

When I ‘came out’ as Dalit

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And why I rejected Rohith Vemula's Facebook friend request.



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‘They’ are the ‘lower’ caste individuals who routinely face abuse and discrimination, most often in rural areas, where such incidents are readily dismissed or forgotten after some initial outrage. The ‘we’ are those of us who cluck our tongues in dismay each time we hear of a Dalit being abused or discriminated against, who write editorials in national and international dailies with headlines nonchalantly announcing “India still needs to deal with its caste problem”, before going back to our lives. After all the stories of blatant injustice and discrimination within universities, within the judiciary, within workplaces were ‘their’ stories, not ‘our stories’ or those of the nation.

At least until one bright, young Dalit scholar pursuing a PhD in science technology and society studies talked about stardust and Carl Sagan in his suicide note – one he wrote as an outspoken protest against the the value of a man being “reduced to his immediate identity and nearest possibility. To a vote. To a number. To a thing. Never was a man treated as a mind. As a glorious thing made up of star dust.”

Rohith Vemula was among five students who were suspended from the Hyderabad Central University hostel and barred access from public spaces including the

administrative building. Rohith had grown up under difficult familial circumstances, after his father – from a slightly ‘upper’ backward caste – abandoned Vemula’s mother. She supported Vemula and his siblings through school by working several odd jobs, including that of a low-income tailor. Vemula later worked as a daily wage laborer to support himself through university, where he not only asserted his caste but also fearlessly opposed the systemic discrimination against Dalits as a student activist. Labeled an ‘extremist’ by university authorities, the monthly stipend of INR 25,000 (USD 370), of which he had been sending a major chunk home to support his mother, was stopped abruptly in July 2015. Then in December last year, shortly before his death, he was expelled. Hopeless and having accrued a debt of INR 40,000 (USD 600), Rohith Vemula committed suicide on 18 January 2016.

His lucid and poignant last note appealed to cosmopolitan sensibilities and within a day had gone viral across the country. The social media uprising spilled on to the streets, with students from the Hyderabad Central University being joined by those in Delhi, Mumbai, Pune, Bengaluru and other Indian cities joining in protest over the discrimination that drove Vemula to suicide. Almost immediately, his death also became a political gambit. The ruling party initially dismissed the suicide as “not a caste issue” and later attempted to dissect and dismiss his Dalit identity in an effort to salvage ‘lower’ caste votes. If Vemula could be painted as non-Dalit, then his death would not elicit the same sympathy from millions of Dalit voters – and not turn against those who drove him to suicide.

When this tactic failed to work, India’s rulers took the non-issue of sloganeering at a student meeting and aggrandised it into allegations of anti-nationalism at Jawaharlal Nehru University, arresting students over charges of sedition for criticising the government and the Indian state. This successfully muffled the rage over Rohith Vemula’s death, in effect diverting national and media attention away from casteism and caste-based discrimination to a fabricated idea of nationalism. The opposition meanwhile wasted no time appropriating the unfortunate incident by insincerely comparing Vemula to Gandhi.

Protests over Vemula’s death even reached some parts of US, where pro-Dalit organisations rallied in Vemula’s support. Protesting students in Delhi faced brutal violence from the police, along with surreptitious use of force by the supporters of the Hindu nationalist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). With debates on television, regular reports in print and heated discourse online, Vemula’s suicide prompted one of the largest pro-Dalit caste movements India has seen in decades.

So how did ‘we’ – the mostly upper caste opinion makers, who shape the narrative in the media, make powerful decisions at private and multi-national corporations that

control almost all of the country's judiciary and popular culture – respond to it? 'Many of us said Vemula died because he was 'depressed'. 'We' tried to talk about our stories by glibly musing how 'we all' killed Rohith Vemula, instead of focusing on the insidious discrimination that led to his death. Some insisted Vemula was not Dalit and thus his death deserved no second thought. The rest of us were only too happy to disregard "the caste problem" as an exclusive affliction of the rural belts of the country.

