

Understanding Caste & Casteism in Higher Education and Academic Institutions (Part II)

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What is casteism?

The systemic discrimination, inequalities, repression, atrocities, targeting, snatching livelihood options, exclusions, various types of humiliation aimed at making members of the lower and lowest castes psychologically, physically, socially and economically vulnerable--allowed and sanctioned by Brahminism to each higher caste in the hierarchy of caste system which ultimately delivers all decisive power to the so called supreme caste i.e. Brahmin--this in brief is casteism.

In such a society, the repressed and excluded castes demand their rightful share in development and asking for equal opportunities via reservations and social securities is their assertion for human rights and constitutional rights based on liberty, equality and equity.

The state and its functionaries in the administration, and the educational infrastructure including all schools, colleges and universities and workplaces have to provide equal opportunities to the excluded and backward communities. But, on the contrary, politically powerful upper caste people, educationists and the media have successfully indoctrinated the young and especially the college going youth with the belief, that the students from the lower and lowest castes do not have any merit and they've just come on the basis of reservations. The myth around meritocracy was purposely spread that so many upper caste students do not get admission due to reservations. These students have never opposed the students taking admission without caliber and marks, by paying capitation fees, donation, bribing, and encouraging the private profit-making business of the education system. This is especially so with the whole mafia lobby, in the so-called degrees for high tech professions, science and technology based courses. This biased system is never questioned or such students ever shamed by upper caste students and

the educationists, but they make easy targets of vulnerable students who are/were first time entrants in higher education via reservations.

Now you can see even in reservations the highest marks are similar in open categories and from students from reserved categories. from SC, ST, OBC, NT-DNT and minorities (men and women). It is a proven fact that the socio-political discrimination and exclusion of men and women from lower/ lowest castes aims to make them feel inferior at every step, to reverse it, special provisions and opportunities are needed. On the contrary, we find that the same argument is made by Brahmin and upper caste Indian students and their parents to get entry in USA or any other foreign country. They take advantage of being citizens of developing or backward country India, and never talk about the merits or competitions with USA or first world countries. This hypocrisy shows a collective conscious behavior of discrimination effect of Brahminism (including all the castes which pretend that they are higher than other castes and target the castes lower than them in the hierarchy, but never have the courage to ask upper castes about the discrimination). Hence, casteism includes a whole range of processes--targeting, humiliating, discriminating and manipulating power against the lowest, lower and vulnerable castes (sometimes due to their minority status). All this should be criticized as **casteism**, according to me. This definition is in the light of the criteria of human rights charter and fundamental rights given by the Indian constitution.

The manufactured notion that 'all is well' was broken once again by Rohith Vemula's death. There are so many students on the streets demanding justice for Rohith. Left parties and Indira Congress came out openly against BJP in Rohith's case. Brutality on demonstrators by police and some goons in civil dress was witnessed on 1st February 2016 in Delhi. There is no use of representative administration, in such an undemocratic State's functioning.

I want to quote here some experiences shared in a focus group discussion of students from well-known Institutes. Some Dalit and OBC students were supposed to get scholarship up to Rs.6000 per month, but the head of the institute cut the amount by half and said that is doing justice with poor Brahmin students. As a head of such a well-established institute, getting salary, increments and perks of more than 2 lakhs per month, he could cut that head's salary into 1/4th, through which at least 15 poor Brahmin students could get *Madhukari* or *bhikshaas* scholarship for their education and this head could attain *Swarga* as well as *Punya*! But this head of the institute was very much influenced by religious texts which have given sanction for exploiting students from SC/ST/OBCs and minorities. So this person cut their scholarships into half which was already insufficient to live in a metropolitan city, to pay fees as well as to buy computers and essential supporting devices etc. Some students tried to raise their voice against this action but they were told that with such sharing they are helping in bringing equality in the campus. I hope that after Rohith Vemula's death at least these students would have the courage to get back their full scholarships, and file PIL to get compensations for the damages and constraints they had to face due to malpractices in the name of sacrifice and legitimizing corrupt practices.

If there would be consciousness and sensitization based on Phule-Ambedkarite ideology at least some changes would be seen. At least assertion by the students and the support

from the teachers' who were sensitized could've addressed it inside the institute. Persons in contact with Dalit-Bahujan grassroots level communities would have at least developed an understanding of the consequences of casteism.

Politics of caste and gender identity in natal and marital states

There was the issue of love Jihad spread against Muslims, previously inter-caste and inter-religious marriage were used by progressive movements in the 1980s as one of the strategies towards annihilation of caste. This was an act to break caste and communal boundaries, it was an act to challenge endogamy. Unfortunately, among many couples who had inter-caste marriage the wife's individuality was not unaccepted and many continued the patriarchal tradition of giving the father's name and surname to the children. This contributed to negating the wife's own culture, beliefs and identity. The practice of associating the caste of the father with the family made the notion of inter-caste marriage as having not reached the potential of becoming fully progressive. If inter-caste marriage means merging the identity of the caste which was a target of discrimination, it means there was no thought given in many such marriages to break the patriarchal model and structure of the institution of marriage. Hence, those who have tried to break such shackles and tried to forge their own, and their children's, identity by giving the children the father's or mother's name or by rejecting surnames carrying caste identity, had to face serious challenges, isolations and opposition from family, relatives, caste community, the larger society and even the state. So some of them left their struggle in the middle, and those people who have tried to bring changes have become a rare and scarce community, mostly as a showcase of symbolism against patriarchy and caste.

