

# Death every night: Travails of an Ambedkarite in the Corporate Sector

Written by The Guilty Warrior

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- ROUND TABLE INDIA

## The Guilty Warrior

To begin with, I work in the so-called "Corporate" sector in India. I was brought up in a small town, in a Mahar stronghold in Maharashtra and grew up under the strong influence of the philosophies of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. I was fortunate in academics to do well, mostly with the grace of Babasaheb and support systems like caste based scholarships. I would not like to go into an account of my family, except to say that my family situation was a hindrance rather than help for my career.



The fire and passion in me for Babasaheb, Phule, Periyar etc., was tremendous and I owed everything in my life to them. I would argue vehemently against upper castes on several topics related to caste, right from school. I used to distribute newspapers on a cycle every summer to take care of my expenses, but never did financial pains come in the way of me and Babasaheb. Once, I was hit with sticks by upper castes for drinking water from a well, when I was 12. But that never dampened my spirit. That fire continued till my graduation. I had to study in a private engineering college and that was the time when one felt being surrounded by demons (physical & mental), some direct while some others indirect. Lots of micro inequities. Be it in group studies, sharing notes, projects- it was there everywhere.

But I never hid myself. Availed my scholarship, which used to be given quite late, after lots of bureaucratic hassles. I would be the only one putting up a "Best wishes for Ambedkar Jayanti" poster on the notice board. How I wish there was something like ASA, BAPSA etc., in my time! But the pressure I faced was immense. And this was my conditioning- first studying in a private college and then working in the private sector. There were many students who would come from the management quota- Brahmins, Baniyas, Rajputs etc. In fact their scores would be significantly lower than our Bahujan students'. But they would still behave as kings of the world. Those are the times I feel so much guilt for not being able to push back professors or students, for the fear of failing in the examination.

After my graduation, I started working in small organizations and and after some years, was lucky enough to join a decent college for my PG. That was the time when I first saw the casteist behavior of corporates for several reasons. It made me wonder "How the hell am I supposed to work with such people that have hatred for the lower castes!" The placement scene in the Institute also reflected the biases and all lower castes would be placed the last.

I got placed. I made friends with a colleague of mine who used to help me in understanding the job. Those were the days of No Social Media. So this chap forwards an email to the group about anti-reservation. It was during the days of the OBC reservation implementation and things like Youth for Equality. I respond to him by stating some facts (in the same email) and that results in a major argument. And from that day, I see how the entire eco-system around me changes. Nobody is willing to help or share. Information is deliberately hidden. I manage to do a good job, but my Maratha boss gives me a terrible rating with zero increment. The point I want to raise is not about my rating, but how the entire machinery conspires against you without saying anything casteist in the open. The mistakes get highlighted whereas everyone else seems to take the credit for your success. All Managers were Brahmins and they would ensure no co-operation and every issue is escalated!

This makes me slightly weak in terms of openly coming out as an Ambedkarite. I get lucky in finding another job within one year of this job. Top Fortune 10 company. Dream role. Joined it. In a year, managed to get married as per my choice. But that brings more pressure of being an open Ambedkarite. I had and still have a dependent mother and sister to look after in my hometown.

Years pass. I don't compromise on my Ambedkarism. Keep Babasaheb's picture at my cubicle while continuing to support Bahujan students in my hometown and other places. I run a coaching centre free of cost for interview and group activities for all age groups as well as English speaking classes. I can already see stares and whispers on seeing Babasaheb's picture- mostly from the Brahmins and Baniyas. Some people knowingly and some unknowingly pass comments on reservation, caste, etc. I try to push back many times, but several times it's a lonely battle. Drains you out. Constantly worried about how it will impact my job. Time passes. Gradually, I also educate some of the expatriates about caste and that helps as a safety cushion. I do exceptionally well in my job. And it makes one realize that it's not a lonely battle after all. Then, I get a "Syrian

