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# Comparative digital protest cultures in South Africa and Tamil Nadu: #feesmustfall, #Jallikattu, and Abahlali baseMjondolo (AbM) – a case of surveillance and diasporic potential

This paper explores three protest movements differing in scale and scope in two regions in the world. #feesmustfall (2015–2016) was a social media movement in South Africa to protest against prohibitive hikes in university fees. #Jallikattu (2017) was a social media movement in Tamil Nadu (India) to lift a ban imposed by the Supreme Court of India against an ancient cultural sport with bulls. Abahlali baseMjondolo (AbM) is a South African social media movement to raise issues related to shack dwellers. While there is literature focusing on these movements individually (Bosch 2016, Kalaiyarasan 2017, Mdlalose 2014), a comparative approach offers some alternate insights into how state power manifests in the age of digital capitalism. Habermas (1987, 1989) theorised the transformation of the public sphere and key to understanding how these publics contest existing power structures is his explication of authentic communicative action. Using Fuchs's (2016) and Zuboff's (2019) analyses of social media activism, we examine police brutality



and surveillance in these three movements. The classical model of diaspora (Harutyunyan 2012) is introduced to show how it manifests in two of the protest movements, and contemporary notions of diaspora (Grossman 2019: 1265) are explored to see what they could offer to diverse protest cultures.

**Keywords:** Abahlali baseMjondolo (abm), #feesmustfall, #jallikattu, diaspora, digital protest culture

## Introduction

The digital age has afforded protest movements the opportunity to organise and speak back to power. Several studies (Fuchs 2016, Bosch 2016, Castells 2012) have demonstrated how various contemporary social movements can harness the potential of social media. This study offers a unique insight into the manifestation of state power in the age of digital capitalism, by investigating three protest movements from two different geographies, which used social media platforms to create awareness and grow. In South Africa, #feesmustfall (2015–16) contested the prohibitive hikes in university fees while Abahlali baseMjondolo (AbM) has fought for shack dwellers' right to land, houses and dignity. In India, the #jallikattu was a protest movement against a ban by the Supreme Court of India of a 2 000-year-old traditional sport with bulls in Tamil Nadu.

## Comparing South Africa and India

The key factor precipitating the comparison between South Africa and India is the many similarities between these two nations. One of the authors lives in India, offering additional access. Both India and South Africa were previously colonised by the British (Oliver and Oliver 2017: 1, Sandhu 2014: 1), and continue to face the repercussions of colonisation (Young 2012: 19). The challenges of corruption have become almost part of the social fabric of India and South Africa (Chatterjee and Roychoudhury 2013, Raghavan 2013, Pillay 2004). Both countries gained their independence after their struggle against colonial oppression and apartheid respectively. Large numbers of people remain poor, and face social injustice (Ojha 2016: 87, Mulinge and Lesetedi 1998: 15). The diverse natural resources of both countries are exploited by powerful transnational capitalists (Hansen et al. 2015, Taneja et al. 2023). Both had long-standing systems of social exclusion. In South Africa, racism was institutionalised via apartheid, the effects of which linger post-1994 (Satgar 2019: 2). South Africa has a deep history of social movements created to oppose apartheid. For instance, in 1976 high school students organised against the introduction of Afrikaans as a language of instruction in school. The images of apartheid police who indiscriminately shot at young students shocked the whole

world.<sup>1</sup> To understand the present it is important to understand these historical events. In India, the caste system existed prior to colonialism, however, caste and coloniality bind to maintain systems of social exclusion (Veemaraja 2015).

The idea of merging the studies on Abahlali baseMjondolo, the #feesmustfall movement, and the #Jallikattu movement stemmed from the similar behaviour of the police and their brutal actions of surveillance of people to prevent them from revolting against the systems of power marginalising them. This article attempts to respond hopefully to these repressive tendencies by invoking diaspora theory as a means of mobilising national and perhaps transnational unity.

This research forms part of larger studies, which received ethical clearance and followed ethical protocols for qualitative data collection, hence only pseudonyms are used. Primary data was collected from a range of online sites based in South Africa and India such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, and from interviews.

