

Rohith Vemula Suicide Case – Unfolding the Lost Dream of a Philosopher

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Abstract

The case highlights the plight of an aspiring youth of India, named Rohith Chakravarti Vemula. He was Indian PhD scholar at the University of Hyderabad, who committed suicide fighting for the plight of oppressed caste especially Dalits. In July 2015, tensions started when the University reportedly stopped paying Rohith stipend after he was found to be an active member of the radical disadvantage organisation ASA that has over the years firmly established its existence in the University. During the last few decades, India has recorded the highest number of student suicide cases. Student's suicide numbers are growing and is frequently making it to the newspaper headlines. It is a major concern for stakeholders of professional Universities, policy makers and celebrity campaigns. Rather than getting into the politico-religious issues, the case draws from concepts in Psychology such as Cognitive Dissonance and Sociological isolation to understand the phenomenon behind youth suicide. Consequently, the case signals a strong reminder for cultivating collective consciousness.

Key words: *Youth Suicide, Cognitive dissonance, Isolation, Psychology*

Introduction

The case highlights the plight of Rohith Chakravarti Vemula, an aspiring Indian youth. Born on 30th January 1989, he committed suicide on 17 January 2016 and a young life was snuffed. He was an Indian PhD scholar at the University of Hyderabad. Sometime in July 2015, the University reportedly stopped paying him the Fellowship of 25,000 (US\$390) per month after he was found "raising issues under the banner of Ambedkar Students Association (ASA)." It needs to be mentioned that University officials vehemently denied all allegations of discrimination in non-payment of scholarship. They countered that the non-payment was due to delay in "paperwork, because of Rohith's suspension from the University in January 2016.

Five students were suspended in September 2015 from the University for being part of a group doing awareness

campaigns about their caste- based rights to avail facilities provided by the government. Suspension of the students was a decision which was upheld on December 17, 2015. Rohith was one among the suspended students. His PhD studies were supported through the stipend provided by the government, which was stopped temporarily due to suspension, only to be decided after a discussion whose date did not seem clear. Meanwhile, his family struggled to help him when it was difficult for Rohith to support himself financially after the suspension and stoppage of stipend. The temporary suspension of funds and the unspecified duration of suspension forced Rohith to even borrow money from a friend. On January 3, 2016, after the suspension was confirmed, Vemula and his five friends moved from hostel rooms to a tent they set up inside the campus and began a "relay hunger protest" feeling dejected and frustrated as their rights were suppressed.

On 17th January 2016, left with no option in a heavily politicized scenario whose outcome did not seem positive nor a visible date for the decision, a frustrated Vemula who fought tooth and nail decided to commit suicide. His suicide generated wide spread anger from all over India and the world. The media also termed it as a case of discrimination against minority and unprivileged groups and academic institutions as the base for caste discrimination against students belonging to minorities.

It also shows how caste-based politics can play with the life of educated, aware and empowered youths whose career gets gambled away by petty politics. The incident also sent a wave of shock across the nation raising questions about reasons behind youth suicides.

The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), 2015 stated that each year, 30-40 people per 100,000 Indians

aged 15 to 29 committed suicide due to financial crisis. Apart from financial reasons other factors also play their role making India record the highest number of student suicide cases in the last decade. The growing number of student suicides is a major concern for stakeholders of professional educational institutions, policy makers and celebrity campaigns. Sometimes due to external and/ or internal pressures, students strive for unrealistic goals and are not able to cope with these pressures and resort to suicides. In India, the youth suffers from the complex tug of war between aspirations versus vulnerability. The result is an impulsive decision to committee suicide. Rohith's suicide led to strong reactions from the academic community. Although the fundamental right of "right against discrimination" protects discrimination against caste and creed, yet there are serious inequalities at other levels deliberately created to exploit the

discrimination for personal, selfish or groups' advantage particularly in politics. The distribution of wealth and opportunities is not even across all groups. Especially the disadvantaged groups experience a sense of relative deprivation. This combined with financial deprivation can sometimes lead to social problems such as Rohith's .

