

The Death Of Anil Meena

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(Countercurrents)

Suicides by Dalit and tribal students is a story of discrimination

Merit is important — students have to go through gruelling entrance tests to prove their worth before joining any educational institution to become doctors, engineers, scientists.

In 2010, Anil Meena, from a tribal family of agriculturalists, a school topper, with 75 per cent marks in 10+2, covered the distance of over 500 km from his village in Baran district, Rajasthan, to Delhi. He had again proved his merit in one of the toughest medical entrance exams to become a doctor at one of the country's prestigious educational institutions — the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS).

However, within two years of his stay at this prestigious institution, on March 3, 2012, he hanged himself. The reasons, according to the AIIMS administration, are that he was “depressed”, developed “psychiatric” problems because of his inability to cope with the rigorous academic environment combined with his lack of skills in the English language. Anil was 22 years old.

It is mere coincidence that on the same day, March 3, in 2010, Balmukund Bharti, a Dalit student at AIIMS, committed suicide in similar fashion, but this coincidence does not end with the date. A son of a Class III employee, a native of village Kundeshwar, Tikamgarh district, Bundelkhand (MP), one of the most backward regions of the country, Balmukund was also a school topper from Navodaya Vidyalaya and possessed many certificates of

academic excellence, including one from the president of India, before getting admission into AIIMS after proving his merit in its entrance exam.

We are told that he was also “depressed” and committed suicide by hanging himself in his hostel room due to “his inability to cope up with academic performance” demanded by the institution. Balmukund was 25 years of age, and was just a couple of months away from becoming a doctor from AIIMS, something his parents say has not happened in the surrounding areas in the last 50 years.

AIIMS is not a lone institution. There is a long list in the recent past that includes almost all premier educational institutions — various IITs, Indian Institute of Science (IISc) Bangalore, University of Hyderabad and many more, where otherwise brilliant Dalit and Adivasi students, school and college toppers, gave up their hopes and chose to commit suicide.

The conventional wisdom is that these students got admission through reservations with “lesser merit” and gave up their lives unable to match the academic expectations of these premier educational institutions. And the definition of this “merit” is defined strictly in terms of marks at the entrance level, conveniently discounting various other factors like social background, family, medium of instruction in school, the rural-urban divide that play a major role in the performance of the students.

So a student from an urban-based upper-caste/ upper-class background with both parents literate and from much better schools, most often elite private English-medium ones, is considered more “meritorious”, more “deserving” with her 85 per cent marks, than those “quota” students with their 75 per cent marks scored fighting against all their debilitating social realities.

This perceived “lack of merit” among Dalit and Adivasi students and their admissions through “quotas” breeds so much resentment among other students, faculties and college administrations that these students feel

totally alienated from campus life, which is dominated by upper-caste students and faculty, and have to go through constant harassment and daily insults in class, in hostels, in playgrounds, in messes.

It is not the academic pressure that these students are unable to cope with; it is the environment of these campuses, with their entrenched casteism that gets displayed in defining “merit”, resulting in caste discrimination from both students and faculty, that Dalit and Adivasi students are not able to deal with.

It is not their lack of efforts in studies that force them to give up their lives after developing “psychiatric” problems, but the feeling of rejection that they experience from these institutions that forces them to take this extreme step.

With their brilliant academic performances in schools, these students enter professional institutions with immense self-confidence and faith in the system that promises a bright future and fair treatment solely based on their academic performances but in reality judges them, from Day One, on their social identities and family background without giving them the chance to prove their merit. That is what shatters them.

In 2006, the Indian government constituted a three-member inquiry committee under the chairmanship of Professor S.K. Thorat, the then UGC chairperson, to look into the complaints of Dalit and Adivasi students of AIIMS.

The first of its kind to probe into caste discrimination in institutes of higher learning, the committee came out with a detailed report and brought out the horrors of caste discrimination suffered by “quota” students on this campus that included physical assaults, boycott by fellow students, deliberate failing by faculties and total insensitivity shown by the AIIMS administration.

The committee also gave various recommendations like establishing equal opportunity cells, transparency in grading, strong punishment for caste discrimination. But the AIIMS administration, rather than engage in introspection, declared the report biased and refuted every allegation of casteism on the campus and even threatened to sue the Thorat committee for bringing disrepute to the institute that promotes excellence and is engaged in the service of the nation.

If one visits the illiterate parents of Senthil Kumar, a PhD student in physics from Tamil Nadu, who committed suicide on February 24, 2008, at the University of Hyderabad, the first thing they produce for the visitors are his certificates that bore the testimony of his merit and his efforts, making him the first from his pig-rearing pannandi caste, the lowest in caste hierarchy, to enter the portals of higher education.

Along with the certificates you can find a diary where Senthil wrote: “I want to bring Nobel prize for my country.” If you flip through its pages, you will also find a picture of A.P.J. Abdul Kalam from a newspaper cutting, with a title in Senthil’s handwriting: “My Role Model.”

These students came up by beating all odds and proved their merit in more than one way. Do our premier educational institutions, AIIMS, IITs and universities, have the required merit and efficiency to be able to teach such brilliant students?

The writer started Insight Foundation, a platform for Dalit and Adivasi youth, focused on higher education issues.