

Against the wind..

Written by Manisha Mashaal

Published on 10 March 2016

ROUND TABLE INDIA

Manisha Mashaal



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My name is Manisha Mashaal. I am a grassroots anti-caste activist, orator and singer. I am from a small village in Haryana and as a Dalit woman I have overcome many hurdles to be where I am today. Now, I am a first generation learner in my family. I have two degrees: a Bachelors and Master of Arts in Women's Studies. And it is from this experience, that I can tell you the battle for #JusticeForRohith is not over.

When I first heard about Rohith Vemula's suicide, I was heartbroken. The more I got to know about him, the more I appreciated his strength and intelligence. For a courageous soul like Rohith, to commit suicide, it was not because of his "weakness" but because he had been pushed to a level of dehumanization at which he had no more tools available to fight anymore. I know Rohith's story because it could have been my own. I too have been there. There were many points during my studies when I thought truly it would be better to die.

I want to share my own experiences in detail because we are at a moment where we are still unable to visualize the full extent of the violence of our casteist educational system of this country. People are still engaged in debates about reservation and the lack of "merit" of the marginalized peoples. But I want us all to ask: What kind of education are we providing to marginalized students at all? An education that is a half-hearted attempt aimed at wounding and pushing us out?

Caste doesn't just operate in higher education. It is everywhere in our lives and begins to rear its head much earlier in school. When I was kindergarten, I was told by my teacher that I was "a lower caste" and that I should sit in the back of the class. He would bark, "How dare you Chude (Valmiki) try to sit in the front? Go to the back! Why do you come to school? Why don't you cut grass in the fields like you are supposed to?"

This was how I found out what caste I was. At the time I didn't fully understand what this meant, but because of how angry he was, I realized that being Valmiki meant something bad. Having school teachers discourage you from learning is the reality many first generation learners like myself face. Our families do work in the fields. We are indentured through caste to landlords all through out India. To go to school alongside these oppressors' children and then to be demeaned in front of them too - is atrocious. As a child you can barely make sense of it.

The bullying continued for me through high school, the teachers would never address me by my name - Manisha. Instead they would make up names for me like "late admission wali" or "bindiwali" to highlight my Dalitness and shame me. In contrast, the upper caste girls and boys were addressed by their proper names. After years of abuse I had had enough. One day I missed school because of a serious incident at home, the next day the teacher hurled abuses at me I asked him "Why do you only reprimand me? Why not ask this upper caste girl who missed school yesterday as well? When I first asserted myself, the teacher could not handle it, he threw my bags and books out of the class and refused to teach me, grade me or allow me into his class ever again. But I did not give up. I came to school everyday. I sat outside the class with my bags and books everyday and listened in. Despite this, at the end of the school year, he failed me.

Dalit children go through truly toxic casteism before they even land anywhere near the door to an institution of higher education. This is in addition to the social torment our families are subjected to. So its fair to ask, do the policies of reservation even begin to neutralize the enormity of oppression that students like myself have had to cross to compete with other students?

As I graduated from high school and began to think about college, I knew it would be difficult. I struggled with preparing myself for the social and economic hurdles. However, I knew that if I didn't make it to college, my options would be restricted to an early marriage and working in a brick kiln or cutting grass. I knew I was meant for more. I wanted to be a leader who could change the situation for my peoples. So with great difficulty I enrolled at Indira Gandhi National College in Ladwa, Haryana.

One the very first day of college, I quickly realized that in India's abodes of higher education, untouchability ran silently rampant. Most students immediately split along caste lines. Upper caste students asked me the name of my caste before they asked me my own name. When they found out I was a "quota" (reservation) student, that was all they wanted to do with me. They refused to talk to me, share notes with me, study with me or eat with me. The three other Dalit girls in my class had the same experience. We stuck together and stayed within ourselves.

The discrimination I was subjected to in college ranged from subtle to direct. During an NSS (National Service Scheme) camp, we were asked to do our own chores, cook and clean-up. When we were sweeping, an upper caste girl complained that she was being made to do " the work of 'Chude' and 'Chamars' ". I was deeply hurt by the bluntness of her abuse and I accused her of casteism. As our argument escalated, professors reprimanded me for being argumentative but did not even attempt to warn the upper caste girl. That day, one Dalit professor took me aside and consoled me saying "Manisha,

our battle is larger than this. There's much we have to do. We have to strategise. Let this go."

However, I didn't have the bandwidth to process these instances or explore them politically because, for me, striving to meet financial needs dominated most of my time and energy. While I was surrounded by upper caste upper class students comfortable in an urban setting, I was struggling with the new set of burdens. Even with scholarships, my family and I had a lot of difficulty paying the fees for the second year. My brother had somehow managed to take out loans to pay for the first year but we did not have enough money for proper clothing, a good bag or even books. The situation was so tough that each day after college, I would rush home to have time to wash the suit to be able to wear it the next day. Some of the students began to call me "phoolon wali suit" (the girl with the flowered dress) because I wore the same suit so much.

