



In the wake of the widespread anger over the death of the Dalit PhD scholar Rohit Vemula at the University of Hyderabad, many excuses have been proffered to divert attention away from caste. One of these is about the so-called 'Decline of the University'. But were Indian universities really ever, as we are told, liberal institutions concerned with excellence, bursting with secular ideals, and open to, if not welcoming of, dissent?

Of course not. As political scientist Gopal Guru has pointed out, although universities are expected to espouse the concept of 'universal', they have always been at odds with it in India, whether in the sense of inclusive or broad-minded. Students from Bahujan communities often enter these institutions with great difficulty, fighting against economic hardship and social discrimination, and via enormous sacrifices by their families. Have these institutions ever shown the sensitivity to appreciate such students? No.

Rohith Vemula's death is only more evidence of the same. A brilliant and erudite scholar, Vemula was also active in the Ambedkar Students Association (ASA) on the campus which provided support to students from disadvantaged backgrounds and also sought to intervene intellectually in civil society. But members of the ASA were accused of being 'anti-nationals' by the ABVP (the BJP's student wing), after they participated in meetings to protest the beef ban and the hanging of Yakub Memon. After a series of such accusations, the ABVP charged Vemula and others with assault. Although the charge was confirmed as false by the police, the University took action, apparently following orders from Central ministers. In a step to deny them basic shelter, food and human interaction, a step that proves that the horrific practice of outcaste-ing of Dalits is neither dead nor confined to some rural hinterland, Vemula and four others – all Dalits – were evicted from the hostel, and barred from the mess and other student areas.

With no home in the city, the five students spent the nights in the open, in the biting cold of the Hyderabad winter. Rohith Vemula wrote to the Vice-Chancellor, suggesting that poison be given to Dalit students during the admission process itself. There was no response. He finally killed himself, leaving a note expressing disgust for a society where 'the value of a man was

reduced to his immediate identity and nearest possibility... Never was a man treated as a



Universities or Agraharams?

Vemula's scholarship – with which he had tried to support both himself and his family – had not been paid for seven months when he died. His was the ninth suicide at the University in ten years, almost all by students from marginalised communities.

All this, and more from the University's history, like Dalit research students not being provided supervisors for years, or a well built for the exclusive use of a brahmin professor, show the accuracy of the description by writers on the Ambedkarite portal Round Table India (www.roundtableindia.org) – that these prestigious educational institutions are really agraharams, i.e. settlements reserved for brahmins.

In Goa, for example, despite the affirmative policies mandated by the Constitution of India, many students belonging to the Bahujan communities identified as SC, ST and OBC prefer to join BA or BSc degree courses in the so-called 'general' category, rather than taking up reserved seats in prestigious professional courses. For it is common knowledge that 'reserved-category' students get ignored, if not harassed, by the mostly savarna teachers. These teachers, instead of explaining how 'merit' is really a euphemism for privilege, and encouraging students who are often first generation learners, identify with the savarna students and foster resentment against them.

The teachers are mostly savarna because the constitutionally-mandated reservation policy – followed grudgingly, if at all, for students – was usually ignored when it came to university teaching jobs. Even after Bahujan organisations took up the issue from the 1990s, following which the Supreme Court laid down strict guidelines for the filling of reserved posts, and professors were also brought under the ambit of reservations, only 7 % of college teachers across India were from the SC communities (against a required 15%) last year; and only 2% from ST (required 7.5%).

For example, Goa University hit the headlines two years ago when Bahujan applicants for

faculty positions exposed its failure to follow the reservation rules in recruitment. While the recruitment roster showed lower figures for reserved posts than actually the case, the authorities ignored even these flawed numbers while making new appointments. Not surprisingly, the University has less than 5% of faculty members from all the Bahujan communities, when they should be nearly 50%. But even this is an improvement, according to insiders; earlier there used to be none.

So there is actually no decline of our universities, but a tiny improvement – and it has come as a result of people like Rohith Vemula fighting to make these institutions meritorious and universal, at huge personal cost. But the agraharams will not give in easily. Goa University is right now running a public course on Caste Today, under the Visiting Professors Programme, which seems like a radical step. But the course is chaired by a brahmin, assisted by guest lecturers among whom are a disproportionate number again of brahmins. The more things change, the university no doubt hopes, the more they will remain the same.

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