## Abahlali baseMjondolo (AbM)

Abahlali baseMjondolo (AbM) (shack dwellers) is a social movement based in Durban, South Africa, created in 2005. According to AbM (2006), the movement is the largest organisation of the militant poor in post-apartheid South Africa with tens of thousands of people from more than 30 settlements. The movement, rooted in civil society, is often at loggerheads with authorities because of its protest culture and the way it exposes government inaction in resolving issues of land. The lack of access to land remains a thorny subject in South Africa. AbM gained popularity by blocking Kennedy Road in March 2005 while protesting against the sale of nearby land that had been promised for housing for informal settlement dwellers (Abahlali baseMjondolo 2006). The movement is engaged in activism and protest round land occupation, social media activism and a variety of media campaigns.

## #feesmustfall movement

The #feesmustfall movement was a student-led movement that emerged in 2015. The movement was created in response to the steep hike in university fees and the untransformed university curriculum in South Africa. It started at the University of Witwatersrand and soon spread to several other South African

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1 Sam Nzima captured the protest on 16 June 1976 in Soweto. The image Nzima captured of Hector Pieterse came to represent the horrific experience of pupils protesting against the use of Afrikaans as the medium of instruction. See Smillie 2021.

universities with the help of Twitter. According to Respondent 1<sup>2</sup>, the movement gained in popularity because it had started off at one of the top tier universities, however the fight for free education and less fees had always been a cause that students had fought for in the other universities, especially the former black universities of South Africa (Respondent 1 2020). Also, the protest followed the #RhodesMustFall movement, which called for the removal of the statue of John Cecil Rhodes from the University of Cape Town campus.

The students engaged in activism including protests, occupying university buildings, social media activism and other media campaigns. In 2015 #feesmustfall became one of the most trending topics on Twitter (TechCentral 2015). Due to its popularity, the movement received a lot of sympathy from various sectors, and as a result, the government acceded to their demand for a zero percent increase in university fees. The fight against increasing fees and the end of the movement after there were no fee hikes in 2016 diluted the issue of free education in South Africa, which had been the demand of the majority of the students who fought in the movement (Respondents 2 and 3 2020).

## #Jallikattu Protests

#Jallikattu protests (2017) were started by a small group of students at the Marina Beach in Chennai (8 January 2017) against the Supreme Court of India's ban of "Jallikattu" a 2000-year-old cultural sport with bulls. This ruling was made in favour of PETA's<sup>3</sup> petition citing cruelty to animals in the Jallikattu sport (Rajagopal 2016). The protests grew larger each day with students all over Tamil Nadu raising their voice against the ban and their families and the citizenry supporting their call. The protests spread rapidly via social media such as Facebook and Twitter, and the influence of these in Tamil Nadu and the Tamil diaspora around the globe.<sup>4</sup> Even though the protest movement was against the ban of the Jallikattu sport, it became an umbrella protest movement, which allowed Tamils to express their accumulated grievances against the Union Government of India (Kalaiyaran 2017: 10).

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2 Respondents 1 - 6 were interviewed as part of two larger studies done at UKZN, where ethical clearance was received.

3 PETA: People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals

4 The protest started amid a chaotic political situation in Tamil Nadu. A Tamil version of the game of thrones took place among the party members and allies of the ADMK party after the suspicious death of party leader and then chief minister of Tamil Nadu J Jayalalithaa.

## Instrumental and cooperative rationality

The theoretical starting point for this paper is Habermas's (1989) notion of the public sphere. Habermas theorised the need for transforming the bourgeois public sphere he identified from 18th century England, which lay somewhere between the private realm and the sphere of public authority (Habermas 1989: 30). Habermas argued for expanding the bourgeois public sphere so that it could be accessible to all, to form public opinion. Critical public debate and consensus arising out of it was key to relative political self-determination by publics with common goals. Habermas built on Mead's theory of communication, indicating that a clearer distinction was needed "between language as a medium for reaching understanding and language as a medium for coordinating action" (Habermas 1987: 23). He thus theorised communicative action to address the means to reaching consensus. We take Habermas's theory of communicative action as a normative goal (Habermas 1987: 304), and use contemporary scholars such as Fuchs, Zuboff, Doyle and Mosco to frame our analysis of digital protest culture in South Africa and India. Media theory, specifically political economic approaches, are also significant in reviewing digital protest culture and its surveillance. Fuchs (2016: 177) usefully delineates four ways in which labour and communication<sup>5</sup> may be related, showing how Habermas, who insisted on a strict separation of communication and labour, was dualistic in his approach. The two ways in which human beings relate to the world is through labour, which is instrumental, and communication, which is towards reaching understanding. In his theory of communicative action, Habermas distinguished between purposive action, which is instrumental and strategic, aimed at success in the life world. Communicative action, on the other hand, is oriented towards understanding (Fuchs 2016: 187). In this way, the business of media is separated from authentic communicative action, which is based on consensus. Habermas described communicative action as follows:

