

ROHITH VEMULA'S DEATH: EXPOSING THE POLITICAL CRIMINALITY OF HINDUTVA*

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ABSTRACTS

Rohith Vemula's dream of becoming Carl Sagan to write science abruptly ended. This 26-year-old son of a landless Dalit mother blamed none, friends or foes, but his death has already exposed their criminality stemming from their casteist mindset. In a spirit of revolt becoming the true moral tribute to Rohith, the students have immediately rejected the administration's awkward overture and declared their resolve to continue their struggle, until the people responsible, including Smriti Irani are punished. This paper looks into the circumstances and the build up of the death of the young Dalit scholar and how the philosophy of caste discrimination is a natural outcome of Hindutva.

This paper probes how the public spaces such as universities have turned anti-Dalit and a den of right wing Hindutva politics. How institutional discrimination that has long existed could be understood better by investigating the case of death of Rohith and other students in universities. How death of a Dalit could be turned into a politics of gains and profits is also dealt in this paper. The Brahmanical section takes pride in self-righteousness, however none of these would go unnoticed by people.

Keywords: ***Educational, Institutional Discrimination, Hindutva, Casteism, Dalits, Communalisation Politics***

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Death of a Dalit Scholar

Rohith Vemula's dream of becoming Carl Sagan to write science abruptly ended at the altar of caste but in death it is metamorphosed into a peoples' dream to end the circumstances that caused it. Rohith dropped out from the process of his likely anointment by the casteist establishment as the doctor of philosophy, but in his poignant lines – he left behind as his suicide note – outlined the philosophy of Dalit existence in this cursed land that shall live on for years. Although this 26 year old son of a landless Dalit mother blamed none, friends or foes, which the casteist vultures that devoured his life would try using to claim their innocence, his death has already exposed their criminality stemming from their casteist mindset.

The agitation of his fellow students unleashed by his death, backed by the national and international protests, and their teachers' resolve to side by them has forced the conceited administration to revoke the suspension of his remaining four comrades. In a spirit of revolt becoming the true moral tribute to Rohith, the students have immediately rejected the administration's awkward overture and declared their resolve to continue their struggle, until the people responsible, including Smriti Irani are punished. It is not important whether they would really be able to hold on before the might of the fascist regime, but the tone is already set for the latter's decimation. The students, who in their innocence greatly contributed to BJP's win in the last elections, have come together to say emphatic no to its casteist and communal agenda. It manifests into complete isolation of the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP's) students wing, Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) in campuses all over the country. There are indications that it may get a lasting organisational form. Rohith's death has already accomplished what he would not have been able to do living.

Criminality Exposed

While the saga of crime against Dalits is ancient, the roots of the current episode in the Central University of Hyderabad (HCU) lie in the false police complaint lodged by the ABVP's HCU Unit president and its state committee member, N Susheel Kumar alleging that a mob of 30 Ambedkar Students Association (ASA) members had beaten him to extract an apology for his remarks on Facebook calling ASA 'goons'. In fact it was in reaction to the demonstrations of the ASA condemning the ABVP attack on screening of 'Muzaffarnagar Baaqi Hain' (Muzaffarnagar eventually...) in Delhi University's Kirorimal College associated with arrogant statements like, '*main Hindu hoon, main tujhe thappad maarunga*' (I am a Hindu, I will slap you.).

Taking offence, the ASA had mobbed Susheel Kumar and demanded a written apology, which he gave in presence of security personnel. However, the next morning he admitted himself into a private hospital, got him photographed and filed a police complaint. The proctorial board of the HCU, in its investigations, did not find any 'hard evidence' for beating; the doctor as well as the security personnel having testified in negative. But still based on some ghost witnesses, the board recommended the suspension of five students for a semester, reportedly under pressure from the BJP Member of Legislative Council (MLC) Ramachandra Rao. The MLC met the then Vice Chancellor (VC) Prof. R.P. Sharma and the BJP MP and Union Labour Minister of State Bandaru Dattatreya, who wrote to the Union Human Resources Development Minister Smriti Irani.

Dattatreya is an RSS member of 50 years vintage, *pracharak* (Hindu evangelist) for two decades, a veteran BJP leader to be a minister of state in the Atal Behari Vajpayee as well as in the current Modi government. His letter to Smriti Irani, who has been infamously promoting Hindutva agenda in educational institutions, has eventually precipitated the abominable punishment that led to Rohith's death. Dattatreya's letter irresponsibly complained against the HCU for having become a mute spectator of the 'casteist, extremist and anti-national' activities of the ASA. In support of his charge he alleged that the ASA had protested against the hanging of Yakub Menon.

Smriti Irani suggestively wrote to the VC to take action as she had done earlier in the case of an anonymous complaint against the Ambedkar Periyar Study Circle in IIT, Madras. As per these recommendations, five ASA members were suspended for a semester. It sparked off massive protest, which forced the VC to revoke the order pending investigation by a new committee. The new VC Prof Appa Rao, with a two-decade history of rustivating Dalit students, who is now being openly accused by his own staff as being casteist (The News Minute, January 22, 2016) crawled into expelling five students out of hostel and banning them from accessing library, hostel and administrative building in groups. The punishment had all the symbolism associated with the *Manusmriti* vis-a-vis the outcastes.

