

Caste, Higher Education and Senthil's 'Suicide'

SENTHILKUMAR SOLIDARITY COMMITTEE

The death of Senthilkumar, a dalit research scholar, at the University of Hyderabad earlier this year is one more example of how, reservations notwithstanding, caste discrimination continues to afflict India's institutions of higher learning.

The suicide earlier this year of Senthilkumar, a dalit PhD student at the University of Hyderabad, has once again exposed the murky realities of caste discrimination in our universities. The debate on reservations in higher education has centred around the question of who "deserves" reservations, while the brahminical ordering of institutions of higher education has received only sporadic attention.¹ Senthil's suicide has re-affirmed the fact that the dominant academic culture works relentlessly to subvert the logic of reservations.

The body of Senthilkumar was discovered in his room at the New Research Scholars Hostel on February 24, 2008. Since then, the attitude of the university has been one of denial and cover-up. The initial claims were that Senthil had died of "cardiac arrest". Even after newspaper reports suggested a case of suicide,² the university did not take any action, and continued to feign ignorance. While the post-mortem report ascertaining the cause of death as "poisoning" is dated February 28, it was not made public until April. A dalit student agitation demanded an enquiry as well as compensation for the family – the minimum an academic institution is expected to do in the circumstances. To this the registrar's response

was that "there was no such provision in the University guidelines".

In an open letter to the vice chancellor, the SC/ST Joint Action Committee (JAC: comprising students, faculty and staff association members) on campus demanded that the rules regarding the fellowships for students be modified, in order to "provide a much broader philosophical premise for the grant of scholarship" and that the procedure for allotting guides to PhD students be made transparent. They also demanded a judicial enquiry; there was no response to this. Instead, an internal fact-finding committee was appointed in mid-March, only after intervention from D Ravikumar, the well known dalit intellectual and a member of the Tamil Nadu legislative assembly. The committee comprised only faculty members of the university; the JAC refused to depose before it.

The report submitted by this committee was again withheld until an application under the RTI Act (from the JAC) forced the university to make it available, finally, on April 28.

In what follows, we draw from this report, newspaper coverage and personal discussions to demonstrate the reason for all these evasions and denial – Senthil was yet another victim of the entrenched realities of caste discrimination that pervade academic spaces and practices in the university.

Senthil

Senthilkumar was the first to enter higher education not only from his family, but the entire Panniandi community. His parents

The Senthilkumar Solidarity Committee is a group of intellectuals and activists based in Hyderabad.

survive on pig-rearing in Salem district of Tamil Nadu. He had finished an MPhil in Physics from Pondicherry University before financial constraints forced him to interrupt his education. He enrolled with the School of Physics at the University of Hyderabad in 2007. This arduous journey into higher education could only have been made by a person of exceptional ability and determination.

Senthil was the only student from the batch of 2007 who was yet to be assigned a supervisor. He failed in one of the four papers required in coursework and in the first supplementary exam. He had the provision of writing another exam in March and clearing his backlog.

The non-NET fellowship (awarded to students at the University of Hyderabad) was his only source of survival as a student. It was also an important means of supporting the family. As the JAC also pointed out in their letter, according to new university guidelines, the fellowships for PhD students are not linked to “performance” in coursework. However, the School of Physics acted in contravention to this and Senthil’s fellowship was stopped, his name put up on the notice-board, citing his failure in coursework as the reason. The rule connecting fellowship with “performance” in coursework clearly has a punitive logic. In this logic, the fellowship becomes a tool of punishment in the hands of the authorities against students, rather than a means to support their education. It is well known that the demands of higher education make the fellowship absolutely crucial for dalit students, and withholding it amounts to wilfully denying them a place in the university, in the first instance. As Senthil’s case shows, the denial of the fellowship can have even more serious consequences.

After protests by a dalit student, a deans’ committee meeting was held and this rule was changed, a week before Senthil’s death. Incredibly enough, the decision was not communicated to Senthil or announced, unlike the very public withdrawal of the fellowship. The report records that the loss of the fellowship was a source of intense anxiety for Senthil in the period leading up to his suicide; it was undoubtedly one of the reasons that drove him to it.

The report’s account of the School of Physics reads like a modern-day manual on practising caste discrimination. In 2006, it became the only school in the faculty of Sciences to introduce coursework. Incidentally, this was also the year that the Rajiv Gandhi Fellowships for sc/sr students in higher education were instituted. At every step of the way, the school seems to have experimented with ways of ejecting “unwanted” students out of academics. One example is the criteria for clearing the coursework; the rules were suddenly changed so that even if a student scored the required 50 per cent to pass in a course, the doctoral committee would be the final arbiter of his/her grade. The students were not informed of this change, resulting in many of them failing or getting a “pass” in courses they assumed they had cleared.

Another example is the distinction between the “faculty adviser” and the “supervisor”. The practice of allotting an adviser for the initial stage of research is not the same as appointing a supervisor who guides the student’s research. According to Vipin Srivastava, the dean, School of Physics, it was understood that the adviser would eventually become the supervisor. The students however insisted that the advisors made it “amply clear” to them “that they should not

assume that they would be their eventual supervisors”. The report records that this creates “uncertainty in the minds of students...compounded when [they] see some of their colleagues being already treated as full-time research scholars and permitted to use the labs of their faculty advisers.”

One might think that the rules being arbitrary for all students, the most one can accuse the school of is lack of “transparency” and “communication”. Therefore, the rules and procedures must be made “transparent”. This is also the report’s “finding” and its “recommendation”.

