

SUICIDE, DALITISM AND UNIVERSITY

G. AUGUSTINE LOURDU¹

¹OFM, Asst. Professor, Department of Psychology, Anugraha Institute of Social Sciences, Dindigul, INDIA

ABSTRACT

The research based on secondary data that aims to analyse factors that pushed Dalit students to commit suicide in an institute of higher learning and the insensitivity of the institute towards them. Six students committed suicide since 2008, in Institutes of higher learning in India. The question does Universities promote caste-consciousness? If it does, it promotes division, it promotes suppression and it promotes red-revolution in our modern civilized society. On the contrary, universities should be ready to counter the traditionally held beliefs, myths and divisive policy of the common and powerful political men of our society. A casteless society should begin in our institute of learning. If the learned men indulge in activities that seriously demean a particular section of our society, one can question the very basis of our education and learning in our country. The secondary sources of data were collected from the unpublished materials, web and other books. The textual research also analyses various committees set up by the university to analyse the causes of Suicide in India.

KEYWORDS: *Suicide, Dalits, University*

INTRODUCTION

Suicide has become the only legitimate form of protest in institute of higher learning for Dalits. (K.P.Girija, 2009) There has been increase in number of suicides among Dalit students pursuing their studies in universities. Cases of discrimination, alienation have led people to choose death rather than suffer humiliating experiences in our educational campuses. These cases of Suicide were a desperate cry to let the world know about the grim facts of discrimination, stigma and exclusion experienced by students even in top class universities of our country. Even today, the students at higher learning are exposed to physical, emotional and psychological harm; In-direct discrimination has become the modern trend and if you voice out your discriminating experiences, it could cause you unimaginable harm rather than good. On the contrary, Silent-sufferers often get through the academic years more easily than those who wish to verbalize their suffering. These experiences at the institute of higher learning are nothing but a shame to our intellectual caliber and the educational ethics. There is an urgent need for analyzing intrusion of caste compulsion, stigma and discrimination into our campuses. This paper aims to analyze factors that pushed Dalit students to commit suicide in an institute of higher learning and the insensitivity of the institute towards them.

On the contrary, universities should be ready to counter the traditionally held beliefs, myths and divisive policy of the common and powerful political men of our society. A casteless society should begin in our institute of learning. If the learned men indulge in activities that seriously demean a particular section of our society, one can question the very basis of our education and learning in our country. The secondary sources of data were collected from the unpublished materials, web and other books. The textual research also analyses various committees set up by the university to analyse the causes of Suicide in India.

EXCLUSION FROM EDUCATION: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Historically, the right to formal education had been limited only to the upper castes. "Therefore, illiteracy became an inherent part of the caste system by a process that was indirect but became internal to caste Hinduism (Thorat & Pande, 2002: 52). The series of penalties for studying Veda by Sudhras described by Manu, the lawgiver, gave rise to illiteracy and ignorance. The denial of right to education inflicted unreasonable economic divide and perpetual dependence, which gave rise to slavery. Denial and exclusion in Education has created a spasm between the higher castes and Dalits. Lack of knowledge and exposure and fear of being ridiculed by the

upper castes made them silent sufferers to the existing inhuman practices.

This forced them to be confined to the menial jobs that are less remunerative and curtail the growth of their human resources. Research clearly states that Dalits for the major chunk of illiterates in India and even if they have studied, they do not have recourse to quality education. That means, they either dropout or complete education without acquiring the capabilities to get suitable employment in this market driven economy (A. John Peter, 2010:47). There has been a systemic failure in addressing exclusion in education, creating a vacuum to be filled. The Dalit community needed to find a common ground to voice their rights towards the government and against discrimination on all spheres of life. Thus Dalitism was born to empower and uplift the weakest section of the society.

DALIT AND DALITISM

"Dalit" is found in many Indian languages and even a Dravidian language. The meaning given to 'Dalit' in the dictionary is: burst, split, scattered, dispersed, broken, torn as under, destroyed, crushed. All these English words sum up the exact position of the Indian Untouchables and also tribes. (<http://ambedkar.org/News/WhatIs.htm>)

Dalitism which is both the ideology and nationalism of India's persecuted and suppressed masses. It is rooted in Ambedkarism. Dalitism or Dalit philosophy is developed to pave the way for a neo tradition against casteism and untouchability. The new revolutionary philosophy of Dalitism also stipulates that Dalits alone can liberate Dalits from the Ruling Class. Even in such a short time Dalitism has attracted millions. It is the living spiritual principle of India's Untouchables. The object of Dalitism is to attract the youth all over India and make them understand the culture and history of India's submerged masses.

