

# Living a Concept: Semiotics of Everyday Exclusion

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After centuries of sanctioned exclusion, reservations provide an invaluable opportunity for youngsters from excluded communities to enter the hallowed portals of higher learning. But the prejudices of the privileged continue to shape campus life, forcing many dalit students to drop out. In extreme cases like that of Senthil Kumar at the University of Hyderabad (August 16, 2008), social exclusion can drive students to suicide. This essay recounts the author's own experiences.

As a concept, social exclusion has contributed immensely to the literature on poverty and deprivation. It reminds us that poverty is more than mere material deprivation, as the ancient philosophers already knew. Aristotle measured the richness of human life by the freedom to engage in meaningful activity. He believed that the lack of liberty to act in self-chosen ways impoverished life. More recently, Amartya Sen has argued that being excluded from social relations limits our life opportunities, thus producing not only capability deprivation, but also diverse capability failures. One important aspect of such exclusion is that it seems to unite the perpetrators at the same time that it isolates the victims. While the "excluders" produce exclusion by collectively expropriating public space and refusing to share social opportunities, the excluded experience exclusion as an individual and personal failure – as the inability to participate freely and fully in the social life of the community.

It was precisely the denial of social opportunities, sanctioned by law and custom, which pushed vast numbers of Indians into a life of penury, lacking both cultural and social capital. In order to bridge the gap, affirmative action was made constitutionally mandatory so as to enable the deprived populace to regain their dignity. Education,

long regarded as a liberating and modernising force, formed an important part of the social justice campaign. But although the Indian welfare state recognises its moral obligation to guarantee every child an education, this is a dream that is still far from being realised. The first generation of learners from the marginalised communities must not only come to terms with an alien curriculum, they must also battle entrenched pedagogical prejudices.

Senthil Kumar was a first generation learner from a poor dalit family belonging to the pig rearing community of Tamil Nadu. He had finished his MPhil from Pondicherry Central University before joining the Physics department at the University of Hyderabad. His family being too poor to support him, his plans for a PhD would not have materialised had it not been for the new fellowships announced by the UGC. Interestingly, almost as if to counter the enabling effect of the fellowships, the English and Physics departments introduced course work for the PhD in the same year. Though he had successfully passed an entrance examination as well as an interview to earn admission into the Physics doctoral programme, Senthil was unable to clear the new hurdle of course work, and his fellowship was stopped. Having failed twice, Senthil Kumar killed himself on 24 February 2008 ("Caste, Higher Education and Senthil's 'Suicide'", 16 August 2008).

The fact that his body was not discovered for two days bears tragic testimony to his extreme isolation – from his neighbours and hostel-mates, his classmates and colleagues, and from campus life in general. This was further confirmed at the public meeting called by the Ambedkar

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Students Association to protest his death. The eminent lawyer Bojja Tharakam and well-known human rights activist Balagopal attended the meeting, along with a few dalit teachers. Conspicuous by their absence were the “liberal” and “progressive” faculty, the “general category” students, and of course, the authorities. These absences reflect the deep-rooted prejudices which have segregated campus life and soured social relations. For the larger student community, Senthil was never really a fellow student; his problems were his alone, not meant to be shared or addressed. For his teachers, Senthil was a much resented constitutional imposition, lacking merit and destined to fail, a problem case. In death as in life, Senthil Kumar remained “only” a dalit.

I have lived for seven eventful years in the same university and the same hostel where Senthil Kumar lived. I know that though Senthil chose to end his life on 24 February, his death began much earlier, on the day he set foot in the university. Every dalit or reserved category student in a “meritorious” higher educational institution dies a little every day. Although other students from poor or rural families also face problems, the daily experience of social exclusion adds a huge and uniquely negative dimension to the lives of “quota students”. Dalit students feel intimidated by the myriad activities of campus life that are structured in ways that make them feel like “inferior outsiders”. It is the accumulated weight of small, everyday practices of shaming and distancing that finally produces a big, extraordinary event like suicide. We cannot understand such shocking acts without understanding routine acts of exclusion.

### Everyday Exclusion

In 1991, I entered Hyderabad Central University (HCU) to pursue my Masters in Political Science, and subsequently enrolled for research studies. The intense passions aroused by the Mandal agitation had deepened existing fault lines and divided the campus into pro-reservation and pro-“merit” camps. Dalit students, who had existed at an invisible subterranean level, suddenly became much more visible during my sojourn in the campus.