At the end of the first year, I thought that like many other Dalit students unable to pay fees, I too would have to drop out. During this time, my uncle, told me to go see Assistant Deputy Commissioner Sumita Khataria. Ms. Khataria was a Dalit woman who had struggled hard in her life come up in life through education. When I met with her, I think she may have seen her own younger self in me. She offered to pay my fees and even bought me some books and a bicycle. Even as Ms.Khataria was helping me, I knew that she faced a lot of criticism from other colleagues and upper caste educators who accused her of working along caste lines. But this act of loving empathy from a fellow Dalit woman actually allowed me to have a real chance at higher learning.

But why I was the "lucky" one? I fought through an oppressive society to be educated. Is that not enough by itself? To really address the casteism in our society we must address the casteism in our schools. Otherwise we will be unable to end this system. Luck should not be the guarantor of success. We should systematize support for Dalit students like myself to help us not only get admission, but to thrive.

My experiences in college represent the experiences of a vast section of Dalit students who do not go to "elite" schools in India - the JNUs or IITs. We go to small state and private institutions close to our hometowns. These colleges, including my own, don't have any state-of-the-art labs or centers. In fact, they often have very poor infrastructure and insufficient faculty. Dalit students suffer further loss of access due to discrimination. Teachers and administration make it difficult for us to obtain of everything from entry into labs, library books, scholarships to job opportunities. We are made to run around from one office to another for the signatures, for scholarships to be released, for food and everything else. I always felt we were deliberately kept in desperation mode right at the edge of meeting our needs.

By the time I enrolled in Masters (Women's Studies) at Kurukshetra University, I realized that in many ways, survival through these institutions required both resilience of personality and the empowerment of Ambedkarite politics. I was elected chairperson of DASFI (Dr. Ambedkar Student's Front of India) and became deeply involved in Dalit women's activism. But, even as women - Dalit women's politics are at odds with upper caste women. When Nirbhaya happened, I pointed out in class that these cases of sexual violence happen all the time to Dalit women and are never paid the kind of attention that Nirbhaya received. I referred the case of the young Dalit woman who was raped and

killed in Jind, Haryana. The whole class and the professor began disagreeing with me vehemently, arguing that rape is a "gender issue" not a "caste issue". I thought to myself that this was the rotten level of understanding in a Women's Studies program. Being women did not mean much when they could not even empathize with the vulnerabilities of a Dalit woman who had succumbed to severe violence. Because there is not a proper structure to accommodate our acts of stepping out of the caste order, getting an education presents many everyday practical problems. For example, Dalit girls in Haryana don't have many hostels. When there are hostels, we don't have the means to pay for them. This means that we have to travel long distances. I used to travel nearly 100 km everyday by bus, 50 km each way. To avoid this commute, many Dalit men stayed at Dharamsalas for days at a time. But we women had to run back home before it gets too dark. This often meant that that we had to board a particular bus at a particular time. As a consequence, there was then no time to visit the library for reading or take part in extracurricular activities. When we get back home in the evening, the day doesn't end. We have to wash, clean, cook and see to the care of our siblings and family members. We have to do ALL this and STILL perform well at college. I often ask - is persevering through these conditions, in itself, not meritorious enough?

These problems discouraged Dalit parents from wanting to send their daughters to universities. Many times, they would express that they preferred their daughters alive and uneducated than educated and dead. After, my master's I started visiting the families of these girls. I convinced their parents that they could stay at my office in Kurukshetra and go to university. That way they weren't making long and dangerous trips everyday and could focus on their studies. At the office, I walk them through the bureaucracy of the university and give advice. I allow them to accompany me as I go about my activism. By watching me, they learn to be bold. I teach them what I understand about Babasaheb and their constitutional rights. If I start to see a change in their demeanour, they are speaking up, then I know they are beginning to feel more empowered and activated. Truly, I believe this is the real education they get, not the farce they are administered at our universities.

This country is often embroiled in debates about reservation and "merit". They want to ask many questions about brothers like Rohith. Without shame, they question his merit too. I want to ask where do upper castes derive their merit from? From their superior abilities or their "superior" caste? Dalit men and women like myself face enough oppression in our lives to scorch any so-called upper caste to a bent and broken down pile of bones. And still, we not only persist, but are constantly glancing behind us, to lend a hand, to raise another sister, another brother, a mother, a lover - even as we are immersed in the battle to slay the feudal fascist monster on our path. End your false debates. I pronounce, that there is no soul more meritorious, than the radiant Dalit student.

Jai Bhim. #JusticeforRohith

We thank **Pushpa Yadav** and **Arvind Shesh** for translations and **Valli Karunakaran** for editorial inputs.

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Manisha Mashaal is a firebrand Dalit woman organizer, thinker, orator and movement singer. She is currently the Haryana state coordinator of the All India Dalit Women's Rights Forum (AIDMAM). Her speeches are fierce and continue to inspire audiences from Punjab to San Francisco. She has a Masters degree in Women's Studies from Kurukshetra University. Passionate for Dalit women's wellbeing, Manisha is the kind of anti-caste leader that this generation can look up to.