

# India's Universities Are Falling Terribly Short on Addressing Caste Discrimination

Physical exclusion and indifference of the faculty towards the plight of marginalised students is pushing many to suicide, and despite measures being in place, administrations are doing little to address the issues.



The JNU campus. Credit: PTI



CASTE EDUCATION 21/NOV/2017

On March 13, 27-year-old Dalit student Muthukrishnan Jeevanantham **took his own life** in a friend's room at the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) campus in New Delhi,



much in the same way ~~his~~ friend and Dalit scholar, Rohith Vemula, **had done** in January 2016.

Rajini Krish, as his friends knew him, **had documented on Facebook** the stories of his struggle as a student facing discrimination. Just a few days before his death, in his last public post, he wrote: “There is no Equality in M.phil/phd Admission, there is no equality in viva–voce, there is only denial of equality...”

The prevalence of caste-based discrimination in Indian universities has been an open secret for decades. While some Dalit student suicides have been more widely reported in recent years, away from the headlines, direct and indirect systemic discrimination continues to suffocate the lives and thwart the education of Dalit students across the country. Information obtained through Right to Information applications reveals that many universities are yet to implement recommendations made by the University Grants Commission (UGC) to address caste-based discrimination.

Discrimination on campuses varies from physical exclusion to a more subtle denial of entitlements, and to seemingly neutral practices which disproportionately affect Dalit students. Several official bodies set up to investigate allegations of discrimination have found evidence of caste-based discrimination.

### **Physical segregation**

In 2007, a committee set up by the central government to investigate allegations of harassment of SC/ST students at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) in New Delhi **found rampant discrimination** against these students.

The committee, headed by former UGC chair Sukhdeo Thorat, surveyed half the SC/ST students at AIIMS. It found evidence of informal segregation in the AIIMS hostels, with SC/ST students being forced to shift into certain hostels following harassment, abuse and violence by dominant caste students. SC/ST students reported that they faced social isolation in dining rooms, on sports fields and at cultural events.

Students also told the Thorat committee about discrimination by teachers, **which took the form of** “avoidance, contempt,



non-cooperation, and discouragement and differential treatment”.

Eighty-four percent of the SC/ST students surveyed said examiners had asked them about their caste directly or indirectly during their evaluations. One student said: “Teachers are fine till they do not know your caste. The moment they come to know, their attitude towards you changes completely.” AIIMS initially rejected the Thorat committee findings, and only agreed to implement them after the exit of the then director.

### **Discrimination by faculty**

Inquiry committees at other universities have also found what they said or suggested, was evidence of discrimination by faculty. At the University of Hyderabad – also known as Hyderabad Central University or UoH – six Dalit students have committed suicide since 2008. P. Senthil Kumar, a Dalit PhD student at the School of Physics, consumed poison in his room in February 2008. He was one of the four SC/ST students in the 2006 PhD batch – two among them had dropped out after they were unable to find faculty supervisors for their research.

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## **Also read: Mourning Rohith Vemula, Who Could Not Rescue Himself From the ‘Fatal Accident’ of His Birth**

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The Professor Vinod Pavarala committee set up to investigate the incident stated: “Inconsistency and subjectivity in the standards applied for coursework and for allocation of supervisors... led to an understandable perception... among SC/ST students in the School of Physics that they are being discriminated against on the basis of their caste.”

In 2013, Madari Venkatesh, a doctoral student at the Advanced Centre of Research in High Energy



Materials, committed suicide. Venkatesh had not been allotted a supervisor or a doctoral committee to supervise his research even 2.5 years after he joined the university.

The Professor V. Krishna Committee set up to investigate the incident stated: “It is indeed deplorable that Mr M Venkatesh... has been pushed to seek out various teachers in a desperate effort to continue with his research work, when it was actually the bounded duty of the University and the ACRHM, in particular, to have done so.”

The Justice K. Ramaswamy Committee, which also looked into the suicide, noted, “Though six faculty members from the School of Chemistry were available, none was willing to supervise [Venkatesh’s] research...He was discriminated on the ground of caste... It is not his personal problem, it is the consequence of institutional discrimination.”

According to a professor at UoH who did not wish to be identified, recommendations by the committees have not been taken seriously. He said, “In most cases, it’s very obvious when a teacher makes a student invisible – the teacher not giving enough time, being discouraging in some way, not allowing the student to not work in the labs. It’s not in your face and therefore difficult to prove.”