Excerpts from the Suicide Note of this Aspiring Indian Youth:

".....The value of a man was reduced to his immediate identity and nearest possibility. To a vote. To a number. To a thing. Never was a man treated as a mind. As a glorious thing made up of stardust. In very field, in studies, in streets, in politics, and in dying and living.

I am writing this kind of letter for the first time. My first time of a final letter. Forgive me if I fail to make sense. Maybe I was wrong, all the while, in understanding world. In understanding love, pain, life, death. There was no urgency. But I always was rushing. Desperate to start a life. All the while, some people, for them, life itself is curse. My birth is my fatal accident. I

can never recover from my childhood loneliness. The unappreciated child from my past. I am not hurt at this moment. I am not sad. I am just empty. Unconcerned about myself. That's pathetic. And that's why I am doing this. People may dub me as a coward. And selfish, or stupid once I am gone. I am not bothered about what I am called. I don't believe in after-death stories, ghosts, or spirits. If there is anything at all I believe, I believe that I can travel to the stars. And knows about the other world. I forgot to write the formalities. No one is responsible for my this act of killing myself. No one has instigated me, whether by their acts or by their words to this act. This is my decision and I am the only one responsible for this."

An Insight into the Life of Rohith Vemula

Rohit Vemula was a poor boy from Guntur district of Andhra Pradesh. His father, Manikumar Vemula belonged to the Veddera (OBC) community and his mother Radhika Vemula was from Mala caste (scheduled caste). Rohith's mother Radhika was the adopted daughter of Anjani Devi. Anjani Devi was herself

educated but ironically denied education to her adopted daughter (Radhika) but gave the best to her biological children. Radhika was married off at an age of 12 years. This early marriage was an abusive one for Radhika. She returned to her adopted maternal home. Even here she was treated like a servant. This has been described by Rohith critically as the “fatal accident of my birth” in his suicide note.

Rohith was an introvert in his childhood and he shared and spent all his secrets with his close friend Sheikh Riyaz. Throughout his undergraduate days he stayed in Guntur and rarely went home. He struggled hard to fund his education. He distributed pamphlets and worked in exhibitions. Rohith was well acquainted with the internet. He took interest in science subjects and had curiosity in other subjects also. Thus, he was studious during his college days. Rohith kept his personal life confidential when he moved to Central

University of Hyderabad (CUH) for higher studies. Even his closest friends were kept in dark about their entire family history.

In the Aftermath of Rohith Vemula’s Suicide

There was a loud voice of political and social unrest due to the death not only in India but also worldwide. Request for justice for Rohith was raised at UN on 31st session of Human Rights Council. In India, the wave of solidarity that engulfed University of Hyderabad following the incident soon spread its wings to rest of the country, particularly to University campuses, from Delhi in the North to Thiruvananthapuram in the South, and then to Universities in other parts of the world as well. According to the national media, the University administration revoked the suspension of students in an attempt to assuage passions and disrupt the on-going agitation that had involved hunger strikes, demonstrations, and

picketing. As a mark of dissent, the eminent poet Ashok Vajpeyi returned his D.Litt degree conferred upon him by the University of Hyderabad (UoH) that led to the student's suicide for which he held the University responsible.

First and foremost thing one should understand is that Universities are not workshops, where people get trained for future career in job. Here new thoughts can be nurtured through debates, discussions and non-violent protests. Without development in thought there will not be any progress in the society therefore Universities become a crucible for thoughts and debates in a democratic society. Ironically, in Rohith's case, his University was held responsible for student suicides due to misadministration and stoppage of financial support to under privileged students.

The terrifying sense of acceptance and openness with which Rohith wrote his

last words in his suicide note remains a powerful token of how deeply 'individual' the experience of death can be. *"I am not hurt at this moment. I am not sad. I am just empty. Unconcerned about myself."* *"I am not bothered about what I am called"*.

But despite the individualism manifest in the note, the incident may not be treated in isolation but needs to be placed in the larger structure of society and process of socialization. One phrase that perhaps captures this mood is 'institutional murder' that has been used by the media.