I shall speak of communicative action whenever the actions of the agents involved are coordinated not through egocentric calculations of success but through acts of reaching understanding. In communicative action participants are not primarily oriented to their own individual successes; they pursue their individual goals under the condition that they can harmonize their plans of action on the basis of common situation definitions (Habermas quoted in Fuchs 2016: 186).

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5 Economic reductionism, cultural reductionism, dualism, and dialectic (Fuchs 2016: 178)

Habermas essentialised an authentic type of communication, which was 'non-dominative', aimed at consensus and understanding towards building a cohesive society. Authentic communication for him was inherently good, pure and fair. He does however, acknowledge that the business of media can disrupt the purity and fairness of authentic communication referring to it as

alienated media of communication that colonize, delinguistify, control, steer, dominate, replace and curtail authentic communicative action in the lifeworld ... they encode a purposive-rational attitude toward calculable amounts of value and make it possible to exert generalized, strategic influence on the decisions of other participants while bypassing processes of consensus-oriented communication" (Habermas quoted in Fuchs 2016: 187).

Fuchs highlights the conceptual split between labour and politics and the world of communication as problematic because communication is intrinsic to social relations. For our purpose, two critiques are important. Communication cannot be free from ideologies, which mobilise it to justify or validate social action. When labour is restricted to instrumental action, "theory is deprived of a vocabulary for conceptualising social activities that produce solidarity, common goods, etc." (Fuchs 2016: 188-9).

To that end, Fuchs extends Habermas's notions of authentic and alienated communicative practices by offering a useful distinction between rational communicative action that serves domination and rational communicative action that transcends domination. Instrumental rationality informs instrumental communication and is based on dominative social relations where one group exploits, controls, manipulates and excludes another. Cooperative rationality informs cooperative communication which is participatory, and aims at creating contexts which allow all social actors to benefit from resources and affords all the possibility to pursue a good life (Fuchs 2016: 201).

Instrumental and cooperative rationality may be applied to a media context. While there are many aspects to media analysis<sup>6</sup>, our focus is on political economy, which deals with ownership and control. Doyle (2002: 12) indicates that pluralism is a key marker for a nation's media. Pluralism refers to a multiplicity of voices in the public sphere. It is measured by the diversity of ownership of output (that is media messages) which must be autonomous actors contributing to the media landscape. It is also measured by diversity of content, which must exhibit differing political opinions and cultural representations. Pluralism and diversity in media is directly linked to constitutional rights, such as freedom of expression. Doyle (2002: 12) says,

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6 Such as representation, audiences and regulation.

'Political' pluralism is about the need, in the interests of democracy, for a range of political opinions and viewpoints to be represented in the media. Democracy would be threatened if any single voice, with the power to propagate a single political viewpoint, were to become too dominant. 'Cultural' pluralism is about the need for a variety of cultures, reflecting the diversity within society, to find expression in the media.

Pursuing a pluralistic and diverse media represents a cooperative rationality, while any repressive tendencies, which reduce diversity, may be seen as instrumental rationality in a media context. Diversity was easier to measure in the age of mass media, but in the digital age, it becomes complicated by powerful transnational corporate interests owning information pathways. Zuboff signals a shift in power from ownership of the means of production to "ownership of the means of behavioural modification" which she refers to as the "Big Other"; ominously, she states, "you are not the product; you are the abandoned carcass" (Zuboff 2019: 354).

