

No More Student Suicides, No More Caste Discrimination, No More Dropouts

Written by Forum Against Caste Discrimination in Education

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Forum Against Caste Discrimination in Education

*Acknowledging the widespread caste discrimination prevalent across the Indian campuses and in solidarity with the ongoing protest by Dalit, Adivasi and Backward caste students of the School of Germanic Studies, The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad, more than 200 students, teachers and professionals from across the country have gathered together under the banner of **Forum Against Caste Discrimination in Higher Education**.*

*The Forum has decided to run a country wide campaign against caste discrimination in our campuses and is organizing a series of **protest marches in different cities** of the country, in the month of May and June, to highlight the issue as well as to encourage our students to **speak out** on their experiences of caste-based harassment and discrimination and break their silence. Our campaign will culminate in a national rally of students, teachers and others at Hyderabad in the first week of July, 2013.*

The Forum invites all students, faculty and other concerned citizens to participate and lend their voices to support our students' protests and towards dismantling of brahminical hegemony in Indian educational spaces. The Forum can be reached at: facdeforum@gmail.com

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When a student from the lowest strata of society fights against all odds to prove her merit and reach the best educational institutions in India, are those institutions proving themselves meritorious enough to recognize her worth, to accommodate, let alone nurture her aspirations? A Dalit or Adivasi or backward caste student in higher education should be a cause of pride for not just the family or the community but for the entire nation. Instead, why do our nation and its educational institutions reward their merit with discrimination, humiliation, violence and death?

It was her friends at the prestigious *The English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU)*, Hyderabad who saved **Sujaya** (name changed), 19 year old, from committing suicide in 2010 at the nearby railway tracks. She was a student of the **5-year Integrated MA Programme** in German, **School of Germanic Studies**. Born in an illiterate agricultural labourer family in a village in Andhra Pradesh, **Sujaya** was too depressed over her course backlogs and eventual rustication from the university. Consistently humiliated by department faculty, both inside and outside the class, for her 'weak' language skills and being 'not fit for German language course', **Sujaya's** friends were witness to her continuous struggle to cope up with the academic pressure and not so academic hostility towards her from the centre and therefore were on the alert when she finally broke down after months of unsuccessful pleading with the centre and university administration to provide her academic support and to prevent caste-based harassment by the department faculty.

Sujaya was the lone **Scheduled Tribe** student among the 24 students admitted to the first batch of the 5-year Integrated MA Programme in German in 2008. But she was not alone in this suffering. Out of 4 **Scheduled Caste** students in her class, 3 dropped out in the middle of the course and the remaining one had to fight hard to get a 3 years bachelor's degree in 5 years but was wise enough to immediately leave the university to pursue her academic career elsewhere.

Seven more students dropped out without completing the course from the same batch. All of them were students from **Other Backward Castes** from the rural areas across the country and were beneficiaries of reservations like their Dalit and Tribal class mates. After the loss of three precious academic years, **Sujaya** is now back in her village pursuing her graduation from a local college. But **Maya Kumari**, daughter of a **backward caste** primary school teacher is determined not to go back to her village in Gaya, Bihar, without a bachelor's degree from the same centre.

Maya is part of the hunger strike and protest undertaken by Dalit, Adivasi and Backward caste students of the university against the casteist School of Germanic Studies along with two other students from the same centre: **M. Sriramulu** (Tribal) and **Ranjan Kumar** (Dalit). Like her, both these students too hail from very humble rural backgrounds and are first generation learners. All three have been expelled this academic year, after studying in the centre for 2-4 years, as they were not able to clear a couple of backlog papers.

Maya had just one paper left to clear. From her 2009 batch of 5 year Integrated MA, out of a total of 31 students, 10 students had already dropped out or left the course in between. All belonged to SC/ST/OBC communities; the rest from these categories are

either on the verge of expulsion or have barely managed to get a bachelor's degree after spending a couple of more years than what is stipulated.

After 5 years of the School of Germanic Studies offering degree courses, since 2008, not a single Adivasi student till today has been able to take a degree from here. Only two Dalits and four OBC students have managed this feat during this period but with great difficulties and a long struggle.