The term 'institutional' remains critical in understanding the reality of Rohith's death. Media highlighted the issue of the non-release of scholarship; the administration sought to defend itself by denying that the withholding of the scholarship had anything to do with Rohith's politics, but was merely a delay in 'paper work'. It is surprising and ironical how 'paperwork' can be a

defense for many things in India, even in an atmosphere of frustration and tension. The lack of means to lead a life of dignity had driven this young activist to the terrible act of suicide.

Secondly, the institution of 'caste' in India remains crucial in understanding Rohith's life, and tragically death, inside the University as well. The institutions of higher learning especially the Central Universities in India attract students from diverse cultures and background and make them inhabit a limited physical space. University is also a space where organised politics finds expressions in the form of student organisations and student elections. Central universities such as the UoH, offer an opportunity for the student to obtain what could be called a 'critical education' in India. Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educator and thinker has been, among others, one of the most convincing proponents of 'critical education.' Freire's

suggests that education effects social transformation and therefore avoiding politics becomes impossible, even if it is politics within the University.

Psychology focuses on human thoughts, emotions and behaviour, but this perspective is surprisingly absent from debate on issues connected with reasons for siced. It is likely; Rohith might have been too scared to object to the humiliation. The young generation is motivated by peer influence and are easily affected by the in group-out-group feelings and a psychological state of minority and majority which resonates with community pockets. When educated youth compare and find a distinction between haves and have nots, they experience an uncomfortable feeling and hold a negative perception and consider themselves as a segregated group. Sometimes youngsters loose self-confidence. Such circumstances may force them to rethink about their caste

and caste pride when they perceive themselves deprived of many basic needs because of belonging to a community. It would be very difficult to know what could have pushed a bright, educated, young man to give up his life. Ideally, this should be an opportunity for a student to project the 'sense of community' of the nation.

In the context of external factors, a powerful governmental university culture and inflexible grading, can taint perception about prospects of good career and may cause psychological hazards including suicides. Through a process of desymbolisation educational organizations try to safeguard and strengthen the shield of belonging among students. As this link loosens, scholars come to feel abandoned, adrift in a zone of insecurity. Therein lies the danger to commit suicides specifically if the student comes from minority group. Another external factor is called

discreditation. This is similar to desymbolization. There is a lack of trust. It can be considered as an act of ungratefulness and nastiness. Sometimes it may restrict the frame for negotiation between teacher and scholars. It blocks all the doors for channelizing the frustrated thoughts.

Analysis from Rohith's Suicide Note from a Philosopher's Perspective

Clearly the suicide note indicates not only the value of a man's life but also the backdrop of frustration that generally any youth may undergo in such a scenario. The frustration of this budding youth was with the political circuit who took advantage of his situation and made his career and life worse all in the game of gambling for politics and publicity.

Hardly anyone took cognizance of his situation that his career seemed jeopardized by this battle that was fought for gaining political mileage by political

goons. The flurry of allegations and counter allegations between political parties missed to understand the plight of Rohith who was only fighting for his right to avail facility mandated by the Ministry of HRD to continue his PhD and set an example for youths of similar category not to lose hope but fight for something that was their fundamental right in this country ,particularly the “Right to Equality”.

In the tussle for publicity and to prove a champion in the relay to safeguard the rights of minority, political parties forgot that quick action was necessary to uplift suspension on this budding Youth-Rohith and his four friends. As Rohith was financially weak, it was the moral duty of all political parties to come together and specify the nearest possible date to deliver a verdict on his suspension away from petty political battles.

None of the political parties anticipated that this delay in delivering an

outcome to Rohith’s suspension will ultimately lead to hyper frustration in this rebellious youth whose rebellion was only meant for a good noble cause i.e. Right to Equality. This fight of Rohith is in fact a basic human right and there was nothing wrong in the youth’s demand which should have led to his suspension.

Suspending Rohith and holding his stipend amount which supported him financially was construed as politically motivated and delay in delivering justice compelled Rohith to take the harsh step to succumb to suicide.