In 2013, 28 professors from universities in Hyderabad impleaded themselves in a writ petition related to caste-based discrimination before the Andhra Pradesh high court. **Their letter noted**, “Students from marginalized groups also are troubled by lack of clarity and sometimes contradictions in examination and administrative procedures...rules that do not take into account their difficulties, and discretionary and biased treatment from the administration. For example, ‘don’t waste my time’, ‘go away’, ‘come tomorrow’, ‘I am busy now’, ‘your presence irritates me’ (the last spoken by a deputy registrar sitting in an air-conditioned room) have become routine.”





Protests after the death of Rohith Vemula. Credit: PTI

Susie Tharu, a former teacher at the English and Foreign Languages University and one of the signatories to the petition, said that most teachers did not have the capacity or patience to work with students from marginalised backgrounds. She said, “The students’ weaknesses would be mostly superficial, like inadequate language, whereas they would have new and relevant important insights to offer and a rich set of questions to bring to any topic. Students who come through reservation and from backgrounds that the university is not familiar with really struggle to survive, but the administration is indifferent to that.”

### Support programmes

Some universities have set up academic support programmes for Dalit and Adivasi students, but these are not without their flaws.

On September 4, 2014, Aniket Ambhore, an electrical engineering student at the Indian Institute of Technology, Bombay (IIT-B), **jumped to his death** from a hostel building. A month before that, he and his parents were reportedly told by his head of department and the head of the institute’s Academic Rehabilitation Programme (ARP) that Aniket, who was struggling academically, would do well to drop out and take up another career.

Aniket had enrolled in the ARP to receive remedial coaching classes, which were voluntarily offered by professors to help students. An IIT-B professor who did not wish to be named said that before the programme, the institute used to

encourage students failing the first and second semesters to drop out.

“For the longest time, if you pulled a few courses in the first few semesters, it meant exit. It took a while for the university to realise that there was a pattern in the kind of students who were encouraged to drop out because they were seen as unlikely to make up. They were overwhelmingly Dalit,” the professor said.

Another professor at IIT-B who wished to remain anonymous said the ARP was inadequate as an initiative to address caste discrimination in campus. He said, “It comes through an upper-caste patronising generosity of certain individuals. This is more of a helping mode, which will never work out in an enabling institutional strategy.”

IIT-B set up an enquiry into the suicide only after the National Commission for Scheduled Castes directed it to do so. While the committee arrived at the conclusion that Aniket’s difficulties could not be traced to a caste-based or anti-reservation environment at IIT-B – as was alleged by his parents in a complaint letter to the university – they did find deficiencies in the support system for students who weren’t performing well academically in general.

The committee found that the SC/ST support system in the institute was largely ‘ineffective’ because of the lack of departmental support and interlinkages with other arms of the support system. It said that the role of the SC/ST advisor in the orientation programme and ARP was cursory and not integrated and that the support system comprised individual volunteers, with no effort made to ensure SC/ST representation.

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Aniket's mother Sunita Ambhore told me: "His caste was brought up from the beginning, when he failed two papers in the first semester. He even went to the campus counsellor but his feelings of being discriminated on account of his caste were suppressed. He was made to feel like he didn't belong there because he came in through reservation and was repeatedly encouraged to drop out even as they praised his talent and creativity."

In June 2015, after IIT-Roorkee expelled 73 first-year students from its BTech, IMT and MSc courses – three-quarters of whom were SC/ST – the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR) conducted an investigation into the incident. In their report, the NCDHR said it was told about instances when students who approached teachers with questions were asked their 'category' or entrance exam ranks. One student said he was asked by a teacher, "Why do people like you even come to IITs?" The NCDHR said that it found a lack of institutional support and infrastructure for students from diverse backgrounds, including inadequate English language classes, summer coaching classes and remedial programmes. Their report also said that the SC/ST cell was mostly 'dysfunctional' and students weren't aware of its existence or mandate.

Chirayu Jain, a former student at the National Law School of India University, Bengaluru who worked on a study on inclusiveness at the institution, said, "The student-run academic support programme and the will and the intent of student body, by and large, remains unconcerned with the issues faced by students from marginalised backgrounds."

### **Admission process biased against marginalised students**

Some inquiry committees have also pointed out that admissions processes in universities, while appearing to be neutral, put candidates from SC/ST and other marginalised backgrounds at a disadvantage because of English language fluency issues during *viva voces* (oral interviews).

