

A STUDY ON THE CRUCIAL SUICIDES OF DALIT SCHOLARS IN HIGHER EDUCATION OF CASTE DISCRIMINATION

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Introduction

More than 60 years after gaining Independence, India is still very much afflicted by the cancer of the caste system. Untouchability smells a hell in nearly every sphere of life and practiced in an infinite number of forms. As members of the lowest rank of Indian society, the Dalits have been branded and treated as untouchables, subjected to contempt and injustice and face discrimination at almost every level for centuries. As the word “Dalit” comes from the Sanskrit word “Dal” which means “down trodden”, “Suppressed”, “crushed”, or “broken to pieces”, the bearers of the identity, Dalits are literally daily victims of the worst crimes and atrocities in the society. Their plights chase them in the disguise of caste, since they reach the earth till they leave the same. Wherever they go, they suffer blows and pains. It doesn't seem to matter whether people are educated or not. They all go about filling with caste hatred.

Plights of the Dalit Research scholars in Higher Education

Higher education is one of the important means of social mobility and human development. Higher education and successful employment among Dalit populations remain a distant dream in India. When aspirational students from Dalit communities do strive to break into the competitive educational system, they are squeezed out through violent caste discrimination. Intolerance, prejudice and harassment towards Dalits are not only found at the elementary school level, which extends to the higher education too. Dalit students are often looked down upon on the campus with full of hatred which frustrates them to the core which remembers the words of Markandey Katju, former chairman of the Press Council of India, wrote on his Facebook wall: “Most non-Dalits look down on them as sub humans, and often taunt, humiliate and victimize them. This is a national disgrace. Unless this feudal mindset is destroying our country cannot progress.”

What we are seeing on display across India is a grotesque mutation of caste prejudice that is pushing some of the most exploited to take their own lives. Several incidents have occurred in institutions of higher education in India, where discrimination is

practiced by senior upper-caste students, teachers, faculties, and administrations. Meena Kandasamy, a writer and poet, wrote in a column in *The Hindu* as Education has now become a disciplining enterprise working against Dalit students: they are constantly under threat of rustication, expulsion, defamation, discontinuation. In a society where students have waged massive struggles to ensure their right to access higher educational institutions through the protective, enabling concept of the reservation policy, no one has dared to shed light on how many of these students are allowed to leave these institutions with degrees, how many become dropouts, become permanent victims of depression, how many end up dead.

Suicides of Dalit Scholars of caste prejudices

Over the last decade, a string of suicides has rocked the central university of Hyderabad highlighting the pronounced discrimination against students from the marginalized sections at the university. Members of the Ambedkar Students Association (ASA) claim that as many as 12 students belonging to scheduled castes have ended their lives since the central university came into existence in the early 1970s, largely due to caste prejudices. A look at the details of the suicides of students in higher education across India throws further light on caste based discrimination; Quoting from the article on India Resists:

In 2004, Rejani. S. Anand, a Dalit by birth and a student of Institute of Human Resource Development Engineering (IHRDE) College at Adoor in south Kerala, knocked the doors of many sources to help her to get a degree, unable to deposit the hostel fees and pursue her education committed suicide by jumping from the seventh floor of the Office of the Entrance Commissioner (Medical and Engineering courses) at Trivandrum.

In 2008, Jaspreet Singh, a Dalit by birth and a student from Chandigarh, ended his life unable to bear the insults and taunts thrown at him at the medical college library. The suicide note recovered from his coat pocket charged his head of the department with deliberately failing him and threatening to fail him over and over for being a 'Dalit'.

On February 2008, just after one year of his admission, Senthil Kumar committed suicide in his hostel room. He was not allotted the Supervisor for his research for a long time, which made him to end up his life. University authorities immediately claimed that he had died of cardiac arrest. But the post mortem report gave the cause of death as poisoning.

In 2010, BalMukund, a Jatav (Chamar) Dalit from Kundeshwar in Uttar Pradesh, the first Dalit from the village in 50 years to enter an elite institute like All India Institute of Medical Sciences, Delhi committed suicide. Mukund, a topper all through his life, had scored 82 per cent in SSLC; had won the International Mathematics Contest and cleared the IIT and AIIMS entrance examinations, but chose AIIMS as he had the dream of becoming a

doctor. He was taunted every now and then by the faculty and fellow students just because he was being born a Dalit like “How could Chamars become doctors? You have come here only because of quota, you cannot go ahead” were the usual comments that chased him in classrooms, hostels and canteen. He tried to change his name as Srijan Kumar to escape caste. He repeatedly talked on the phone about caste and settling down abroad, but before that depression made him commit suicide in March 2010.

In 2011, Manish Kumar of Indian Institute of Technology, Roorke, committed suicide by jumping from the fifth floor of his hostel. Manish was from Muzaffar Nagar and was a bright student. Both his father and mother had found that their son was a victim of caste abuse by fellow students and complaints to the authorities went in vain. Even after he shifted out of the hostel the taunts did not stop and he went into depression leading to his death.

In 2012, on March 3, Anil Kumar Meena, an adivasi medical student at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences, killed himself in his hostel room. Educated in the Hindi medium, the son of poor farmers in Baran, Rajasthan, Meena had scored 75 per cent in Higher secondary and a second rank in the AIIMS entrance test. He was following in the footsteps of BalMukund Bharti, a final year MBBS student, who exactly two years ago hung himself to death in his hostel room in AIIMS.

