

Statement issued by Concerned Academics on the Suicide of Rohith Vemula

The suicide of Rohith Vemula is now the subject of a ridiculous inquiry to be conducted by a Committee set up by Union HRD Minister Smriti Irani. The real reason and the politics behind it are clear to those who are willing to open their eyes. As academics, we are concerned that such a situation should prevail in Universities, and wish to register our protest.

Muzaffarnagar Baaqi Hai was to be screened at the University of Hyderabad. The action was planned by the Ambedkar Students' Association. The Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad, student goons of the RSS, used force to try and halt this. Dalit students were subjected to verbal abuse as well as physical force. As a result of agitations the ABVP had to apologise in writing. This was what caused such tremendous heartburns to the Hindutva forces. While the screening of Muzaffarnagar Baaqi Hai has taken place in various parts of the country, and has also given rise to conflicts in various parts of the country, it is in UoH alone that the consequences turned so aggressive with full participation of the top echelons of the University. The new Vice Chancellor, Appa Rao Podile, had five PhD students suspended. They were subjected to social ostracism as well. Thrown out of hostel, debarred from entering library, administrative spaces, they were hounded in a way that no administration has hounded any upper caste student in our memory. It is also reported that an MHRD letter designated them anti-national for opposing the hanging of Yakub Memon. The MHRD, today proclaiming autonomy of Universities, was goading UoH through several letters to take action against the ASA. Rohith had even written a letter to the Vice Chancellor a couple of weeks ago, where he suggested the University provide means of committing suicide to Dalit students. Even after this the authorities did nothing. And after the suicide, the police acted in a brutal and shameless manner, grabbing the body of Rohith and disposing of it in secrecy instead of handing it over to his relatives.

As a result, we need to conclude the following:

That while other conflicts, such as over communalism, over a host of issues, do remain important, when they are fought with Dalits at one end, the attitude of government and authorities becomes far more aggressive.

That there is a generalised hostility to Dalits, and a great insensitivity to the burdens they carry, which is why the Hindutva offensive against the ASA could proceed so far with so little protest from across the country.

This should once again force us to open our eyes, as incidents repeatedly, whether the suicide of Chuni Kotal in 1992, or the death of Balmukund Bharti, again by suicide, or so many other cases should have, that while formally the Constitution of India declares the end of casteism, in reality Brahmanism is rampant, and Dalits today have to fight the same battle as Shambuk or Ekalavya. If we are really sincere in desiring democracy and substantive equality, we must stand up and be counted in the struggle against casteism.

We demand:

- Removal of Smriti Irani as the Minister in charge of a Department that wrote repeated letters to UoH demanding punishment of so-called anti-national students.
- Removal of the Vice Chancellor and his punishment for casteism, and for abetting suicide.
- Action against all those using casteist abuse on social media against the ASA.

Signatories:

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