Christian" boss. The first question the boss asks is how come you have this "Ambedkar Baba" picture with you? I said "because he means more than my parents to me!" Later, things get worse. She starts to find fault with everything. And I slowly realise the reasons. I ask myself "She is a Christian. She shouldn't be having hatred towards lower castes". She starts passing comments while eating as I always use my hands to eat rice, non-vegetarian food. There are several discussions and arguments on caste. And then again I get the rating that I expected from her- which is terrible to say the least. I try to reason with "liberals" at work. But I realise it's a place of upper castes and I am all alone. It becomes very lonely and depressing, so I start looking out for new jobs. I eventually quit this job. Top organization, but once the climate gets hostile & casteist, it gets suffocating. Once I said Jai Bhim to a friend on the phone while I was at work, and the way people looked at me was unbelievable. There was another occasion when some manager mentioned about the Mars mission. He said that if ISRO does it, then it will ask let's first give it to SC/ST and then others. I openly argue with him that "This is in distaste and in fact ISRO people would rather consult their Brahmin swamis for a mahurat and only then take decisions. You expect them to send people to that planet when they use "stars" to discuss the country's fortunes?". Once people were also making fun of the dirt by people due to the 6th of December celebrations in Mumbai and I responded using references of the dirt and filth generated during Ganapati, Durga Puja, Holi etc.

Babasaheb's picture still adorns my cabin (yes- not boasting, but showing my journey from a newspaper seller to a leadership team member) as an inspiration. I still am the only one who will challenge people when they talk ill about caste or reservation or Rohith Vemula. I will still wear a white kurta-pyjama at work with a blue badge on 14th of April and wish people and distribute sweets.

In the government sector, there is a support system. There would be SC/ST organisations. There would be other Ambedkarites who will help and share. But in the private sector, you are all alone. Surrounded by the upper castes, under extra scrutiny for performance (if they know your caste). The top and middle management is full of Brahmins and Banias, and you sometimes feel like slapping their faces when you hear them talk about castes, but you can't. I don't claim to be the best performer, but the system is such that if your boss wants to show you as a bad performer, several flimsy reasons can be found and same is the case for rating you a good performer.

I tried to stay away from things like Facebook as I have always guarded my privacy fiercely. But one fine day, somebody tells me about Round Table India. I started reading about it. But I didn't want to tag or share on Facebook. For the fear of someone in office knowing about it, and my job getting lost. I read several articles but refused to share or comment, just like those one-sided lovers doing everything just to steal a glance at their loved ones, and not having the courage to express or speak.

Now, I am fortunate to work in a decent international organization. But I mask my identity on social media. I don't keep any of my office colleagues on my Facebook list. Generally, I can be myself and aggressive on social media about Bahujans and our issues. I came out of hibernation recently in Facebook, and Rohith Vemula's death has kind of awakened me. But the fear still looms. Fear of the loss of job and the impact on

my family. Fear of harm being caused to your loved ones. Yes, I know *we are* because of Babasaheb and hence the guilt kills me everyday of not being able to do more. Every night, some part of me dies. I don't have the guts to see myself in the mirror. It's a very disturbing situation and then I get inspiration from the bravehearts around me and it keeps me going.

I know there might be others who also want to help but are scared. But I want to take this opportunity to tell all of them that this is the time. Even if you hide your identity, your conscience will curse you for not supporting Babasaheb and his mission. I know some of you would be reading this article, the way I did, like a shy lover. Come out of your closet. Do it wisely, but do it. If not now, then you will repent the future of your coming generations. Don't think that someone else is there to manage. A part of me will still die tonight as I still can't reveal my identity in this article. I am afraid this might reach people at work in my office, but I will live to fight another day. For my brothers and sisters. For not letting another Rohith die. I am not the torchbearer of the Ambedkar movement nor intend to be. I am just contributing from my side wherever possible. I know reality sucks (of fear of losing the job) when I start dreaming of a better future for Bahujans. So I remember one of my favourite quotes and Jai Bhim to all again.

*"The permanent temptation of life is to confuse dreams with reality, but the biggest defeat of life is when we surrender our dreams to reality." ~ James A. Michener*

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*Illustration by **Unnamati Syama Sundar**.*