

Notes on Rohith Vemula and the Movement After

- Anveshi¹

The essay by Gopal Guru highlights the ground of endemic caste discrimination in places of higher learning in India. It offers the critical concept of 'social death' to understand the lethal effect of this discrimination. We have the following observations to offer MFC readers for consideration and reflection:

Mental Illness or Social Discrimination?

It is a well known fact that dalit students have often committed suicides in universities and colleges all over India. In 2011, Anoop Kumar, the dalit activist listed 18 suicides by dalit students in the preceding four years. In Hyderabad, too there have been enough to warrant a *Suo Moto* PIL intervention by the Chief Justice of the AP High Court in 2013 to determine the cause of student suicides on campuses. An implead petition filed by senior academics in this case listed four suicides of students from marginalized communities in the preceding four years in the central universities of Hyderabad. In every case, dalit opinion points to caste discrimination as an overwhelming factor.

Caste discrimination has been documented and fought in several battles, including at AIIMS and Safdarjung Medical College. The Thorat Committee Report (2007) clearly states that caste based discrimination was widespread at AIIMS and more recently, the National Commission for Scheduled Castes found AIIMS guilty of caste discrimination against an Assistant Professor of Nursing (2015). The dalit students of Safdarjung Medical College filed a case of caste discrimination against the college in the Delhi High Court in 2012.

As Guru argues, active and passive discrimination leave dalit students (and faculty) in a state of existential abandonment. This is the outcome of venomous discourse, cultural ostracism and social exclusion that surround dalit students who are physically included in the university space. In addition to this, there is also the major problem of systematic institutional punishment of dalit and marginalized students that needs to be understood. Take for example, a dalit student who comes from a village with no relative in the city (or as recently seen in Hyderabad, a Kashmiri woman student). Expulsion of such a student from the hostel is an intolerable cruelty that those of us with relatives and friends in the city can never understand. Such forms of extreme punishment are increasingly meted out for minor infractions or for demanding student facilities and rights, and many central university regulations legitimize them through their ambiguous wording. This fact of brutal and excessive punishment of marginalized students is also under severe criticism by the student movement that has followed Rohith's suicide.

The institutional response to such instances, in our observation in Hyderabad, has been to see the suicide as an individual's failure to cope with life, and to portray it as

a psychological problem that is specific to the individual. This is a kneejerk response to the crisis that is provoked by a suicide event. In fact, the AP High Court, after hearing the *Suo Moto* petition mentioned, passed Orders with several administrative safeguards and procedures to minimize student distress. However, what universities selectively implemented were the recommendations to set up psychiatric counseling centres for students in distress. These centres are dysfunctional, and the one in the English and Foreign Languages University, has been shut down. Such a kneejerk response is reminiscent of the manner in which distressed women were theorized to be 'psychologically frail' when the distress was clearly an effect of overt and unbearable social and familial violence. It is thus an attempt to sweep the larger political issue of caste discrimination under the carpet of individual weakness.

The implead petition by senior academics argued that the theory of individual failing leading to suicide was wrong, and that the social determinant of caste discrimination was the main cause. The petition argued that it was important to work towards changing the academic culture and administrative environment of these institutions.

The political developments after Rohith Vemula's suicide have completely delegitimized the individual psychological flaw theory. It has become impossible for the university administration, the ABVP and the BJP to sustain any theory of individual failure in the face of the massive national protests against the caste-oppressive academic and administrative culture in institutions of higher learning. There is no possibility of talk of 'failure of love affairs', 'psychological weakness' or 'counseling'. This is a positive development at this stage in the battle against caste discrimination. It remains to be seen how this progresses. All political and administrative attempts to discredit Rohith Vemula have simply exposed their inherent tunnel vision.

Urbanization

What is understated in the above discussion of suicides among dalit students is that these suicides have occurred in the wake of large scale dalit migration to cities in search of a dignified life, equality and freedom from caste oppression as promised by the Indian Constitution. The dalit migration to the city, not only in search of wage labour, but also and especially in pursuit of higher education, is driven by a desire to escape the static, oppressive constraints of caste-Hindu dominance in rural India. The opposing positions on urban and rural have been staked out by BR Ambedkar and MK Gandhi respectively.

Gandhi, starting with his early essay *Hind Swaraj* (1908) and his essay in *Nav Jivan* (1921), was an advocate of rejuvenation of the village economy and social life through constructive work. He was an unrelenting critic of modern industry, cities and Western civilization. These views have been sustained through his arguments over several decades

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regarding education, Khadi, the Constructive Programme, and the various practical experiments such as the Sabarmati Ashram and Sevagram.