In any other civilized society and democratic educational set-up all this would have been the cause of much concern for the administrators and teachers and probably they would have devised certain positive interventions to support students coming from humble backgrounds, representing more than 75 percent of the Indian population, beating all caste/class/gender odds, proving their merit, intelligence and thirst for higher education in more than one way. But not here. Not in this campus. Not in any other campus of the country completely dominated by 'upper' caste faculty.

So at EFLU, in the School of Germanic Studies that has not a single SC/ST/OBC faculty member, these students become the poster boys and girls of the born 'non-meritorious' SC/ST/OBC population who gain entry through 'reservations' in an otherwise 'prestigious' educational space that was designed and steadfastly maintained to cater to English speaking 'upper' caste students only. Therefore, instead of acknowledging the socio-economic differences and supporting the students admitted through reservations, many faculty members remain hostile and take no time in branding them as 'undeserving', 'not up to the mark', students they are 'forced to teach' due to the provision of reservations. With no academic support coming from the faculty and being the target of their openly casteist barbs, the SC/ST/OBC students of School of Germanic Studies find it very difficult to cope with the constant demoralization and are unable to perform to the best of their potential. Majority among them have dropped out within a year of their courses and the rest remain condemned to wage lonely battles against the casteist faculty. It took **another suicide attempt**, on April 10, 2012, by a 20 year old OBC student of the 5 year Integrated MA course, 2008 batch, **Ravi Kumar** (name changed) for the University administration to finally wake up and take notice. Fearing students' protests, the administration swung into swift action and arranged a separate supplementary exam for him as soon as he was out of the hospital but refused to pay any heed to the other suffering students.

Even prior to this suicide attempt, students had filed a number of complaints with the administration against the faculty and especially against Prof **Meenakshi Reddy**, Dean of the School of Germanic Studies, who the students allege is the main culprit behind all the harassment, but the university administration never took any action despite written complaints against her and she, allegedly, along with her colleagues continued to play with the lives and careers of the SC/ST/OBC students.

With no hope of any academic support from their own department and the university, many SC/ST/OBC students are now forced to pursue part time diploma courses in German language offered by the nearby Osmania University along with the regular classes in their own university.

Since the last three weeks, the students of the centre are on a relay hunger strike demanding the university administration to take strict action against casteist faculty and

to safeguard the interests of SC/ST/OBC students. The administration instead of acting on the complaints served **expulsion notices** to 3 of the protesting students: Maya, Ranjan and M. Sriramulu. And when the students from other departments in the campus joined their protest and posted a video interview of M. Sriramulu and couple of other videos of the protest on YouTube, five of them including M. Sriramulu were served a **legal notice from** the Andhra Pradesh High Court. In a clear cut tactic to browbeat the protesting students into submission, Prof Meenakshi Reddy has charged the five students with 'defaming' her and her "illustrious" family, being a daughter of an ex-chief justice and ex-governor father and a much reputed doctor mother, and has demanded 'monetary compensation'.

Against such claims of being from an "illustrious" family background, it is not surprising that Sujaya, Maya, Ranjan, Ravi, Sriramulu and scores of other students from "non-illustrious" families, being sons and daughters of labourers, marginal farmers and petty shopkeepers from the country's rural areas, were deemed 'undeserving', 'not fit for study' in the department headed by Prof Minakshee Reddy.

EFLU is not the lone campus in harassing and forcing students from the marginalized backgrounds to drop out or attempt suicides. In recent times there have been a number of cases of Dalit and Adivasi students committing suicides unable to bear the humiliation in different campuses (*For more information on such students' suicides kindly go through: [The Death of Merit](#)*).

Apart from this, various students' groups, across the country, have raised their voices against such treatment meted to the SC/ST/OBC students and have been fighting it inside campuses and in courts. In 2006, **an enquiry committee under Prof S.K. Thorat**, the then UGC chairperson, came out with a detailed report on the massive caste discrimination prevalent in the country's top most medical college **All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS)**, New Delhi. However, both the Government of India and the AIIMS administration took no action on the report which could have saved two more precious lives.

Continuously harassed by a Professor, **Balmukund Bharti**, a final year MBBS student hailing from a poor Dalit family from the backward Bundelkhand region, **committed suicide, on 3rd March 2010**. Exactly two years later, on the same date, 3rd March 2012, **another student Anil Meena**, from an Adivasi family from a village in Rajasthan committed suicide.