Even though liberation and inclusion of all sections is still a dream after six decades of independence in our country, more over scholars who are being educated to eradicate such orthodox practices become victims and perish. Dalits have fought a great war to reach the door steps of Higher education but yet they continue to experience discrimination in institutes of higher learning. This discrimination often creates despair in life leading the scholars to kill themselves in the campuses.

SUCIDE OF RESEARCH SCHOLARS SINCE 2008

- Rohith Vemula is the sixth victim since 2008. Vemula was born on 30 January 1989 in Guntur district of the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh to Manikumar Vemula and Radhika. He was an Indian PhD student at the University of Hyderabad, belonging to the Dalit community (Mala caste). His father is from *veddera* (OBC) community and his mother is from *Mala* (scheduled caste) caste. In July 2015, the University reportedly stopped paying him the fellowship of 25,000 rupees per month after he was "raising issues under the banner of Ambedkar Students Association (ASA)," though a university official denied the allegation of non-payment of scholarship, citing the delay on "paperwork." On 3rd January 2016, after the suspension was confirmed, "the five moved out of their hostel rooms to a tent they set up inside the campus and began a "relay hunger protest". At 17 January 2016 Rohith Vemula committed suicide, hanging himself with a banner of the Ambedkar Students Association. In the suicide-note which he left behind, he blamed the "system" for his death.
- Senthil Kumar, who committed suicide in 2008, was the first. He was pursuing PhD in physics at the university and after being denied to complete his research, had taken his own life by consuming poison in his hostel room. He hailed from Tamil Nadu and belonged to the small 'Panniyandi' sub-caste of the Dalits known for pig-rearing. (Vinod Pavarala committee)
- Madari Venkatesh, a third year PhD scholar at the Advance Centre for Research in High Energy Materials, took the extreme step on November 24 that year. Hailing from a Dalit family in Ibrahimpatnam, Andhra Pradesh, Venkatesh too fell victim to caste discrimination.
- Pulyala Raju, a student of MA in Applied Linguistics. (Prof V Krishna committee)

You might be shocked about the statistics but they are often just the tip of the iceberg. When human beings are made to feel their birth as a curse, their potentials is of no-worth and their existence is mere accident and unnecessary, these thinking research scholars often consider the meaningless of life. These are no sporadic incidents of suicides; these deaths invite a serious introspection of the very attitude towards fellow human being. Stigma, Discrimination and exclusionary corrupt the conscious of our education and shames the uniqueness of

our humanity. This paper analyses the last words written by Rohit Vemula and in-depth interview with a scholar in one of the top-class University of our Country. The sources of this research paper are from secondary sources.

SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

- To assess the last words of Rohit Vemula
- To study discrimination experienced by a respondent in top Indian university.
- To analyze the contributing factors of suicide.
- The role of universities in promoting equality.

THE LAST WORDS OF ROHIT VEMULA

In a letter to the vice-chancellor of the Hyderabad Central University, Rohith Vemula had requested that a "nice rope" should be supplied to rooms of all Dalit students. (December, 2015) "Please give us poison at the time of admission itself instead of humiliating us like this," He was one of five Dalit students who were protesting against their expulsion from the university's housing facility. In his suicide note, he expresses similar pain. "For some people life itself is a curse. My birth is my fatal accident. I can never recover from my childhood loneliness. I am not hurt at this moment. Not sad, just empty. That is pathetic. That is why I am doing this. The value of a man was reduced to his immediate identity and nearest possibility. To a vote. To a number. To a thing. Never was a man treated as a mind. As a glorious thing made up of stardust. In very field, in studies, in streets, in politics, and in dying and living.

- I am writing this kind of letter for the first time. My first time of a final letter. Forgive me if I fail to make sense. Maybe I was wrong, all the while, in understanding world. In understanding love, pain, life, death. There was no urgency. But I always was rushing. Desperate to start a life. I am not sad. I am just empty. Unconcerned about myself. That's pathetic. People may dub me as a coward. And selfish, or stupid once I am gone. I am not bothered about what I am called. I don't believe in after-death stories, ghosts, or spirits. If there is anything at all I believe, I believe that I can travel to the stars. And know about the other worlds. I forgot to write the formalities. No one is responsible for this my act of killing myself. No one has instigated me, whether by their acts or by their words to this act. This is my decision and I am the only one responsible for this

Is Rohit Vemula's death a case of socio-economic inequality? Or is it a case of caste insensitivity? Or have the universities become the breeding ground for caste discrimination? Or the cases of discrimination against Dalits are treated as low priority by the local authorities? Whatever the reason might be, there has been collective responsibility our country cannot disown. The collective attitude towards caste based stigma and treating people as expendable from our society is the first and the most important reason for such inhuman practices in our society.