Ambedkar was a severe critic of the rural social structure, seeing it as suffocating, oppressive and antidemocratic. He saw the Gandhian village thesis as pre-modern, politically reactionary and economically backward. In *What Congress and Gandhi did to the Untouchables* (1945), Ambedkar subjected the Gandhian perspective to a withering critique ending with a call to shun obsolete social constraints, remove caste barriers to equality and economic well being for all, and therefore to modernize at all costs by moving to an urbanized, wage labour based economy.

The Constitutional provisions for reservations among the scheduled castes and tribes are a clear recognition of the validity of Ambedkar's argument for urbanization as the way to escape caste oppression. They provide a space for dalits and tribal students (both from largely rural or remote hill areas) to enter an urbanized civil society as equals.

The dalit and tribal students who have suffered in the past and continue to do so come into universities and colleges through reservations. The Ambedkar Students Association (ASA) works to mitigate the distress of such students in the University of Hyderabad. The difference with Rohith Vemula is that he came in as an open category student because his brilliance did not need any vindication even in the traditional terms of 'merit'. He was an outstanding intellectual and activist of the ASA.

The ASA's battle with the ABVP was sparked by two events in the following order: first, the ASA, which opposed death penalty in general, conducted a protest in the context of the hanging of Yakub Memon. Second, the screening of the film *Muzzafarnagar Baki Hai*, was forcibly stopped in Delhi University by the ABVP. In the University of Hyderabad, the ASA launched a protest against ABVP's action in Delhi (as did several student organizations in other universities). This second event led to a scuffle between the ASA and the ABVP, which was exacerbated by the BJP's interference. The BJP posted a complaint to the university and the MHRD (and filed a police case). This complaint foregrounded the Yakub Memon incident (to attack the ASA as part of the BJP's tirade against what they call 'anti-nationalism'). The MHRD then exerted pressure on the university to expel five ASA students from the hostel. Rohith was one of these five students.

What is remarkable is that though these events were entirely secular in nature, it is clearly accepted by the student and social movements that have exploded after Rohith's suicide that the ASA was hounded by the ABVP and the BJP and punished by the university administration and the MHRD, as a dalit organization. The remaining four expelled students continue at the head of a national protest against the actions of the MHRD, the University of Hyderabad and the BJP.

Thus, the current crisis in the institutions of higher education must be seen as a historical turn that complicates

Ambedkar's analysis. The institutions of higher education have now become fortresses of caste privilege, seeking to retain that privilege at all costs. This does not delegitimize or disprove Ambedkar's thesis of the oppressiveness of rural life, or the need to move towards a more modern civilization. This is a political reaction of caste domination that must be noted and fought.

Three Implications for a Politics of Health

One implication for a politics of health relates to the struggle against individualizing and psychiatrizing such suicides as personal psychological flaws. Suicides and mental distress in universities are the effect of the intersection of severe social disadvantages and institutional oppression. They point to structural flaws that haunt Indian society. This social distress cannot be medicalized or individualized -- it haunts whole communities subject to chronic discrimination. It is utterly erroneous and reactionary for psychiatry to try and resolve distress by individual counseling or medication without taking into account the oppressive context it arises in. It is also thus important to see these suicides as symptoms of the chronic social illness that haunts India today: caste discrimination.

More specifically and yet more broadly speaking, we at Anveshi strongly advocate a culturally rooted psychiatry that is aware of and actively engages with social discrimination of dalits, tribals, women and the marginalized communities of India.

The second implication is that the way forward is to address in an active political manner the general problems of social health that arise in the tide of urbanization and migration to the cities. It is crucial to see that many forms of morbidity and mortality (not only related to mental distress) occur in relation to the deep structure of social discrimination that perpetuates itself in modern urbanizing India. Medicine needs to find ways to understand and theorize the social determinant of discrimination in the pattern and scale of morbidity that characterize Indian populations.

The third implication we would like to draw is that medical activists with a social conscience and political commitment must pay special attention to the political and administrative struggles of embattled students in medical and allied institutions and exert pressure to change the academic culture and administrative environment. It also means that such activists need to make a special effort to understand the larger political perspective and the context of these marginalized student struggles, so that they can effectively support the students, helping them cope with the enormous social pressures they face. It is such students who will develop a way of thinking about health care that takes into account the larger frame of distress in contemporary times.

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