In 2014, Aniket Ambhore, fourth year Electrical Engineering student at Indian Institute of Technology, Bombay has committed suicide by falling from the sixth floor of a hostel inside the campus. Caste-based discrimination was cited as a reason for under tremendous stress. There Aniket’s father had accused that his son used to be taunted for being a student from scheduled caste in his college. He remembered that once Aniket’s Head of Department has passed a derogatory comment about him. But there is no trace of any formal complaint from his family.

Rohit vemula, a second year research scholar of science, technology and society studies Department of Central University of Hyderabad, hails from a poor family of Guntur district of Andhra Pradesh, was University Grants Commission's Junior Research Fellowship (JRF) holder. He was one of the five Dalit research scholars expelled by the university administration from the campus hostel following an intra student skirmish. He was protesting at the campus along with other students against the expulsion for nearly a fortnight. But his efforts went in vain; desperately he hung himself using the blue banner of Ambedkar Students Association (ASA) and left a five page suicide note. "My birth is my fatal accident... I always was rushing. Desperate to start a life... I am not sad. I am just empty. Unconcerned about myself. That's pathetic. And that's why I am doing this." These excerpts from his letter literally provoke our agony towards that wretched soul. A young bud wanted to blossom with full of dreams, love and longed for a happy life and aspired to become a

science writer like Carl Sagan, ended up defeated and crushed by discrimination and apathy.

The pitiable condition of these unprivileged young souls who ended their lives due to caste prejudices literally moves our emotions to the hilt. Here is the list of the Dalit students who have committed suicide nearly for ten years from 2007 to till date. This is by no means an exhaustive list but covers only those cases which we were able to document and where parents and relatives have raised their voices and had accused the institutions of caste discrimination against their children that led to their suicides.

1. M. Shrikant, final year, B.Tech, IIT Bombay, 1st Jan 2007
2. Ajay S. Chandra integrated PhD, Indian Institute of Sciences (IISc), Bangalore, 26 Aug, 2007
3. Jaspreet Singh, final year MBBS, Government Medical College, Chandigarh, 27 Jan 2008.
4. Senthil Kumar, PHD, School of Physics, University of Hyderabad, 23 Feb 2008
5. PrashantKureel, first year, B.Tech, IIT Kanpur, 19 April, 2008
6. G. Suman, final year, M.Tech, IIT Kanpur, 2nd Jan, 2009
7. AnkitaVeghda, first year, BSc Nursing, Singhi Institute of Nursing, Ahmedabad, 20 April, 2009
8. D Syam Kumar, first year B.Tech, Sarojini Institute of Engineering and Technology, Vijayawada, 13 Aug, 2009
9. S. Amravathi, national level young woman boxer, Centre of Excellence, Sports Authority of Andhra Pradesh, Hyderabad, 4th Nov, 2009
10. BandiAnusha, B.Com final year, Villa Mary College, Hyderabad, 5th Nov, 2009
11. Pushpanjali Poorty, first year, MBA, Visvesvaraiiah Technological University, Bangalore, 30th Jan, 2010
12. Sushil Kumar Chaudhary, final year MBBS, Chatrapati Shahuji Maharaj Medical University (formerly KGMU), Lucknow, 31 Jan, 2010.
13. Balmukund Bharti, final year MBBS, All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), New Delhi, 3rd March, 2010
14. JK Ramesh, second year, BSc, University of Agricultural Sciences, Bangalore, 1st July, 2010
15. Madhuri Sale, final year B.Tech, IIT Kanpur, 17th November, 2010
16. G. Varalakshmi, B.Tech first year, Vignan Engineering College, Hyderabad, 30 Jan, 2011
17. Manish Kumar, IIIrd Year B.Tech, IIT Roorkee, 13 Feb, 2011
18. Linesh Mohan Gawle, PhD, National Institute of Immunology, New Delhi, 16 April, 2011

19. Anil Kumar Meena, MBBS, All India Institute of Medical Sciences, New Delhi, 3 March, 2012
20. Aniket Ambhore, Fourth year Electrical Engineering, Indian Institute of Technology, Bombay, 2014
21. Rohith Vemula, Ph.D, Hyderabad Central University, January 2016

Conclusion

Are Dalits not human beings? Do they not have common sense? Do they not have such attributes as a sense of honour and self-respect? Are they without any wisdom, beauty or dignity? What do we lack? They treat us in whatever way they choose, as we are slaves who don't even possess human dignity. And if ever a Dalit gets wise to this and wants to live with some honour and self-respect, they jump up and down as if something really outrageous is happening. They seem to conspire to keep us in our place: to think that we who have worked throughout history like beasts should live and die like that; we should never move on or go forward. (Bama. 2000. p. 28)

These words of Bama add fuel to the fire that all people are born on this earth like us: they have the same flesh, blood and bones in them, so do their feelings, emotions and identity. But why are they discriminated and differentiated with regard to their caste, community, religion and nationality? Why should the people be marginalized in all the walks of their life? Do they deserve such slavish treatments? A string of such questions keeps arising which leads to no answers. A society is created for the well fare of the human beings, but it won't be a barrier to the success of people. So the Society must take initiative to create a climate in which there is no caste or any other discrimination.

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