In the case of Rohith Vemula, there were several issues raised and politics was played around by BJP and other parties. One issue, about whether Rohith Vemula is Dalit or not, seemed to preoccupy some people. Rohith was not only a good student but also a brilliant one, he was very eager to become a science writer; he got admission in the university on his merit - why then, did the educationists from universities make an issue of his caste? Why did they become restless when he was propagating an ideology of equality and dreaming about an egalitarian society? If they were concerned about only education, then why were students' progress in research not taken seriously and why were their activities targeted? It reveals the entrenched casteism and casteist view of the faculty and administration.

Caste has not vanished, it exists in the teachers' minds, it is reflected in the results, and their biases against the students they dislike; especially the students who do not belong to their own caste or from upper castes. The supremacist belief that brahmins inherit brilliance and knowledge by birth and are therefore superior to others is the origin of such biases and discrimination. Though countless examples which have countered and disproved this, the internalization of myths by treating them as facts, needs collective psychological deconstruction of the myths.

For example, we know that the first woman teacher in India was Savitribai Phule, from the Mali caste, was called a Shudra. The first feminist writer in India was Tarabai Shinde, from the Kunbi Marathacommunity; in 1882, she wrote her essay, *Stree-Purush Tulana*. If Kunbi Maratha would be considered upper caste then Lokmanya Tilak would not have

opposed the crowning ceremony of rulers from the community, and Brahmin pandits would not have refused to recite mantras.

People who follow Phule-Ambedkar, Shahu-Periyar's ideology view inter-caste and inter-religious marriages as progressive, which offer avenues to develop human relationships beyond caste and religion. Such types of marriages provide scope and space to understand each other's culture. And when the wife is not subjected to patriarchal dominance and imposition of religion and caste on her in such relationships, the future generation of such couples will be adhering less to the value systems associated with any caste, religion or class. It does not mean in such marriages there are no possibilities of break ups or divorce, that possibility is present in any marriage or live-in relationship. Here we are specifically discussing caste and casteism, and key aspects of caste are related to restrictions on choice of marriage partners and restrictions on food choices, whom to dine with and not. Gradually the restrictions of eating together have been slowly receding but most of the time caste-conflicts are viewed at the time of inter-caste marriages, which sometimes lead to honour killings.

Then our experience in Rohith Vemula's case show that the caste and casteism is part of academic institutions and higher education. Caste discrimination is not only restriction to dine or marry, but it is equally about gaining knowledge and producing knowledge. This restriction was challenged by Jotirao, Savitribai, Shahu, Periyar and Ambedkar. Here I want to quote a few of these icons as educationists' who were known as social revolutionaries.

'Lack of education leads to lack of wisdom,
which leads to lack of morals,
which leads to lack of progress,
which leads to lack of money,
which leads to the oppression of the lower classes.

See what state of the society one lack of education can cause!' ~ Mahatma Jotirao Phule

Savitribai Phule's first collection of poems – *Kavya Phule* – was published in 1854 (in 1854, Pandita Ramabai was only a 2 year old child):

Go, Get Education
Be self-reliant, be industrious
Work, gather wisdom and riches,
All gets lost without knowledge
We become animal without wisdom,
Sit idle no more, go, get education
End misery of the oppressed and forsaken,
You've got a golden chance to learn
So learn and break the chains of caste.
Throw away the Brahman's scriptures fast.

~ *Poem by Savitribai Phule*

"Only education, self-respect and rational qualities will uplift the down-trodden."

~ *Periyar E.V. Ramasamy*

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's famous directive "Educate, Agitate, Organise" has become an inspiration and motivation for students who belong to the depressed, excluded and marginalized sections, across the country.

As soon as the concept of exclusive power of knowledge was dismantled along with supremacist myths that only Brahmin men could take up education as by birth only they have intelligence, the doors of knowledge opened. It showed that people can gather information, translate it into knowledge, practice and experiment and have the courage to believe in change, thus creating wisdom. Phule-Ambedkarite vision rationally and holistically put forward the notion that knowledge and wisdom are not a monopoly of any caste, gender, race, class, religion or profession in human society.

In Hyderabad Central University, Ambedkar Students Association genuinely tried to spread awareness about the ideology of equality and about the history and contribution of Phule-Ambedkar. This is important to create a new society where there would be easy access for everyone to learn, get an education with guaranteed freedom of expression in an enabling atmosphere for knowledge creation--for discovery, invention and innovation in the fields of science, technology, arts, research and activism geared towards creating egalitarian changes in the society. Why is such a beautiful dream not accepted by the dominant castes and Brahminism? The new generation from Dalit-Bahujan men and women are coming forward and showing their caliber and will to change inequities, hence, the saturated ego of old conservatives has been ruptured. All revivalists are coming together but are also underestimating the power of upcoming insurgence and it will be so in all institutes of knowledge and power, rural or urban.

It is vital to plant, grow and nurture a consciousness based on Phule-Shahu-Ambedkar-Periyar's ideology, starting at the primary level and continued to the highest level of education. This has to encompass all fields of education--science, technology, software development, medicine, all branches of humanities, defense studies, sports, business management, commerce, vocational studies, mass-communication etc. The curriculum and pedagogy with courses about Phule-Ambedkarite ideology will give us a citizenry that is informed of all their constitutional rights as well as democratic values important for all human beings. This is important to develop an egalitarian view in educational system and to develop understanding about common person's contribution in knowledge creation and wisdom that happens beyond the typical walled knowledge production of academia. This ideology asks us to be educated not by copying and reproducing the same print-outs or repetitions, but, urges us to undertake innovative, visionary understanding of the larger context of life, environment and ecology. The human being should not be turned into followers or imitators, instead education should open the doors towards creation of knowledge which will create wisdom to protect nature and all its creatures including human beings, as Phule says, or as Babasaheb Ambedkar accepts Buddhism in search of peace and empathy. Thus educationists who are assumed to have the potential to nurture young minds with such egalitarian consciousness can usher in a renaissance in education where such conscientization will be internalized.

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