But what are we to make of the following two statements? “...it is a fact that most of the students affected by the inconsistencies and ambiguities in procedures were sc/sr students” (p 4). Even more significantly, “[A]ll the Physics students that this Committee could meet have reported their sense that the School was acting against the interests of the sc/sr students” (p 4). It also tells us that out of four sc/sr students in the batch, two dropped out because they did not find supervisors, and one has now committed suicide.

The report categorically states, “Senthil was aware of all the problems being faced by other sc students in the School. He was not only beginning to believe that

ANNOUNCEMENT

The Post Graduate Department of Sociology, University of Mumbai, established in 1919, is the oldest Department of Sociology in the country. It will turn 90 next year. On this occasion, the Department is embarking on a project to publish a directory of alumni. If you are an alumnus or know of any other alumni, please contact the Department and you will be sent a brief data sheet to fill in. The data sheet can also be downloaded from the University website. The Department looks forward to hearing from you.

Kamala Ganesh
Professor and Head

Address:
Department of Sociology, University of Mumbai, Kalina Campus,
Santacruz (E), Mumbai 400 098.

E-mail: sociology.alumni@gmail.com with a copy marked to
head@sociology.mu.ac.in

the sc/ST students were 'being targeted' in the School, but was also getting anxious about it. He spoke to friends about the case of one of his friends, who, in spite of being a CSR fellowship-holder and clearing all four papers in one attempt failed to pass the comprehensive viva examination. Such instances led him to think that the School had too many 'obstacles' for someone wanting to do a PhD in Physics" (p 5).

When reports of Senthil's death first came out, Srivastava told a newspaper "we did make personal recommendations with the academic council to not include students who are not up to the mark". The report of the fact-finding committee has established that the "mark" this school seems to require is the mark of caste. The "arbitrariness" in the procedures of the school, then, is quite systematic; it seems designed to push out those dalit students who have managed to gain entry in spite of this special requirement. These are students who have battled such odds at every step to come to the department, and whose success is a testimony to their ability and their immense value to the academic community. The practices of the School of Physics then amount to upholding the caste-order at huge costs to science and higher education, and the nation at large.

Elite Institutions

The University of Hyderabad is no stranger to allegations of caste-based discrimination, that have also been the centre of many a political agitation. The rustication of 10 dalit students in 2002 – without an inquiry or any investigation – is only the most recent instance that comes to mind. But this is the first time that an official acknowledgement has come from the university, in spite of the vice chancellor, Syed Hasnain's claim that the committee has not found "evidence" of discrimination.

The years following the Mandal agitation have given us the vocabulary to speak about caste in its new realised forms in modern institutions. While this new language has to some extent transformed the discussion in the humanities and social science disciplines, the "pure sciences" have been completely fenced off from a

social audit in the name of "objectivity" and "national progress". It is significant that the latest round of agitation against reservations has been spearheaded by medical professionals, engineers and the IT sector. These disciplines have been at the forefront of pitting "merit" against "politics", where one lies in the domain of truth and objectivity, while the other is merely a politician's whim. The survival of these disciplines is linked to the prestige attached to them by virtue of their exclusivity. In this scheme of things, Science is important inasmuch as the "masses" cannot approach it – it is an exclusive domain, and zealously guarded as such.

Those who manage to get in in spite of these stringent gate-keeping mechanisms are made to pay a heavy price for their ability. A dalit research scholar committed suicide at the Indian Institute of Science in Bangalore last year, and no investigation was held. The Thorat Committee Report on AIIMS has documented the widespread manifestations of caste prejudice at that premier institution, where right from the ragging of students, to hostel accommodation, extra-curricular activities, grades and classroom

practices, all aspects of life bear the stamp of caste bias. How many more dropouts, humiliations and deaths will we need before recognising that institutions must be held accountable and the guilty punished?

Senthilkumar's suicide lies at the intersection of the academic malpractices of the School of Physics, the exclusivity of the "pure sciences", the re-formed untouchability practised in university spaces and the threat to the status quo posed by reservation. Each of these questions has to be addressed if higher education is to be enabling and not merely accessible, for the large numbers of students who struggle to gain entry into it, only to be met with indifference, or downright hostility and humiliation. Reservations may provide access, but as Senthil's death shows, the battle for democratising our institutions – and a genuinely progress-oriented science – is of a different order altogether.

NOTES

- 1 The Thorat Committee Report on AIIMS, which has been conveniently forgotten in the euphoria surrounding Venugopal's reinstatement as director.
- 2 TOI, February 26, 2008.



Economic & Political WEEKLY CD-ROM 2006

The digital version of *Economic and Political Weekly* is now available for **2006** on a single disk.

This electronic edition contains the complete content of all the issues published in 2006. The **CD-ROM 2006** comes equipped with a powerful search as well as utilities to make your browsing experience productive. The contents are indexed and organised as in the print edition, with articles laid out in individual sections in each issue. Users can browse through the sections or use the sophisticated search facility to locate articles and statistics of interest.

Price for **CD-ROM 2006** (in India)

Individuals – Rs 285 (Rs 250 plus postage and handling charges of Rs 35)

Institutions – Rs 535 (Rs 500 plus postage and handling charges of Rs 35)

International – US\$ 40 (including airmail postage)

Also available 2003, 2004 and 2005 on three separate CDs, individual CD price as above

Any queries please email: circulation@epw.in

To order the CD-ROMs (please specify the year) send a bank draft payable at Mumbai in favour of *Economic and Political Weekly*. The CDs can also be purchased on-line using a credit card through a secure payment gateway at epw.in.

Circulation Manager,
Economic and Political Weekly

320, 321, A to Z Industrial Estate, Ganpatrao Kadam Marg, Lower Parel, Mumbai 400 013, India