## If money is the language of commodities<sup>7</sup>, surveillance has become its stabilising syntax

Zuboff introduces the idea of surveillance capitalism, which Duncan modifies as securitisation in the context of South Africa. Both Zuboff and Duncan illustrate how surveillance is offered and promoted to citizens as a means of protection and convenience. However, Zuboff argues that surveillance offers "solutions to institutions in the form of omniscience, control, and certainty. The idea here is not to heal instability – the corrosion of social trust and its broken bonds of reciprocity, dangerous extremes of inequality, regimes of exclusion – but rather to exploit the vulnerabilities produced by these conditions" (Zuboff 2019: 360). Duncan traces the move to less visible forms of policing post-Marikana, which led to intelligence-led policing:

Intelligence-led policing is meant to ensure more efficient uses of policing resources, and is closely related to predictive policing, which uses data analytics to predict likely occurrences of crime based on historic patterns (Bezuidenhout 2008). Intelligence-led policing relies on paid informants and surveillance techniques, including physical surveillance; surveillance of electronic signals, including communication signals (a form of intelligence that is known as SIGINT, or signals intelligence); and other forms of data-driven surveillance (Duncan 2021: 180-1).

7 "Marx (1867, 143) describes money as the 'language of commodities', quoted in Fuchs 2016: 188.

Duncan points out that the level of prosecutions arising from unlawful protests should lead to a similar proportion of convictions, but this is not the case. High numbers of arrests are matched with very low conviction rates.

During the #feesmustfall protests, SAPS opposed the granting of bail during investigations and tried to keep those arrested in jail for as long as possible. Organisers of protests are often targeted as they fall into the trap of visibility. The Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect<sup>8</sup> and the Socio-Economic Rights Institute of South Africa (SERI), two organisations that offer support, advice and in some cases representation for those wrongfully arrested, reported that police inflate and adjust charges depending on what would be most successful. When such organisations get involved, most of these cases are withdrawn (Duncan 2021: 188).

In addition, the State Security Agency (SSA) became involved as the narrative was shifted from public safety to threats to national security. It is interesting that SAPS over-performed here, generating more than double the number of targeted intelligence reports<sup>9</sup> (Duncan 2021: 183). This astounding number of intelligence reports was justified by the claim of increased threats to the authority of the state. Duncan observes “SAPS Crime Intelligence Division monitored community and student protests...and strategic intelligence products”, yet this had not translated into significant convictions in terms of state capture or organised crime (2021: 191). Duncan, drawing on the work of Alex Vitale (2017), shows that when police become co-opted into political management, it can lead to a loss of legitimacy. Apart from this, the over-policing and surveillance of protest movements erodes the potential for cooperative rationality and communication, which in turn erodes democratic potentiality (2011: 197-201).

Oyedemi defines protest as a form of communication, a tool for raising dissatisfaction with or opposition to ruling ideologies (2020: 8), and this form of communication may be the only way some marginalised citizens can raise their voices. When instrumental logic squeezes out cooperative communication, protest is an inevitability. Protest culture signals dissatisfaction, dissent and perhaps the declining legitimacy of governance. When government responds to protests using overt and covert<sup>10</sup> brutality, it is an early warning sign that the democratic formations within that nation state are brittle. Political policing serves only to reproduce status quo social relations, which could lead to greater racial and class inequalities.

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8 The Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect upholds the ‘Responsibility to Protect’ – known as R2P, a UN-based set of norms for collective action to aid people in danger if their governments are unable/unwilling to act.

9 “386 732 operational analysis reports were generated during the 2015/16 period” (Duncan 2021: 183).

10 Physical violence and surveillance.



## Political policing against the persistence of protest: South Africa and India

There has been extensive literature examining digital protest culture in South Africa and India, specifically related to #feesmustfall, Abahlali baseMjondolo and #Jallikattu, respectively. There are studies (Bosch 2016, Nel 2016, Olorunnisola and Martin 2013) which compare the European, American, and Arab perspectives of social movements with African perspectives. Significant to our paper is Munoriyarwa's (2022) account of the militarisation of digital surveillance in Zimbabwe, providing a regional account of a troubling trend in digital surveillance as a militarised tool against protest. Moja et al. (2015) describe protests stimulated by #feesmustfall. However, there is little in terms of comparative literature on protest culture, specifically between South Africa and India.

A review of global protests shows a general increase in protest culture (Voss and Williams 2009: 4), with movements showing similar motivations for protesting (land and water rights, service delivery, living wage, etc.). Braga (2019: 480-81) looked at class-based and popular struggles in Brazil, Portugal and South Africa, focusing on the Marikana massacre. The one South Africa/India comparison related to protests was by Shaheer, Carr and Insch (2023: 387-388), which examined Twitter calls for tourism boycotts due to animal rights violations in China, India, South Africa and Spain. This paper attempts to offer a comparison of protest movements in South Africa and India as a way of illustrating the shift of respective governments towards an instrumental rationality in responding to such protests.