IN DEPTH INTERVIEW WITH IIT STUDENT

How do the professors in these elite institutes treat students from reserved communities? They treat reserved category students with contempt. SC/STs who come from rural, vernacular medium backgrounds struggle to cope with the rigor of the new environment. Instead of assisting them, they use this to brand the students and discriminate them academically - some in AIIMS have threatened students that they will fail them leading to commit suicide among the students.

Upper-castes students practice untouchability - many ask for change in rooms if their room-mates are Dalits. They generally avoid them and in worst cases abusive behavior is also seen. IIMs is no exception, there is a shade better as they have some mix of population from different age groups - and more maturity among students and staff. The following in-depth interview is taken from a secondary source. This clearly states how even in the elite institute of higher learning discrimination takes place towards students who gain their admission through reserved category.

BACKGROUND

"I am an Undergraduate at one of the IITs and I belong to a Scheduled Caste community. I gained admission through reservation, against my wish. I wanted to give JEE again the following year, but under pressure from parents and relatives I gave in and accepted the seat in the same year. My CPI currently stands at 8.82 on 10."

HAVE I BEEN DISCRIMINATED AGAINST?

Yes. During the initial days of my stay here, there are "interaction" sessions with seniors. You are asked to introduce yourself. I was made to repeat thrice in front of people my rank in the examination and laughed at and made fun of after the disclosure that my rank in JEE 20xx was xx under the SC category . And hence from that very day, I chose to hide the fact. Because, people looked down

upon me. I have my own self esteem and to this day I regret having accepted that seat and it hurts so much when you are treated as if you had committed a crime. I lied, I lied about my rank shamelessly after that. I wept all my first year because I felt I was looked down upon just on the basis of the fact that I gained admission through reservation.

EXPERIENCE WITH FELLOW MATES

I have heard that some students in IIT do not want to share the rooms with Dalits, they ask for a change of room when they come to know that the person staying with them belongs to lower community. They try to be indifferent with us. There has been anger towards people who gain admission through reserved quotas as if we have robbed their opportunity. They do not realize that the majority should give opportunity to the minority to stand in par with them.

EXPERIENCE WITH ADMINISTRATION

Delay in paper work with the office administration, many professors in the administration seems to be fair with us.

EXPERIENCE WITH FACULTY:

Experienced Discrimination

EXPERIENCE AT LIBRARY:

Nil

EXPERIENCE WITH GRADES:

Experienced Discrimination

CAUSES OF SUICIDE ACCORDING THE PROBING COMMITTEES

Madari Venkatesh, a third year PhD scholar at the Advance Centre for Research in High Energy Materials, took the extreme step on November 24, 2013. Hailing from a Dalit family in Ibrahimpatnam, Andhra Pradesh, Venkatesh too fell victim to caste discrimination. A seven member fact-finding committee headed by Prof V Krishna investigated the case. Earlier that year, the same committee had probed the circumstances that led to the suicide of Pulyala Raju, a student of MA in Applied Linguistics.

“He (Venkatesh) was not provided a guide and a lab, even after three years, even when other students started their researches, and published international papers,” an independent committee, which probed the suicides of both Venkatesh and Raju, said in its report.

The Krishna committee’s report of December 2013 too pointed out that its earlier report as well as the Pavarala committee report highlighted glaring instances of insensitivity and lack of diligence, especially towards students from marginalized sections of society. There has been marked insensitivity and negative attitude towards people from the marginalized sections of our society. There has been open discrimination and verbal threat to people who dare to raise their voices against injustice towards them or the university.

The Vinod Pavarala committee, which investigated the circumstances that led to the suicide, found that discrimination against students from marginalized sections of society was one of the main reasons for the drastic step. The findings of the three committees that probed the three suicides on campus between 2008 and 2014 were clear: the Dalit students faced a “sense of alienation” and “institutional discrimination” owing to “caste consideration”.

One of those committees, headed by retired Supreme Court judge Justice K Ramaswamy, stated in its report: “Because of the insensitivity towards problems faced by the students belonging to the aforesaid social groups, frequent occurrences of suicides are taking place.”

