

By DALE LUIS MENEZES



Lessons that Students Learn: Mol in Times of GAA
It is four years since the tragic death of Hyderabad Central University scholar Rohith Vemula.

Driven to commit suicide by a deeply casteist and discriminatory educational system, Vemula now is a symbol of liberation for all students who hail from minoritized- and discriminated-against backgrounds. In the context of the recent country-wide protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019, Vemula's memory fortifies protestors to soldier on.

Vemula's life and death is also an indication that thousands of people in India desire education, particularly higher education, even when the system is so discriminatory and fails to deliver quality education. Many of these people, just like Vemula, want to be writers, scientists and enjoy the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. However, as Vemula's life and pursuit of his dreams indicate, this aspiration for education and a better life is riddled with obstacles. Yet, it was through higher education and the university space that Vemula challenged the casteist politics in India—many like him do the same.

The access to higher education after the Mandal Commission reforms has resulted in many students from minoritized backgrounds thinking about how to make their lives and those of others better. It has also resulted in students from elite backgrounds coming in contact with their non-elite colleagues. Though not always in mutually respectful encounters, this sharing of educational space has led to a change in thinking about Indian society. In short, more people are challenging received wisdom and articulating their opposition to discrimination. More and more people want a say in their political futures.

Thus, many students, like and unlike Vemula, join schools, colleges, and universities to make something out of their lives, to succeed, and to have decent employment. If there is a disconnect between what students expect from education and the realities outside an educational institution, they realize that their hopes, dreams, and aspirations will not be fulfilled. Therefore so many students have taken the lead in safeguarding their futures by registering their protests against misguided policies of the government.

Despite having a less than ideal educational system in this country, it can be said that education has positively molded minds. Perhaps, it is the values that education imparts that makes some difference, however little it may be. In learning about ourselves and the world around us, students are automatically led to question: Why does a particular chemical reaction occur? Why does an equation work? Why is there so much poverty around us?

Hence, in Goa, it was not surprising to see the speech by a 14-year old student, Diksha Talaulikar, a student of Maria Bambina Convent High School, to make the news. This speech, made on occasion to mark 70 years of the Indian Constitution, organized by the Department

of Education, was a passionate plea against the Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019. Naturally, the ruling establishment was utterly embarrassed by the moral clarity shown by a young student.

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Talaulikar, perfectly trained in the art of formal elocution, pleaded, “And today this bill discriminates [against] them (Muslims), thus making a mockery of my fundamental duty to promote harmony and the spirit of common brotherhood among people, transcending religion, region, and linguistic diversities. The country is burning. The soul of the Constitution, the Preamble, the liberty, equality, and fraternity has been murdered.”

Considering that Talaulikar is not alone in expressing such an opinion as school, college, and university students across the country are increasingly vocal about the state of affairs, we have to ask how the educational system can be made better. For despite the less than ideal condition of the educational system, some students demonstrate a remarkable moral clarity that is crucial to the health of the Indian republic and democracy. One needs to urgently think of the reform of primary, secondary, and university system in Goa.

As stated earlier, the demand for a better system comes from the citizens, especially those who are socially discriminated and economically deprived. Take, for instance, the demand for government aid for primary schools using English as the medium of instruction. Popularly known as the Mol controversy, it was a movement that demanded quality education for children so that, much like the children of the rich, the majority of the poor children will have a better shot at gaining employment.

Learning from the Mol movement can inform our current debates over citizenship. While those who were opposed to English as a medium of instruction wanted the poor to bear the burden of learning Indian languages with no guarantees of gainful employment, the poor wanted education in a seemingly foreign language for a chance at a better life. The poor, therefore, was only asking for a deeper realization of their Indian citizenship—the constitutionally guaranteed right of equal education.

The present moment of widespread student protests is an excellent opportunity in Goa to revisit the basic issues of education, as I have tried to show in reference to the Mol movement. The stress by some to use *only* ‘mother tongue’ as Mol for primary instruction is a political ploy to keep poor children undereducated, thus stealing their right to equal opportunity in employment. By not providing proper education to all members of the society, without discrimination, citizenship only ends up being a hollow concept.

The answer to many of our current woes, then, is simple: the education system needs to be better. Because even if it is bad, many students have found a way to make the best out of a

worse situation. How much better would it be if we had a better education system?



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