The reservation quota is filled by the university because it is constitutionally

mandatory. The system facilitates the entry of the marginalised groups who would never have been allowed in by the hierarchical social structure. However, it is very clear from the admission process onwards that the same hierarchical attitudes are still present in the institution. While writing the entrance exam, the scheduled caste (sc) and scheduled tribe (st) candidates are made to sit separately for reasons of “administrative convenience”. (This is done in Delhi University also). In the process of getting admission and gathering information regarding fee structure, courses, hostel facilities, etc, both the students union and the authorities display a lackadaisical attitude. Many dalit students are not given any leeway in depositing fees or documents and they are often only given conditional admission. Senior dalit students are the only source of help to overcome such obstacles, and to negotiate with the authorities. First generation learners from dalit families are rendered more vulnerable as they lack any family guidance to deal with such matters. I too was denied a hostel seat initially and ultimately had to take the help of a senior dalit student to get a mess card.

After somehow crossing all the initial hurdles and managing to gain entry, “ragging” is the next ordeal to be faced. This is particularly intimidating for dalit students struggling to take their first steps in a “meritorious” institution, and forces many of them to drop out. Ragging of dalit students can take specially humiliating forms, for example, ridicule based on the name of caste, colour or complexion, habits, culture, etc. Even the body language and mannerisms of faculty and students belonging to the dominant community can seem threatening to dalit students. The authorities generally remain mute spectators and are reluctant to take strong action against ragging offenders. The student nion’s role was also negligible when any such issue arose. These attitudes only strengthened my impression about the caste hegemony and academic arrogance in the campus, specially in the sciences and professional courses like MCA. I was personally involved in many such cases, and also remember instances that led to physical conflict between upper caste MCA

boys and the Ambedkar Students Association. A case where eight upper caste MCA students were caught red handed ragging their dalit junior was swept under the carpet. Although the relevant authorities were informed and a committee appointed, the only action taken was a note issued to all departments and hostels not to indulge in ragging.

If they manage to survive ragging, dalit students must learn to cope with normal everyday life on the campus. Because they come from deprived backgrounds, they do not get the “natural” training that upper caste students get from their socially privileged backgrounds. Dalit students have to learn how to “occupy” social space in a hostile environment. Even the common place interactions of day-to-day life become a constant challenge. Since they do not possess the means to dress well and cannot speak in a polished tongue, dalit students are neglected on social occasions such as birthday parties, cultural festivals, welcome or farewell parties. Even if they attend such occasions, the dalit students huddle in a corner and the other students ignore their presence. Lack of money is a permanent source of social anxiety. Dalit students lack the financial capability to indulge in routine student pastimes like watching films, eating out or going to parties. Their fear is that if today they accompany someone for a cup of coffee or a film show, they will have to reciprocate tomorrow, which is beyond their means. This naturally limits their social interaction with the wider student community. They are denied credit by the campus shopkeepers as they are not considered creditworthy.

Dress codes, language skills and general “etiquette” influence the relationship between the genders. Dalit students are at a disadvantage with respect to such markers of social status, and find it difficult to interact with the opposite sex. The upper caste boys’ and girls’ attitude towards the dalit students is very functional. There is very little sharing of study materials. Apart from routine interactions, all social and academic gatherings are very exclusive. I can still recollect my batch mate (from the dominant Kamma caste) cautioning her sister against interacting with sc boys as this would adversely affect her

social prestige. During my research days I only wore rubber chappals, and I can remember an upper caste girl asking me why I never wore decent footwear. Another upper caste girl stopped interacting with me after she found my name on the poster of a dalit organisation.

Inevitably, such attitudes also enter personal relationships and create conscious or unconscious feelings of superiority or impunity on one side and inferiority or helplessness on the other side. When they break down or go bad, such relationships can have particularly tragic consequences for dalits.

A dalit girl pursuing her Masters in the Mathematical Sciences got involved with an "upper caste" Reddy boy from the Hindi department. However, the boy later refused to marry her citing caste reasons. Unable to withstand the humiliation of betrayal (many fellow students were aware of her plight) the girl committed suicide in 1995. As per the post-mortem report, she was pregnant when she died. Assured of the authorities' silence, the upper caste boy boasted to the friends of the deceased that they can never harm him. On the day of her death, upper caste girls in the same hostel continued to celebrate a birthday party. These kinds of reactions make one lose faith in humanity.