Rohith’s suicide note clearly states that at the backdrop of his attempt to life leading to death, he envisaged a world at sync with that of a philosopher’s thought. The suicide note reflects a philosopher within him and the other side of his personality which is soft and unbiased. He was a rebellious youth but for a noble cause. The character within Rohith which

one can read between the lines in his suicide note indicates that of a Philosopher having a true humanitarian touch. Rohith expected fairness, justice, biasedness from the system. The sole purpose of escalating the issue was to reach to appropriate authorities so that there could be quick delivery of justice as his financial needs were met by the stipend released by HRD. To Rohith's horror nothing out of his protests, at least it did not look promising to him in terms of delivering justice as "Justice delayed is justice denied".

Another facet of Rohith from his suicide note is that, he could be dreaming of himself as a person who championed and took the rights of oppressed class to the next better level. He dreamt of a better world, a world based on equality, unbiasedness and wanted to set a mark for himself in society where suppressed

category would look up to him as a torch bearer against discrimination.

But nothing of that sort happened except that he became a pawn in the hands of politicians and media alike. While politicians used him as a scapegoat, to make matters worse, media used the name of Rohith just to hit the headlines and increase viewership.

Rohith found himself reduced to a material, not a living being as his suicide note states. A material picked up by politicians just to appear in front of audiences and make the politicians a saviour just on the face but not by action. Likewise the media picked him as a material just to hit the headlines but did not help him for the cause he was fighting and championing.

Being at the midst of such a scenario, Rohith landed up in frustration as he felt of himself being used by others to their advantage but not to his grievances.

Generating such ambiguous situation for vulnerable youth and putting them into confusion by the system of this country was something which Rohith realised at a later stage. The image which Rohith envisaged as a visionary, parallel to the cause which he purposefully escalated, suffered demise in the hand of exploitative selfish mercenaries of this country.

The humanitarian philosophy which Rohith had in his mind as a dream at the backdrop of his agitation did not seem likely to materialize in reality. This philosopher's dream which he wanted to convey & convert into action finally ended up in his suicide note which indicated his noble personality away from the debate of politics and slanted media hypes.

Rohith's suicide note spoke of humanitarian aspects which none of the people involved in his cause could figure out. It only indicates the pathetic state of youth and double standards of society

which masquerades itself as a saviour but has a selfish agenda of exploitation and personal gain, nothing else.

The suicide note spoke of those golden Gandhian values which none in this country could figure out. Hence a written note spoke of: Lost Dream of a Philosopher which no one could feel in the pulse of his agitation.

Psychologists use the phrase cognitive dissonance coined by Festinger. He proposed that "the greater the discomfort, the greater the desire to reduce the dissonance of the two cognitive elements" (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 1999). It was perceived that lengthy exposure to cognitive dissonance kindles an early emotional reaction that is then facilitated by the rationalization process. If no explanation can be given, or if the feelings cannot be effectively controlled by the individual, then the original reaction may develop into powerful mood-regulation

disorders such as unhappiness, worry, or post-traumatic stress disorder (Hull, 2002). The degree to which cognition is resistant to change is more complex than the relative importance of various competing cognitions. Cognitive resistance to change is predicated on two conditions; the level of ambiguity associated with the cognition and the degree of difficulty involved in handling stress situations (Festinger, 1957). Sociologist Emile Durkheim (1951) viewed suicide in terms of an individual's degree of social interaction or social relatedness. He believed people who committed suicide to be socially isolated and unable to identify with other members of the social group to which he or she belonged.

Conclusion:

Economists, sociologists, and developmental psychologists have

constantly decided that one's background can intensely mould mental and social outcomes. When the management of schools do not implement strategies to slim class differences, students' chances of success are significantly weakened. The role of In group versus out group feelings also comes to play. As many researchers have pointed out these group feelings can have significant role in developing negative attitude towards an issue. As it is mentioned by many psychologists that lack of proper opportunities, lack of boarder perspectives/holistic goals, lack of expressing own societal values may be the possible facilitators of committing suicide. Realizing the gravity of the situations from different perspectives, it is very difficult to draw a single cause for Vemula's suicide.

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