Coming out

Until a few weeks ago, I too was a part of the 'we'. Despite being born an untouchable in a 'lower' caste family, I successfully passed myself as an 'upper' caste for almost all of my adult life. I spoke excellent English, wrote on fashion for the *Hindustan Times* in Delhi, had an ambiguous last name, and my complexion fell somewhere on the acceptable side of the dusky spectrum – supposedly all non-Dalit attributes. Nobody had trouble believing me.

Moving to Delhi right after school gave me the necessary distance and a fresh start to create my own identity. And I built that as a non-Dalit. My caste changed – from Brahmin to Baniya to Kshatriya – depending on who asked. I often remained silent when friends or colleagues discussed 'reservation' or 'quota category', afraid of them finding out that I was the one they were talking about. Or in college, if someone derided a student for having availed a seat through reservation, I often validated that mocking with my own silence, thinking, "At least they are not mocking me." Staying in Delhi I could never have the same courage to admit to being a Dalit that I gathered in New York, where no one ever questioned my caste.

In India, I meticulously scrubbed myself of my Dalit identity, as so many others in my position do, in an attempt to live a life free of judgment, discrimination and systemic inequality. Born a girl in Rajasthan – a state known not only for its bitter prejudice against caste but also one of the highest rates of female foeticide in the country – I already faced an uphill climb. I was not going to make it steeper by declaring myself as Dalit.

Rohith Vemula had sent me a Facebook friend request. I rejected it. Days later I was reading his suicide note when it went viral. Living in New York, I was just another journalism school graduate catching up on the news from back home, thanking my lucky stars for having passed undetected so far.

The missed connection from a life that could just as easily have been mine changed me. Here was someone who did not think twice before standing up for what was right, even when he was being viciously persecuted for it. Bolstered by his courage and the years spent away from both the thick shadow of my caste and the weight of my dual

identity, I decided to come out as Dalit in a confessional post on Facebook. I wanted to emulate Rohith in some way, to follow the trail he had blazed for Dalit rights. So I started [Documents of Dalit Discrimination](#), a safe space where Dalits like me could share, read and discuss their stories, and hopefully manage to come out too.

As a former online editor and an invisible Dalit, I somewhat expected the reaction my note received. I expected degrees of shock and surprise, for it to be shared heavily and appear on the websites it did. But I did not expect being called brave, courageous, exceptional and the overwhelming messages of support from across the world. I also didn't expect the foul and bitter vitriol of caste-based hatred that I had somehow managed to unleash on myself.

Until now, being Dalit had only caused me an exacting internal struggle: the strain of having to hide my identity, the shame I was forced to feel for it, friends becoming strangers on finding out my caste and strangers gauging my 'worth'. But I had never experienced the nauseating hate emanating from millennia of caste-based prejudice as I did after coming out as Dalit. Millions of Dalits who don't have the option to pass themselves as upper caste encounter this hate all their lives, especially those who like Rohith Vemula who choose to confront it or, unlike, him, don't have the means of articulating that anger. This palpable animosity and the resulting discrimination, which in some ways is more pernicious than it was centuries ago, surprisingly elude the attention of the average urban Indian. Many refuse to acknowledge its existence. In rural India, casteism takes extreme forms, with Dalit children routinely killed and teenage girls gang raped as revenge on the lower castes' temerity to progress and prosper. Most cases go unreported, without even a basic First Information Reports – mandatory for police to file on hearing a complaint of this nature. There continues to exist a disproportionately large number of pending cases involving crimes against Dalit and a high rate of acquittal in those cases. Day-to-day incidents such as forbidding Dalits from entering places of worship or wearing footwear – because even in the 21st century wearing shoes is considered a purview of the upper castes – are so common they barely warrant mention in the local dailies.