The following list of digital protest movements (Hashtag activism or Hacktivism) indicates the growing disquiet of citizens across several parts of the world, following the Arab springs (Brouwer and Bartels 2015: 9). Given the timeline of these hactivisms, it could be inferred that they were inspired by #feesmustfall bringing student issues to the fore or by mobilising the tag line.

Students from the University of Nairobi in Kenya in 2015 protested against the hike in tuition fees and demanded a better learning environment. At Makerere University in Uganda, student uprisings arose against the new tuition fees policy. In Nigeria at the University of Lagos protests erupted due to poor campus infrastructure, and precipitated the death of a student as a result of a damaged power cable on the university campus. In the US, a #BlackOnCampus movement protested against the under-representation of Black students at universities in the USA. In Princeton University the #WilsonMustFall movement called for the removal of the name of Woodrow Wilson from the campus because of his racist tendencies and policies of segregation (Moja et al. 2015).

## #feesmustfall

#feesmustfall was largely online though the organisation of the protest was mostly offline. The protest actions included blockading gates, occupying university buildings and disrupting academic programmes. Although the movement was effective in highlighting the plight of students, the state response could be characterised as hostile. The state's hostility towards #feesmustfall was accelerated by the media reporting on the protest, which portrayed students as violent hooligans. The police dealt with the students harshly, including tear-gassing them, firing at them with rubber bullets, hitting the students, and arresting them. Respondent 1 (2020) claimed that all those students arrested along with him at UKZN were Black males. Respondents 1, 2 and 3 (2020) said male students had to patrol the female residences on UKZN campuses to defend female students against rape by the police. From the beginning of the protest, the students wanted police to be on their side because the struggle of #feesmustfall was a struggle of working-class parents who cannot afford university fees. But it is understandable that police take instruction from above.



Figure 1: This image demonstrates an act of conciliation by the student (Haffo 2016)

The state's hostile response toward the #feesmustfall protest was an attempt to prevent events similar to the Arab springs protest, which toppled dictatorships in North Africa. Duncan (2021) has also noted that the criticism emanating from the militarisation of police during the Marikana disaster has led to police increasing their intelligence-led policing. According to the Zondo Report into State Capture (2022), state intelligence was activated to deal with the threat of student uprisings. The commission also heard that some students were recruited by state intelligence to infiltrate the movement and cause divisions. However, in September 2022, senior police officers were arrested for defrauding the crime intelligence division of SAPS of R54,2 million. The officers had claimed they were victims of protesting #feesmustfall students in 2015 and 2016, and had complained of insufficient resources to adequately monitor the social media activities of students. The cost of the software (Daedalus) was vastly inflated and improperly procured (Koko 2022).

Seboka (2022) indicates that

the purpose of Daedalus was to encrypt voice calls made by management of the SAPS at the time when Phahlane was under investigation by IPID. He was being investigated for the 'Blue Lights' police tender and other irregular procurement that happened during his tenure. Daedalus made it impossible for investigators to get call records from cellphone providers. Daedalus was procured for the sole purpose of encrypting calls and wiping out cellular records and messages.

## #Jallikattu

The Marina beach was the central ground of the #Jallikattu protests; it is surrounded by fishing communities and some of the poorer communities of Chennai, India. The people from these communities supported the protests by joining in and also gave the student activists food and water during the protests. The protestors engaged with the police amicably by sharing their food and water with them, by clearing traffic in the area, and by cleaning up litter on the protest grounds. Several police even joined the protests at the Marina beach and other parts of Tamil Nadu, urging the government to withdraw the ban against the sport. On 23 January 2017, a bill was locally passed by the Tamil Nadu government as a temporary measure to legalise the sport again. The people were not happy with this and many of them continued their protests, demanding a permanent solution to their problem. Suddenly, the protests, peaceful for 15 days, were dubbed violent, and the police, claiming that anti-social elements had infiltrated the protests, started forcefully clearing the protestors.