In April 2016, the Committee on the Welfare of Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes, set up under the human resources development ministry, examined the reservation policy at JNU. It stated: "[W]hile SC/ST students clear written examination with flying colours, they often fail interviews, which is indicative of latent caste discrimination on part of college authorities and teachers."

In November 2016, a committee led by professor Abdul Nafey analysed admission data from 2012 to 2015 at JNU. The committee said: “The data consistently indicate the pattern of difference in the written and viva voce marks across all social categories which indicate discrimination”. It recommended that viva voce marks be reduced from 30% to 15% during admissions, and for the university to review the system every three years.

Indian universities did not, until last year, have a common admission policy for MPhil and PhD research programmes. However, in May 2016, the UGC issued a notification reducing written entrance tests to mere qualifying exams, and basing admissions into these programmes completely on oral interviews. It was this move that Muthukrishnan had written against in his Facebook posts.

### **Compliance with UGC regulations**

In July 2011, following several instances of student suicides, the UGC wrote to all universities asking them to develop pages on their websites, and place registers in the registrar or principal’s offices for Dalit students to lodge complaints of caste-based discrimination. In January 2013, the **UGC (Promotion of Equity in Higher Educational Institutions) Regulations** were passed, which required institutes to take measures to eliminate discrimination and harassment against SC/ST students.

Authorities in institutions were prohibited from, among other things, announcing students’ caste identities in class, not properly evaluating certain students’ examination papers and withholding their fellowships. The UGC also mandated higher educational institutions to establish an equal opportunity cell and appoint an anti-discrimination officer of professor rank or above. Institutions were obligated to decide on complaints within 60 days of receiving them, and also upload on their websites details of measures taken to eliminate discrimination and punishments for perpetrators.

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**Also read: Education and Exclusion of Dalits – A**





# History of Hurt and Humiliation

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In March 2016, the UGC wrote to universities asking them to submit 'Action Taken Reports' on whether they had constituted cells to look into complaints of caste-based discrimination, whether they had webpages and complaints registers in place as well as details of the complaints. Amnesty International India filed RTI applications seeking details of these reports

According to the UGC's response to the RTI application, only 155 universities appeared to have responded to the UGC's letter for the year 2015-16 (India has about 800 universities). Of them, only about half had a webpage where SC/ST students could lodge complaints of discrimination. Less than half – 47% – had constituted committees or cells specifically meant to look into complaints of discrimination against SC/ST students. It is perhaps not surprising then that 87% of universities reported that they had received zero complaints of caste-based discrimination. Of the 146 complaints that were received, some were apparently addressed through 'lectures', 'counseling' and 'mentorship'.

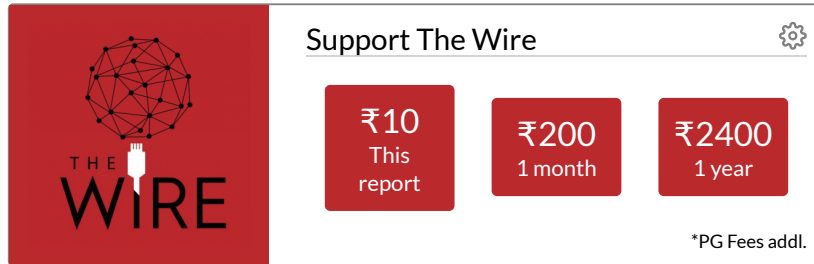
Discrimination against Dalits and Adivasis is a problem that will not be solved overnight. Many of the universities mentioned above have taken steps to address caste-based discrimination, but far more needs to be done. Anecdotal evidence suggests that discrimination faced by Dalit and Adivasi students in less well-known universities is as bad, or worse.

Following Muthukrishnan's suicide, a JNU professor told me that things on campus have not changed. He said, "The death of a brilliant young man was tragic to say the least. There are students like him who are first generation entrants into the university system and lack social support and language skills to cope initially. He had a lot at stake. But his death has caused no self-reflection. Things continue as they are, and there is no immediate hope of a transition or change."

Many of the recommendations made by various committees which have investigated caste-based discrimination – including remedial coaching, functional SC/ST complaint

cells and a sensitised teaching staff – are bare minimum standards that a university must follow. Their absence will continue to prove the truth of Krish’s parting words quoting B.R. Ambedkar, “When equality is denied, everything is denied”.

*Makepeace Sitlhou is a former campaigner with Amnesty International India.*



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