- When Dalits do make the papers, as in the case of two children, aged two and nine, who were burnt alive in the Delhi suburb of Faridabad after their parents' hut was set on fire, the stories are usually categorised under the inadequate label of 'Caste Violence'. Staff at English-language media comprise an upper caste majority with no lived experience of caste-based trauma, and even the most well-meaning end up classifying such stories as issues of the 'other'. Compared to heinous crimes in rural

areas, instances of urban discrimination (like willful negligence of PhD advisors in universities and deliberate withholding of scholarships reserved for the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes) are easily overlooked.

Growing up in Ajmer, my identity was that of my parents'. Those who knew them knew, I was Dalit. Neighbors often didn't drink water at our house and when a friend's mother discovered my caste, she suddenly stopped inviting me to their house. My classmates in school didn't always know my caste. However, that didn't stop them from asking what my caste was. That's when I started lying about it. Back home, when I told my mother what I was doing to escape being detected, she didn't exactly stop me either. Perhaps she didn't want me to face the same discrimination she had, by touting her Dalit identity, when she attended school and college in Uttar Pradesh. For even in urban areas, caste-based prejudice can lead to assault and violence. I can say this with authority, because it happened to my mother in Rajasthan the other week. A long-standing resentment stemming from our being Dalit led our neighbors to collectively direct the colony's sewage waste behind our house in Ajmer. When my mother protested, an upper caste neighbor (the drain of whose house she wanted to redirect) kicked her twice on the shin and hit her on her forehead and near her nose with a mid-sized stone.

For us as 'privileged' Dalits who have been educated for more than three generations, this incident was unexpected and shocking, and a brusque reminder of the caste-based hate and prejudice that breeds among us in plain sight. As Dalits, education, wealth or top government jobs do not necessarily make us impervious to that hate, but instead our progress exacerbates the prejudice into full-blown rage. The evidence of this marked clearly in the scars on my mother's forehead.

Even when the prejudice does not translate into violence, it exists as discrimination in access to housing, employment and social interaction. Employment-based discrimination is at its worst in the private sector, where even though 'merit' is supposedly the only criteria, "cosmopolitan attitudes" and "family background" are routinely assessed when candidates are being selected. This pits poorer and 'lower' caste candidates against their culturally wealthy 'upper' caste competitors.

In a telling study, researcher Paul Attewell and economist and former chairman of University Grants Commission, Sukhdeo Thorat, [tested](#) for bias in the first stage of the hiring process in private sector firms in Delhi, Mumbai, Hyderabad, Bangalore and Chennai, by using fictitious applications from relevantly qualified male candidates. The pretend applicants all had similar education and identical resumes, differing only in their 'upper' caste Hindu, Dalit and Muslim last names. The study found that Dalits were 33 percent less likely to get a call back for the next stage of the hiring process

compared to ‘upper’ caste Hindus. Muslims fared even worse with 66 percent fewer callbacks.

Studies of rental housing in the Delhi National Capital Region area – which includes urban areas from surrounding states of Rajasthan, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh – found similar discrimination with 97 per cent of ‘upper’ caste Hindus getting a positive response from prospective landlords, as compared to 44 per cent of Dalits and 61 per cent of Muslims. There is recent documented discrimination against Dalits seeking flood relief in Tamil Nadu. Lab technicians and even doctors dispensing infant polio vaccines in Gujarat refrain from touching Dalit children – because they are untouchable.

Rohith and his five companions were not alone in facing discrimination. Shortly after Vemula’s suicide, another Dalit PhD candidate in Rajasthan ended his life, with his parents alleging harassment by his advisor and the dean of the university. Dalit students have long complained about bias in educational institutions and now tired of the inertia, have decided to take collective action. Some Dalit activists and scholars have created a [crowd-sourced](#) map collecting real time data about instances of discrimination in higher education, where they intend to “change the narrative from pathologising Dalit Bahujan students to understanding how caste apartheid operates on our campuses”.

Caste divisions that have been in place for more than a thousand years will not disappear overnight. But acknowledging these divisions and the systemic privilege they allow the majority to enjoy at the expense of the rest, is a solid start.

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