The police violently charged at the protestors, raided and burnt a fish market at Nadukuppam,<sup>11</sup> tear-gassed the protest grounds and the nearby residences of the fishing communities, who then provided refuge to students under police attack. The nearby poor and marginalised communities were also attacked by the police. Men, women, children, without regard to age, were brutally thrashed by the police and several from these communities were falsely arrested. Those arrested were beaten up by the police for either supporting the movement, the protestors or for simply being present at the area of the protest (Respondents 4 and 5 2020).



**Figure 2:** Jallikattu protestors get into the water at Marina Beach to avoid removal and arrests by the police (Sudhir 2017)

The #Jallikattu protests in Tamil Nadu opened the door to other social movements there. These included the #Neduvasal protests (2017), which were against fracking projects, and the #Sterlite protests (2018) against environmentally destructive corporate expansions (Muralidharan 2017). The #Sterlite protest was against the expansion of the Sterlite Copper plant in Thoothukudi, which was polluting their water sources. This protest was not noticed for more than 100 days by the state or union government, so 20 000 protestors peacefully marched to the Collectorate in Thoothukudi<sup>12</sup>. Police started a baton charge and opened fire at the protestors

11 Nadukuppam is a fishing village located near Marina Beach, in Tamil Nadu State, India.

12 Thoothukudi is a port city in Tamil Nadu.

with assault rifles because they had tried to cross the barricades and enter the Collectorate office. Thirteen people were killed and 102 injured (Thirumurthy 2018). The Tamil Nadu government claimed the shootout was unavoidable and had been carried out in defence. Journalists from leading Indian news channels, seeing the video footage, opined it was clearly state-sanctioned violence (Choudhry 2018). It seems there is some similarity between events in South Africa and India.

Both the Marikana massacre and the Thoothukudi massacre happened for the benefit of the countries' corporate interests (Hamann 2019, Pillay 2018). These events show violence in governance, and the erosion of democracy and the field of politics in both India (Cox and Calder 2023) and South Africa (Holdt 2013: 590, Austin 1995). The violent processes to stop people from uprising or protesting for their rights is against the principles of democracy.

## Abahlali baseMjondolo (AbM)

AbM, based in KwaZulu-Natal, is active in a variety of ways to raise important issues affecting their communities. This includes protests, digital activism (Facebook and their website), and word of mouth. However, their issues do not get the full attention of mainstream media. AbM complain that the mainstream media does not cover their stories effectively. Many AbM activists have been killed, but most of the media turns a blind eye to these politically-motivated assassinations. One AbM activist said: "We use Facebook pages and the website of Abahlali because the mainstream media have rejected us. We issue a number of statements knowing very well that the mainstream media will not take us seriously." (Respondent 6). Without media coverage, the issues that they experience everyday are not highlighted and this results in inaction from the state.

AbM members says they recently have lost 24 activists to political assassination. According to AbM (2022), they lost four activists in 2022 alone and they say this attack on their movement has shocked their international solidarity organisations. Among the activists who were killed, some had been detained and spent six months in jail after which the cases were withdrawn (Majola 2022a). Nokuthula Mabaso, a local community leader, was murdered on 5 May 2022; family and residents said she had been a witness to the earlier murder of Ayanda Ngila, killed on 8 March. Mabaso lived very close to the Cato Manor police station (approximately 500 metres), but police only arrived after two hours (Majola 2022b).

In the last decade, many key people linked to AbM in Durban KZN were killed in questionable circumstances. In 2013, two unnamed AbM members were killed in KwaNdegezi while AbM activist Nkululeko Gwala was also killed that year. In 2014 an AbM leader from KwaNdegezi, Thuli Ndlovu, was killed. In November

2017, S'bonelo Mpeku, chairperson of an AbM branch in Lamontville, Durban, was killed. On 8 March 2022, Ayanda Ngila was shot dead. Ngila was a housing activist based in eKhenana informal settlement in Cato Manor and had links to AbM (Majola 2022a). In May 2022, Mabaso was killed in front of her children, while she was cooking. Mabaso was an eKhenana leader and a member of AbM (Majola 2022b). On 20 August 2022, Lindokuhle Mnguni was shot while with his girlfriend. Mnguni was an eKhenana Commune chairperson and a member of AbM. His girlfriend was also shot (Solomons 2022).



**Figure 3:** The Deputy President of Abahlali was about to address the United Nations in Geneva (Abahlali baseMjondolo 2022).