STIGMA, DISCRIMINATION AND EXCLUSION

It is very unfortunate that Dalits face a “sense of alienation” and “institutional discrimination” in the institutes of higher learning and elite universities of our country. Alienation and discrimination deeply discredits the student in the campus as Goffman defined Stigma as “an attribute that is deeply discrediting” and results in the reduction of a person or group “from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one” (Goffman, 1963). Thus, the ultimate effect of stigma, as noted by Goffman, is the reduction of the life chances of the stigmatized through discriminatory actions. This seems to be one of the major causes of suicide in the higher institutes of learning.

Among the students, who appear for Joint Entrance Examination (JEE) and other common entrance examination, there has been anger regarding reservation, some students even believe that their opportunity was usurped by some one, who does not deserve and who does not have the required rank. The attitude seems to be catching up with the young minds of students who enroll themselves in IIT and IIMs and other institutes of higher

learning. The educational discrimination creates fear in the mind of Dalits and they fail to reach up to higher learning.

THE ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES TO CURB DIRECT AND INDIRECT DISCRIMINATION

- University campus has become another “orthodox-village”, where “socio-educational strata” is preserved and any deviation from “norms” of that orthodox-village is punished with alienation, discrimination and even instigating people to end their precious lives. Our universities have not only lost the ethics of education, but they have imbibed conservative ideals of the past. When Universities should work on freeing minds and unlocking the potentials of future generation; they work, on the contrary, to lock our minds. The faculty of the university work towards earning rather than learning. There is a serious need in the attitude of people working in the Universities research guides to change their attitude towards people who gain their admission through reservation.
- Universities and Institutes of higher learning should not learn from the society rather the society should learn from the University. The feeble mind carry the society in to our university, but great minds carry University into our warring society. University is for the intellectual education of the whole man, and for every man, than so exuberant and diversified and persistent a promulgation of all kinds of knowledge Why, you will ask, need we go up to knowledge, when knowledge comes down to us? (Cf. John Henry Newman) if knowledge comes down to us, we need to transform our society towards an inclusive and equal opportunity state.
- “The university needs to show greater alacrity in setting up and adequately monitoring the mechanisms for making the campus a more inclusive and rewarding experience for its students.”
- Modern institutions like universities are too smart to practise crude discriminatory practices like separate water pots for Dalits that happen in some rural schools (Sukumar 2008). The defining attribute of indirect discrimination (practised in modern institutions like universities) is that it counts substance than form and impact than intent. Indirect discrimination operates by acting on discourses like merit, rights, academic freedom/autonomy, academic excellence and accountability in the university system.

- A law on indirect discrimination tries to counter such discriminations under the garb of rights/autonomy. It does not accept neutral sounding discourses like university discipline or academic quality at their face values.
- Commissions constitute crime from the legal point of view. Authorities become culpable for their “activity”, not their “passivity.” However from the morality point of view both commissions and omissions are crime. A real “civil” society cannot sustain itself only with laws of commissions. Laws related to omissions are equally necessary. A law on indirect discrimination takes care of omission as it focuses on the result rather than the procedure per se. (<http://www.epw.in/journal/2016/6/web-exclusives/removing-discrimination-universities.html>)

CONCLUSION

Casteless society should begin in the institute of higher learning. Where education breaks our bondage and frees our mind to see human being as human being. The uniforms in schools have broken the differences between external looks, but on the other hand institutes of higher learning should cement the differences in internal looks. Attitude, perception about another human being should have its roots in equality, dignity and respect rather than age old customs and religion-cultural practices. If our institutes do not adhere to the basic principles of humanity, their learning and the degrees they dispense will not be useful to the individual, family and society at large. Let learning bring the light within us.

REFERENCES

- (<http://www.epw.in/journal/2016/6/web-exclusives/removing-discrimination-universities.html>)
- Edmos Mtetwa : Policy dimensions of exclusion, *the Indian Journal of Social work*, Vol. 71, issue 3, July 2011.
- Elliot, Antony,(2009): *Contemporary Social Theory: An Introduction*, Routledge,
- Goffman, E. (1963): *Stigma. Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Herek, G.M. (1986). The Instrumentality of Attitudes: Toward a Neofunctional Theory. *Journal of Social Issues*;42(2), 99-114.

<http://ambedkar.org/News/WhatIs.html>

K.P. Girija : *The Death of Merit: Dalit Suicides in Institutes of Higher Learning*. January 24, 2016, <https://thedeathofmeritinindia.wordpress.com/2011/04/26/84/>

Leary, M.R. (1990) Responses to Social Exclusion: Social Anxiety, Jealousy, Loneliness, Depression, and

Low Self-Esteem, *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 9, 221-229.

Ritzer, George, (2010): *Contemporary Sociological Theory and Its Classical Roots: The basic*, St. Louis, McGraw-Hill, 2010, pg.5.