Vile Stratagem

It is not either the stray case of prejudice of certain casteist functionary or the first case of Dalit scholar committing suicide in the HCU, nor is the HCU the only university in the country to have such incidents. That the caste venom pervades the country is proved by several surveys right from 1950s throughout this century, as late as in 2015, and such incidences are perhaps rising in recent years as revealed by its raw manifestation in the form of atrocities.

According to the National Crime Research Bureau (NCRB) Atrocities have risen from 33507 in 2001 to 47064 in 2014.

The reason can be traced to the social Darwinist ethos of neoliberalism, which reversed the welfarist paradigm created by Keynesian economics. Its social implications contra-intuitively resonate with the upsurge of Hindutva forces in the country, evidenced by the BJP's rise from a marginal position in 1980s to be the contender for political power at the centre. Castes, which were being spoken about in hush-hush tone, are now flaunted and justified in the open. The Hindu religiosity was considered a mark of backwardness, is being proudly exhibited with wraps of vermilion threads tied onto wrists and *kumkum* marks on the foreheads even by the professorial class.

It is this Brahminic upsurge, which is driving Dalit scholars to kill themselves. Speaking of the HCU, there have been reportedly twelve suicides of the Dalit scholars since its inception in 1970 but most of them (8) during the past one decade. Rohith's being the ninth. Senthil Kumar (2008), pursuing PhD in Physics, R. Balaraj (2010), pursuing PhD in Telugu Literature, Madari Venkatesh (2013), a PhD scholar in High Energy Materials and Pulyala Raju (2013), a Post Graduate student in Applied Linguistics are a few names that are easily remembered because their cases were investigated by the committees which pointed out the rampant caste discrimination to be the cause. However these efforts failed to sensitise the casteist administration. On the contrary, they are further emboldened to persist with it obviously encouraged by the right wing forces in power.

How does it sync with the desperate attempts of the right wing government to woo Dalits through its over-kill of love for their icon in Babasaheb Ambedkar? It is not difficult to fathom. It wants Dalits to accomplish its Hindutva agenda but not radical Dalits that could spoil its broth. Memorialising Ambedkar or going gaga over observation of his 125th birth anniversary, it hopes, would fool gullible Dalit masses into voting for it. But a few radicalised Rohiths could topple its applegart. It is unfortunate; the Dalits do not understand that Ambedkar wanted *prabuddha* (enlightened) Dalits to emerge from his followers and not the hymn-singing devotees. It is therefore that Ambedkar risked emphasising higher education over the elementary education because he saw that only the former could create critical thinking in people and provide moral strength to stand up against the free play of caste prejudices of dominant elements.

The government is crushing these potential torchbearers of Ambedkar in every possible manner while singing paeans to him. The strategy of the Hindutva camp is to Brahminise common folks of the Dalits and to demonise the radical Dalits. As dissenting Muslim youth are branded terrorist, Dalit-

Adivasi youth are being stamped as extremists, casteists and anti-nationals. The Indian jails are filled with such innocent youth incarcerated for years under the vague charges like sedition and unlawful activities. Under the veil of *samarasata* the Hindutva forces feigning caste blindness could oppress the Dalits with impunity. Death symbolises the exit from this oppression the life is enduring.

Political Portents

Rohith's death exposed the multi-layered injustice of the saffron establishment. Entire student community, barring of course the ABVP, came out spontaneously condemning the Hindutva hooliganism. It exposed the Dalit leaders who failed even to speak out against their political patrons in the face of such monumental injustice. The Dalits who were fooled by them into voting for the Hindutva forces have slowly woken up to see their folly. The caste is culture of ancient India, which is craved by the Hindutva forces. What Dalits call discrimination, is automatic and natural to the Hindutva. Howsoever, they camouflaged it as expedient for their political strategy; it has kept spilling over in many ways every day.

The Prime Minister speaking at Lucknow University described Rohith's death just as loss to a mother and shed crocodile tears in filmy style. He kept mum over the misdeeds of his own ministers that contributed to Rohith's death despite huge political backlash. Smruti Irani in her characteristic ineptitude tried blaming the entire HCU episode to Dalits lying. She said that a Dalit professor had headed the sub-committee that had recommended the punishing Rohith and his comrades. It provoked all Dalit teachers of the HCU to resign *en masse* from their administrative responsibilities. The previous day, the teachers' body of the HCU had boldly rejected the request from the VC to resume classes until the punishment was revoked. The VC had to lick the dust and revoke the suspension. The Prime Minister announced the judicial commission to enquire into the entire episode in another attempt to cover up the sins of his own clan. This all would not go unnoticed by people. The Brahminical pride in self righteousness blinds BJP to see Rohith's noose tightening around its neck too.