According to the AbM website, most of their activists were killed by iZinkabi (hitmen). The government's lack of response to this spate of assassinations is one facet of the ambivalent relationship between government and social movements. The government views social movements as a challenge to their power because they consistently expose government's inaction on a variety of issues such as land, unemployment and poverty.

## Instrumental rationality squeezing out cooperative rationality and action by protest actors, constricts the public sphere

Oyedemi (2020) saw protest as a form of communication for social change, sometimes the only way marginal voices could make themselves heard. We argue that these kinds of protests for social change may be seen as a form of cooperative rationality in which marginal groups, already excluded by mainstream media, communicate their desire to create greater self-determination over their circumstances. The voices of such groups represents an important widening of the public sphere as it increases pluralism and a diversity of voices.

Contrary to the digital promise to open up avenues of representation, the experience of digital, social protests illustrates a narrowing of the public sphere by instrumental practices of intelligence-led policing (surveillance), unlawful arrests, and police brutality, which effectively silences protesters. These repressive practices lessen the possibility of cooperative rationality and action.

Intelligence-led policing constricts pluralism and diversity of voices as marginal actors, such as AbM, become suspicious of online platforms and may not use them to their fullest capacity due to the fear of surveillance. AbM have complained repeatedly about how their protest activities are intercepted and disrupted by police, and suspect digital surveillance.

Intelligence-led policing can also lead to intimidation and frivolous arrests, where protest actors are harassed in jail but eventually released. Police brutality against social movements, like #feesmustfall and #Jallikattu, also illustrate the inability/unwillingness to mobilise cooperative rationality and action via participatory communication as a way of resolving public grievances. Surveillance-reduced freedom of expression, a fundamental right of marginal actors, is perhaps more significant to these constituencies.

The Daedalus software procured by fraudulent means was motivated by false claims of student intimidation. In reality, the software appeared to be for the protection of police's freedom of expression, as opposed to that of students and other constituencies. Rather than monitor student social media traffic, the software encrypted calls and wiped out cellular records of the police. It may be inferred that Daedalus was procured as police, more than most ordinary citizens, have the best sense of how ubiquitous surveillance has become in South Africa.

Munoriyarwa (2022: 457) reviews the Zimbabwean context using Haggerty and Ericson's 'surveillant assemblage' indicating that military surveillance technologies are increasingly part of civilian (public) spheres as a means of

political repression. He argues that the saturation of cellphones “opened up more extensive...opportunities for monitoring...oppressive and opaque forms of surveillance practices are becoming increasingly ubiquitous” (Munoriyarwa 2022: 460).

When social media is used as a public sphere, it is easily visible, but the surveillance, censorship and control of social media are not visible and so make it perilous (Kadivar 2015: 170). The involvement of the corporate world with social media does not end with business promotions and advertising on social media but goes far beyond that. For instance, the European Parliament has alleged that Nokia Siemens sold censorship and surveillance technology to Iran to crush the social movements fighting for democracy in Iran (Schrempp 2011: 95). Meanwhile, Narus, an American company owned by Boeing, sold monitoring and surveillance software called “deep packet inspection” to the Egyptian Government to control social activists and democratic reformists in the country (Morozov 2011).

While more research is needed on South Africa’s surveillant assemblage, Duncan’s (2021) work on intelligence-led policing has made a significant contribution to understanding the instrumental rationality stimulating digital surveillance. As cooperative rationality and its potentials are squeezed out of the public sphere, we consider how marginal groups may leverage any power to advance their cause and garner support. Diaspora emerges as an answer as groups mobilised foreign support from their respective diasporic formations.

## Diaspora of dissidents

The #feesmustfall, #Jallikattu and AbM movements revealed diasporic expressions of support and a solidarity against nationalistic hegemonic forces. Loosening the classical definition of diaspora could offer a way into leveraging alternate or third spaces, where global alliances could be mobilised. We argue that shifting the definitional framework of diaspora, rather than creating another useless category, could provide a significant response to Shuval’s (2000: 44) question of the social and political functions of diaspora.