Cultural conflicts are also affected by the inequalities of the larger social structure. When a professor from the mathematics department got a well dug in his official quarters because of his belief that the municipal water supply polluted his "brahmanical purity", this did not become an issue, or attract the attention of the university authorities. But a beef biryani stall at the 2006 Cultural Festival set up by dalit students (after taking permission from the dean of student welfare) became controversial from the first day. Responding to objections from Akhil Bharatiya Vidya Parishad (ABVP) students, the authorities issued verbal orders to close down the beef biryani stall. Dalit students protested this order and demanded that the cultural festival be stopped till the matter was resolved. The authorities proposed a general body meeting (GBM) to vote on the issue. We made a counter proposal that if we won a vote at the GBM, then beef should be served in the mess,

canteens and guest house, etc. The authorities felt threatened that if the dalits and other beef eaters won the GBM, the "purity" of the campus would be sullied. Despite coercion from the authorities and brahmanical forces, the beef biryani stall continued for the duration of the festival.

### Classroom Interactions

Humiliation of one sort or another is woven into the academic experiences of a dalit student. When the administration prepares the list of admissions, the reserved category students are placed last. A symbol is placed against the names of all the students from the reserved category, even those who qualify in the general list. Since the attendance list is prepared according to the admission list, it is easy for the faculty, office staff and students of the general category to identify dalit students.

A dalit girl topped the 1991 Political Science MA entrance examination of HCU. She was unable to maintain her position subsequently, though she went on to join the Indian Police Service. Two other dalit students who joined the same course dropped out within a month; six others only managed average marks. Along with three of these students, I too opted for a course in the Telugu department to improve my percentage to fulfil the UGC norm of 50 per cent (for scs and sts) for

further studies. We were more confident of securing respectable grades in our mother tongue. Though I went on to teach the same paper in Delhi University, how can I forget that my esteemed Brahmin teacher gave me four marks out of twenty in internal assessment for political theory? Let me also acknowledge the humane attitude of the few teachers who provided me with courage and confidence to penetrate the domain of knowledge, though their empathy towards dalit students was ridiculed, and they were accused of diluting "academic standards".

The lack of adequate English language skills is the biggest challenge confronting the underprivileged students. Teachers interact with the students who are conversant in English, and even the peer group does the same. Teaching in English further marginalised dalit students like me, forcing us to sit on the last benches without participating in class room discussions. This gets reflected in exam performance and leads to biased marking. Gradually, confidence levels decline and some students opt out. This happens more in the sciences and other professional courses which are dominated by the elite. Often, the teachers' demeanour discourages students from approaching them.

Getting into research is again very problematic for dalit students. Since reservation

## Post-doctoral fellowship in Political Science/Sociology

### The Centre de Sciences Humaines (CSH), New Delhi, invites applications for a post-doctoral fellowship in Political Science/Sociology.

The candidate should hold a Ph.D. in Political Science, Sociology, International Relations, History or Law from a recognised university in India or abroad. Fluency in English is a prerequisite.

The candidate is expected to conduct a research project in the context of contemporary India or South Asia and to produce original results in terms of publications. Preference will be given to projects contributing to one of the following themes: Evolution of Indian federalism; Role of identity-based dynamics in politics; Evolution in practices of democracy (political representation of specific groups, social movements, new forms of political mobilisation, et al.); Political role of specific actors on the national scene: the international institutions, the judiciary, the media.

For **conditions** of the fellowship and **application procedures**, please see [www.csh-delhi.com](http://www.csh-delhi.com). The **deadline** for submission of applications is 2nd January, 2009. Pre-selected candidates will be called for an interview in the second week of **January 2009**.

is constitutionally mandatory (though it is rarely fully implemented in the science faculty), it is possible to get admission. But there are other means of exclusion. Those who qualify in the written examination find it difficult to clear interviews. If they manage to make it, they are given less marks or failed in the course work, making them drop out. If they qualify for research despite these hurdles, only dalit teachers will be allotted to supervise them. In case, they are working with someone from the dominant caste, they face different kinds of harassment. Most teachers do not wish to supervise dalit students on the pretext that they are not “meritorious” enough. If the department allots them such students, they come up with some excuse. A young dalit research scholar in the political science department was quite distraught when, in the last semester before submission of his MPhil dissertation, his supervisor realised (after two years!) that his English language ability was below “standard” and refused to supervise his work. Dalit students who are active in the social and political activities of the campus are denied admission for research degrees. This sends a clear signal to the next generation of dalit learners not to agitate for their rights.

