

A Tragic Exit from Social Death¹

- Gopal Guru¹

In spite of his continuous victimization, Rohith Vemula did live a life of the mind that militated against the caste of the mind.

Let me start with what might be seen like an overstatement, that Rohith Vemula's tragic death marks an exit from the larger phenomenon of social death that Dalit students and teachers face through everyday forms of discrimination and worse, humiliation.

In the Indian context, social death gets defined in terms of the social stigma that Dalits, particularly students, are forced to silently suffer. The social stigma acts in stages. First it seeks to reduce a person or a group to a repulsive or undesirable other and then cancels out the severed other from all forms of human civilizational interaction. It has been our general experience particularly with the institutions of higher learning that the 'stigmatised other' gets produced through active as well as passive forms of social boycott.

An active mode involves imposition of social sanction mostly by the pre-modern authority such as caste. And hence the social boycott imposed by public authority on the five Dalit students, including Rohith, is unknown to any modern penal system. Curiously, it resembles the state authority that existed in the 19th century Peshwa state in Maharashtra.

The passive mode of social boycott, on the other hand, is enacted through a very subtle social matrix, like non-Dalit students refraining from joining courses that have strong Dalit component, and non-Dalit teachers avoiding opportunities to guide Dalit students. Such passive social boycott finds its expression in Dalit students' efforts to force some universities to introduce reservation in the allotment of supervisors. Passive social boycott also find its tragic expression in Dalit research scholars committing suicide on account of not getting supervisors for three years, as in Hyderabad Central University.

Hostel life on university campuses in the country has been socially hostile to Dalit students, while campus civic life is less hospitable towards the marginalised sections including Dalits. Needless to say the institutional support is inadequate and at times completely lacking as in the case of the five Dalit students from the central university in question. Other social resources such as the interventions of concerned teachers is fast depleting on the university campus.

This is not to suggest that non-Dalit teachers lack moral commitment to stand by Dalit students, but such motivated teachers are unable to focus required attention on the issue of caste-based discrimination on the campuses. The failure has to be understood in terms of the existential struggle in which such teachers are engaged. They are driven to make survival attempts in a professionally hostile atmosphere which is replete with destructive envy and enmity. In the end such failure on the part of the faculty does lead to passive injustice to the much traumatised Dalit students who feel

increasingly more vulnerable to the fear of victimization should they speak against discrimination on their own.

It is hence irony to imagine that the institutions of higher learning are supposed to encourage the academic community including Dalits, so that they can later enjoy intellectual autonomy that constitutes the minimum moral condition to live a life of the mind. A life of the mind motivates one to develop ambitions for ideas, thus seeking to outgrow narrow caste identities and to become the part of a universal idea.

Universities are supposed to enable Dalit students to appear in different spheres of learning and scholarship without the sense of shame and stigma. Institutions of higher learning are not supposed to perpetuate a deep sense of stigma leading to loss of self-worth and meaninglessness. Every student, including Dalits, has a right to gracefully exit from the university both into opportunity structures as well as into a more humane, decent society.

The question that one needs to ask is: how far have we fulfilled these conditions that are necessary for a graceful exit?

Universities are egalitarian structures that should encourage students to speak in a universal language that concerns the well being of humanity. This was the normative thrust of the philosophically reflective letter written by Rohith Vemula. Rohith's lived academic existence on the campus, though unfortunately short, however, has enormous moral significance. In spite of his continuous victimization, he did live a life of the mind that militated against the caste of the mind. Ironically his profoundly intellectual expression, scholarly depth and commitment to universal human values shows the intellectual limits of Dalit leaders from the ruling parties.

Rohith's letter has issues some everlasting moral guidance around which we can organize our future life. The letter in its philosophically reflective tone has suggested to us not reproduce the barbaric cycle of hatred. In a profound sense, he has morally surpassed all those university kids who otherwise wear merit on their sleeves and walk proudly on campuses.

Honestly speaking, one requires moral/ ethical capacity to fully grasp if not earnestly appreciate Rohith's intellectual depth and normative commitment to both human as well as values in nature. Hence, conveniently constructing a counterfactual that Rohith provided reasons for his own fate amounts to reducing his intellectual calibre to banality.

Let me end this essay, by drawing first on Baburao Bagul, one of the doyens of Marathi Dalit literature, and Rohith. Both seem to be suggesting that being born in a particular caste that robs one of his/her moral essence is indeed a fatal mistake. One has to rectify such a mistake by waging war against all forms of discrimination. But the necessary condition to eliminate the condition that produced social death in society is to create transformative consciousness among those who do not think that their birth in a particular caste is not a fatal accident.

¹Reproduced with gratitude from Outlook Magazine, Feb 1, 2016, (Online Extra) Accessed on 26th Jan 2016, at: <http://www.outlook-india.com/article/a-tragic-exit-from-social-death/296480>