Despite students' protests and the highly damning report from a high powered enquiry committee, nothing much has changed in the All India Institute of Medical Sciences, New Delhi. A similar fate was reserved for another enquiry committee, this time set up by National Commission for Scheduled Castes (NCSC) in 2011 under **Prof B.L. Mungekar**, Rajya Sabha Member and ex-member, Planning Commission, on the complaints of Dalit and Adivasi students of Vardhman Mahavir Medical College (VMMC), New Delhi. **The committee in its report exposed the caste discrimination practiced by the faculty** and recommended strict action against 4 guilty professors, but till today there has been no action whatsoever and its report has appears to be discarded.

Apart from these incidents, there have been a number of other campuses where the Dalit and Adivasi students have been protesting against continuous harassment meted

out to them by their 'upper' caste faculty but to no avail. In 2009, the **Supreme Court of India**, in a case filed by Dalit and Adivasi students of IIT Delhi, was forced to acknowledge the problems faced by these students and gave directions to the educational institutions to create conducive environment for students from marginalized socio-economic background [*Avinash Singh Bagri and others vs. Registrar, IIT Delhi, 2009*].

Taking suo motu cognizance of the media report on the recent suicide by **Pulyala Raju**, yet another Dalit student from the **University of Hyderabad**, the Andhra Pradesh High Court, on 21st March, 2013, issued notices to UGC, the Andhra Pradesh state government and all the universities to inform the court of the steps being taken by them to prevent such suicides. Our Forum appreciates the Court for taking notice of the problems faced by our students and sincerely hopes that the authorities would be a little honest on the issue in the court.

Our Demands

1. Immediate revoking of expulsion of M. Sriramulu, Ranjan Kumar, Maya Kumari and other students of School of Germanic Studies, EFLU, Hyderabad and providing them fair support to pursue their courses without any prejudice and harassment from the School.
2. Immediate Suspension of Prof Meenakshi Reddy, Dean of the School of Germanic Studies, EFLU, Hyderabad.
3. Constitute a time-bound high level enquiry committee with adequate representation from SC, ST, OBC students and faculty to look into the cases of caste discrimination, harassment, dropouts in the School of Germanic Studies, EFLU, since 2008 and strict action must be taken against faculty found guilty.
4. Immediate implementation of recommendations made by Prof S.K. Thorat Committee (2006) in AIIMS, New Delhi and Prof BL Mungekar Committee (2012) in VMMC, New Delhi.
5. The National Commission of Scheduled Castes (NCSC), in recent times, has come out with several reports exposing caste discrimination in many institutions of higher learning like King George Medical College, Lucknow, Ganesh Shankar Vidarthi Medical College, Kanpur, Banaras Hindi University, Varanasi etc. We demand strict actions against these institutions and also demand that both National Commissions for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, being constitutional bodies with mandate of securing rights of Dalits and Adivasis, to come out with separate reports on all the complaints of caste discrimination in higher education received and action taken in the last one decade.
6. We demand Government of India to institute a high level enquiry commission including parliamentarians, members from judiciary, academia and student community with proper representation from SC/ST/OBC communities to investigate various practices of caste discrimination prevalent in Indian campuses, all the cases of students' suicides, large drop-out rates, on the failure of existing redressal mechanisms like SC/ST cells, liaison officers for SC/ST students in preventing caste discrimination and to devise strategies and mechanism to make Indian campuses caste-discrimination free.
7. We demand Government of India to enact a special anti-discrimination regulation/act related to educational institutions with strict punishments for those found involved in harassing students from marginalized communities.

8. A society that aspires to be democratic and egalitarian must strive towards having its public institutions reflect the social diversity in its composition as a prerequisite to achieve these ideals. The constitutional provision for SC/ST/OBC reservations in education and employment is one such step. However even after six decades of such provisions the higher education has remained completely in control of 'upper' castes of the country and the provision of SC/ST/OBC reservations in the faculty appointment has been violated with impunity across the campuses in the country. There is a huge backlog in almost all the universities and other educational institutions in the faculty recruitments. It is also not surprising that the cases of caste discrimination against SC/ST/OBC students are found more in departments/educational institutions which failed to have proper representation from these communities as faculty. The diversity among the faculty is also one of the effective ways to prevent caste discrimination and therefore we demand the Government of India to immediately act and force these institutions to recruit faculty in accordance with the reservation provisions and clear all the backlogs.