Diaspora is a contested term. Originating as a means of understanding displaced peoples usually moved under conditions of violence, the concept can be unwieldy and contentious. The classical model of diaspora theory focused on ethnicity, dispersal and homeland or origins (Harutyunyan 2012). In Abraham’s review of David and Muñoz-Basols’s *Defining and Re-defining Diaspora*, he shows how transnational migratory patterns led to the growth of a “constellation of concepts” (Abraham 2014: 1883) under the umbrella of diaspora. This can make diaspora theory ambiguous and so expansive as to render it useless.



As migrating people settled in new lands, being subjected to new norms and influences, digital connectivity allowed for continuous links to home spaces. Abraham (2014) indicates that alternate or third spaces form sites where individuals may fashion identity and contest notions of alien-ness versus citizenship. It is difficult to conceive of homogenous diasporas, even more so homogenised, singular nation states.

## Diaspora in a time of transnational movement and global flows

Hall (1990) and Safran (1991) may be considered as classical contributors to diaspora theory, which involved in some way an account of “forced dispersion, retention of a collective historical and cultural memory of the dispersion, the will to transmit a heritage, and the ability of the group to survive over time” (Shuval 2000: 43).

For our purpose the contemporary approach to diaspora is appropriate due to its flexibility, as connections and loyalties may be constructed and reconstructed as individual interests shift over time.

Diaspora is a stateless power in transnational moment, consisting of communities of hybrid identities positioned in-between host and original cultures, with a shifting character of home, a structure to be researched beyond ethnicity and through multi-dimensional lenses, such as gender, class, internal power relations, etc. (Harutyunyan 2012: 10).

Shuval (2000: 47) distinguishes between consciousness to the group and social functions to others. Our concern is with the latter. When a group finds itself in a context of exclusion, limited opportunities for advancement, political domination or social and political discrimination, a diaspora culture helps maintain a sense of community and belonging to a more rewarding and welcoming social entity. This is accomplished by selectively preserving and recovering tradition.

Despite the persistence of ethnicity in diaspora studies, Brubaker's (2017: 1559) definition of diaspora as a category of practice is extremely useful. This allows loose diasporic formations to “make claims...articulate projects...appeal to loyalties” and most importantly mobilise support. As to Shuval's question on the social and political function of diaspora, we argue that the evolving looser definition of diaspora could be a potent force in globalised citizenship and cooperative communication practices, if protest actors are able to create and sustain alliances across nations as like groupings in unfair circumstances.

#BlackLivesMatter is against racism and police brutality against Black people in the USA. Social media propelled the movement's importance among global communities who support anti-racism (Célestine 2022). Local movements can create global alliances with movements like #BlackLivesMatter to create solidarity among protest groups and to form a bridge between each other to form a loose alliance in order to activate the political function of diasporic formations.

The big movements of #feesmustfall and #Jallikattu were temporal formations precipitated by specific sets of grievances that were reduced to a single issue in the media. As such diasporic support for #feesmustfall came from students around the globe. #Jallikattu also received support from Tamils across the globe as an expression of ethnic solidarity. Global alliances could be a very useful type of solidarity.

## Conclusion

This study explored some digital protest cultures in India and South Africa. The initial studies on these protests did not encompass continental comparisons. However, the cases of #feesmustfall, #Jallikattu and Abahlali baseMjondolo reveal a shared discontent with governance., and they also all were subjected to harsh responses from the state authority. All the protestors studied here used digital platforms to organise and mobilise for their respective causes, signifying a critical type of communicative action. Thus, key to the analysis was Habermas's notion of the transformed public sphere with specific emphasis on the communicative action as a normative goal. Contemporary scholars such as Fuchs, Zuboff, Doyle and Mosco influenced the framing of these regional protests. Protest cultures in India and South Africa were driven by a similar desire to challenge state authority. As Oyedemi (2020) said, protesters who have no other means of communication, protest as a communication for social change. The social movements often find difficulty in securing media coverage because they are outside the dominant culture. The symbiotic relationship between legacy media and the state often contributes to the lack of coverage of them. Here, the social movements have used social media to communicate their discourses. The analysis shows similar protest repression in the two countries, in which authorities have often resorted to suppression of protesters, perceived as a threat to the state. The extent of police brutality will be covered in forthcoming research. In addition, the prevalence of surveillance over protestors is a lacuna needing further investigation. The comparison of digital protest culture across three movements and two continents' points to an opportunity for a diaspora of dissidents to form, which could grow into a phenomenon where social movements create an environment of global support.

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