclaiming "Education over economics", a direct challenge to neoliberal hegemony. These acts of disruption were not mere tactics but symbolic assertions, aligning with Touraine's vision of NSMs as struggles over meaning rather than power. They echoed Habermas's call to defend cultural spheres, reasserting education as a societal cornerstone rather than a revenue stream.

This contestation bridges Bangladesh's past and present, drawing on a legacy of cultural defence. The 1952 Language Movement fought for education in Bengali, a cultural stand against external imposition; the 2015 uprising fought for education's integrity against internal marketisation. A student's conviction draws this thread: "Our elders secured our tongue; we secure our future"[1]. This historical dialogue positions students as cultural stewards, resisting neoliberal erosion with a nod to their forebears' sacrifices. Globally, this finds kinship with Mexico's #YoSoy132 [27], which challenged media monopolies as cultural threats, though Bangladesh's repressive context – where dissent invites swift retaliation – lends the 2015 effort a sharper edge. The organisational dynamics of the movement enhance its NSM profile, revealing a movement that thrived on fluidity rather than fixed structures. The movement's energy sprang from grassroots spontaneity. This was a stark departure from the party-led campaigns of 1969 or 1990. The movement's spread – from EWU's initial clash on September 9 to dozens of campuses within days – testifies to this organic momentum, driven by students' initiative rather than top-down directives. Digital platforms fueled this fluidity, transforming the uprising into a networked phenomenon. Facebook livestreams of police clashes and Twitter's #NoVatOnEducation hashtag turned isolated acts into a collective surge.

[1] A student of Daffodil University who wanted to remain anonymous (interview taken on 4th January 2025 at Uttara).

This technological backbone, absent in earlier mobilisations, mirrors NSM's reliance on diffuse networks, enabling rapid escalation and broad reach. Repression – tear gas, arrests numbering in the dozens – tested this structure, yet its lack of a central figure confounded state efforts to suppress it.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The "No VAT on Education" movement was more than a policy protest – it was a critique of Bangladesh's neoliberal trajectory under Hasina. Economic growth masked democratic deficits: rigged elections, opposition arrests, and centralised control. The education sector exemplified this paradox: privatisation expanded access but commodified learning, alienating youth facing unemployment. The VAT's withdrawal was a tactical victory, but its legacy lies in its symbolic impact. By asserting agency, students prefigured later uprisings – 2018's quota reform movement, 2024's July Uprising – suggesting a growing NSM-style consciousness. A student asserts: "We stopped VAT, but we started something bigger – our voice matters now"[1]. This shift challenges a regime reliant on economic legitimacy over democratic consent. The protests exposed neoliberalism's limits – growth without equity or participation – resonating with youth disillusioned by unfulfilled promises. This movement echoes global NSMs like South Africa's #FeesMustFall, where students contested market-driven education, or Chile's 2011 protests against privatisation. In Bangladesh, this consciousness hints at systemic change, as youth reject top-down governance for collective agency. The movement's legacy extends culturally. By framing education as a right, students revived 1971's ethos – education as nation-building – against neoliberal erosion. This cultural reclamation, seen in chants like "Education for all, not the elite", positions them as custodians of Bangladesh's founding ideals, bridging past and present. The NSM theory enriches the analysis of the 2015 protests, capturing their cultural and identity-based dimensions. It reveals how students transcended economic grievances to contest neoliberal power, aligning with global trends. The movement shares NSM traits but is shaped by Bangladesh's postcolonial, authoritarian context – unlike Chile's democratic setting. This necessitates adaptation, as material survival coexists with post-material goals. The protests' success highlights NSM efficacy, yet their limits suggest further research into a material–post-material interplay in developing nations, refining theory for hybrid settings. It extends Bangladesh's student movement tradition into a neoliberal age, offering insights into youth resistance in the Global South. By challenging commodification and asserting agency, students secured a policy reversal and signalled a shift toward activism prioritising meaning and justice, with lasting implications for Bangladesh's political future and the NSM theory's postcolonial application.

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