### Hostel Life

For a person who has been deprived of social space in day-to-day life, even common place interactions are always challenging. This starts with the allotment of rooms wherein the authorities see to it that a dalit rarely shares a room with an upper caste student. Even if this happens, the dalit student is excluded from conversations and generally made to feel inferior. The hostel mess is a special source of tension and conflict.

Mess cards are segregated on the basis of social welfare cards and general cards. While the normal mess menu is common for all, special (non-vegetarian) dishes are made optional. The dalit students who depend on social welfare scholarships find it difficult to afford these dishes. This intentional exclusion is very mortifying for the dalit students. For many poor students, eating two square meals a day is a dream. The mess tends to be segregated into dalit and non-dalit tables. Comments

like “Bakasura and Kumbhakarna tables” are commonly made by the non-dalit students and mess workers. The mess workers jocularly told me that they need more staff to serve the two tables where dalit students generally sit as they eat more. Many dominant caste students get their own plates and glasses to have food in the mess hall to avoid “pollution” and maintain “purity”. Dalit food habits and their unfamiliarity with cutlery are ridiculed.

In every hostel, unauthorised inmates are a problem, but this becomes a serious issue if dalits are involved. Dalit students often carry food for their guests who cannot afford to buy food. Raids by authorities specifically target dalit students, and their guests are evicted forcibly and fines are imposed on them. In some cases, hostel admissions are also cancelled. I was visiting a friend in the hostel when the warden raided his room. My friend was accused of keeping illegal guests, fined Rs 500 and threatened with eviction. Upper caste students become mess secretaries in order to control the food intake, and to prevent students from passing their mess cards to non-boarders or taking food out of the mess. Some non-boarder students cook rice in the room and wait until 9 PM for the official dinner time to be over. Once the mess hall is vacant, they creep inside with fear writ large on their face, to take some leftover dal or curry. I have personally witnessed non-boarders eating food left over in the serving utensils when cats and dogs were also licking the plates. This is objected to by the mess secretaries who lock up the mess by 9 pm. Many upper caste students also demand that the mess hall be kept locked.

The most serious conflict over the mess took place in 2002. Hostel students used to manage their own mess and this practice was given up in favour of the Central Purchasing Committee (CPC) system. This helped the authorities to make money and monitor the intake and quality of food consumed by the students. Many poor students who were unable to pay their mess fee on time could expect some leniency when the students were controlling the mess. Now they could not ask for any concessions. Naturally the dalit students suffered more in this new system. A group of students went to discuss the issue with the

chief warden. A dalit hostel warden who was instrumental in imposing the CPC was also present, and there was an altercation between the authorities and students. Subsequently, without any preliminary enquiry, 10 dalit students were rusticated and criminal cases were filed against them. All of them were the first from their families to enter higher education. Nine of the students were pursuing research, four in sciences (CSIR fellowship) and five in humanities and social sciences. They had all cleared UGC-NET. The students rented rooms outside the campus to finish their studies. With their grit and determination, they have all succeeded in fashioning lucrative careers for themselves. The case was finally quashed in late 2007.

Not only the mess but the hostel common room is also kept under surveillance by upper caste students. The dalit students are fond of watching television as it is a luxury for them. This provokes other students to ridicule them, and comments like “they have no need to study since reservation entitles them to free food, accommodation and entertainment” are made. Any poster reflecting dalit and minority ideologies provoke extreme reactions. Dirty comments are scribbled on such posters in hostels to insult them. Abusive comments like “pigs”, “government’s son-in-laws”, “bastards”, “son of god”, “beggars”, etc, and comments which question paternity are quite common. In 2002, a (PhD student) miscreant scribbled “bastard” on B R Ambedkar’s poster in the social science building. A similar incident took place in the ladies hostel in 2006.

### Conclusions

A university is supposed to be a democratic space which moulds students into politically vibrant citizens. These meritorious institutions of higher learning are supposed to perpetuate a legacy of humanism. But our universities have become sites of social exclusion, where dalit students are denied a share in the cultural and social capital of society, and are expected to bear this denial silently. Who knows how many more Senthil Kumars languish in other *agraharas* like IITs and IIMs? The best way to honour Senthil Kumar’s memory is to fight the everyday exclusion that drove him to his death.