

DISCRIMINATION AND STRESS IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN INDIA

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Rohit Vemula...

- On 17th of January, 2016 Rohit Chakravarti Vemula, a PhD scholar at University of Hyderabad, took his own life.
- While he did not blame anyone in the last note that he wrote, his words caused a nation wide movement and protests seeking answers and justice.
- He was from a mixed heritage
 - ▣ his mother was a *Dalit* (ex-untouchables of India) and father came from one of the communities, that are collectively & legally designated as *Backward Castes* in India.

Study



- This incidence was a tipping point and brought into focus the nature and form of discriminatory behaviour, attitudes and administrative governance that existed in Hyderabad Central University.
- And alluded to what might still be happening in other Elite universities in India.
- This lead a group of concerned few to take up a study:
- **Discrimination, Distress & Higher Education in India**

Idea



- The study was funded through a international partnership and mobility grant from British Academy.
- The study is based on qualitative ethnographic research methods that examines the everyday ‘lived experiences’ of caste based stigma and humiliation amongst the students, the academic and the administrative staff in universities.
- It examines subtle and overt caste discrimination, prejudice and stereotype, its perpetuation on campus and its impact on students psyche.

India and U.K based Partners



- **Sushrut Jhadav:** Is a psychiatrist and an anthropologist, who teaches in the area of Mental health at UCL and also works with London Municipal corp, to deliver mental health services to homeless people.
- **David Moss:** Is an Anthropologist teaching at SOAS, who as worked extensively on caste issues in south-India & a key person to work on anti-caste legislation in U.K
- **Sumeet Jain:** Is a lecturer at Univ. of Edinburg who teaches around issues of mental health & Social work.

Research Assistance



- **Gaurav Pathania:** He has a doctorate in Sociology from JNU and is an adjunct faculty at Georgetown university.
- **Pindiga Ambedkar:** He is a Sociology student pursuing his Ph.D. at JNU and also works the Tricontinental Research Institute.
- **Amit Thorat:** Teaches Economics at JNU. I work in the area of Poverty, Inequality, identity and behaviour.
- The study was carried between September 2016 and August 2017.

Study Involved



- A day long workshop was held:
 - ▣ Involving
 - Academics, Psychologist, Media personal, independent researchers, publishers & others – to think about discriminatory behaviour and its psychological impact on students and how it is understood, thought about, depicted and dealt with in different spheres of life.

Focus group Discussions



- Two Focused group discussions were held:
 - ▣ **One** with students from DU, JNU, JAMIA, RLM hospital and IGNOU from discriminated & other communities.
 - ▣ Participants were boys and girls from different religious, caste and ethnic backgrounds across academic streams, such as psychology, Media & Politics, Sociology, Political Science, Education and History and across courses such as M.A, M.Phil. and Ph.D.

Focus group Discussions



- **Second Focused Group Discussion:**
 - ▣ Was amongst faculty members again from different universities (D.U, J.N.U, IGNOU etc.) teaching different Subjects.

 - ▣ I will be talking a little about the findings of the Student FGD in this presentation.

 - ▣ In the FGD we asked specifically if they experienced any discriminatory behavior, they thought was because of their identity.

Broad findings:



□ Identification:

- For many, universities & higher education are an escape from a history of identity based prejudice – gender, caste, ethnicity, sexuality (social and biological).
- Right from applying for admission, separate days and lines for Students availing reservations.
- Some collages put lists of selected under-grad students by category.
- If all the above is avoided, then easiest way of identification is from a persons Surname (caste name in India)

Results



- ▣ Students told us that teachers force them to reveal their surnames publically in class, if withheld or identity not apparent.
- ▣ Once identified – Stigmatization occurs as these students are then seen as ‘Non-meritorious’/‘category’
- ▣ Even when students name are caste-neutral, their socio-economic and cultural cues at times given them away, as they are usually first or second generation learners.

Results



- Language Barriers:
 - ▣ Many students, category as well as non-category but who come from regions, where education and language of communication is regional, stand out.
 - ▣ English speaking ability then becomes an identifier of higher class and upper caste.
 - ▣ It also then becomes a source of distress for those not fluent in English, as it identifies and isolates them.

Results



- Clothing/Dressing & General etiquette:
 - ▣ Many first and second generation learners come from poorer, rural families. They might then stand out.

- ▣ Class room or Laboratories:
 - We were told that in some colleagues multiple sections of a particular course are broadly allocated on the basis of the lists of students as they might appear. Section-A, B & C.
 - Dalit Students reported, their lab experiments being diluted or tampered with.

Results



□ Interviews:

- ▣ For graduate courses like M.Phil. and Ph.D. all students have to qualify entrance examinations.
- ▣ However an interview thereafter decides if they are finally selected or not.
- ▣ It is found that these interviews can be at time very discriminatory and act like a screening process.
- ▣ These are hugely stressful for students, especially for those who come from marginalized communities.

Consequences



- Universities then become sites of continued and new institutionalized forms of *prejudice*.
- Where a students desire to learn, work hard and aspirations are not valued but their Scio-economic and cultural disadvantages form the basis for how they will be *engaged with, perceived and treated*.
- Many studies and fact finding committees have made similar observation and have recommended institutional measure to identify such practices and discourage them.

Consequences



- However these recommendations have hardly ever been implemented.
- This results in the cycle being not being broken and the students and faculty continue to experience:
 - ▣ Hurt, Trauma, and humiliation.
 - ▣ This can lead to dropping out, bad performance, social isolation and personal psychological distress.
 - ▣ An in many cases as we know, in self harm and suicide.