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AIFRTE Statement on suicide by Dalit scholar Rohith Vemula

“I always wanted to be a writer. A writer of science, like Carl Sagan. At last, this is the only letter I am getting to write.

I loved Science. Stars, Nature, but then I loved people without knowing that people have long since divorced from nature. Our feelings are second handed. Our love is constructed. Our beliefs colored. . . . 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.”

[Rohith Vemula’s last letter to the ‘ASA family’ before his suicide at the University of Hyderabad’s campus on 17th January 2016]

The death of Rohith Vemula, a self-conscious and political **Ambedkarite-Marxist** academic who was pursuing doctoral studies at the **University of Hyderabad (UoH)** has ripped open the façade of a democratic society and polity where all sections and opinions can claim equal space and rights. AIFRTE lowers its head in shame that the future of a young mind of such promise should have been cut short by a callously uncaring caste-divided society. We condemn the prominent and direct role of ministers of the present ruling party and of the organizations affiliated to its caste-protectionist ideology for their direct involvement in setting the stage this tragedy. **AIFRTE also recognizes that the malaise of Brahminical domination runs deeper into institutions and structures of our society and polity. Caste discrimination and oppression in various forms has been institutionalized even in the so-called premier institutions of learning. This needs to be recognized to effectively challenge and annihilate caste otherwise these institutional killings and violence will continue unabated.**

As leading activists of the Ambedkar Students Association (ASA), Rohith and his colleagues consistently fought for the democratic and human rights of students and hence had fallen foul of right-wing Hindutva forces on the campus and their student wing the ABVP. The details of the events that led to the suspension of five Dalit scholars of the UoH have become shamefully common across campuses and communities in India. Any lifestyle, activity or political expression that does not conform to positions taken by the self-proclaimed ‘nationalist’ Hindutva right-wing forces is typically confronted through vigilante attacks and dubbed divisive, communal/casteist and anti-national. It is then politically and administratively treated as such under the present regime. This signals the descent of government institutions and functioning into a network of fascist practices and represents a serious threat to the struggle for protecting and expanding the democratic rights of the mass of the Indian people who suffer numerous forms of socio-economic oppression and discrimination.

At the UoH the ASA’s screening of the film *Muzzafarnagar Baqi Hai* was sought to be disrupted by the ABVP. When student resistance defeated their intentions, the ABVP leaders and supporters resorted to social media to post abuses and caste-based hate speech against ASA activists. Forced to give a public apology when faced with the anger of the students, the ABVP claimed that its leader had been physically assaulted by ASA activists. A university inquiry committee came to the conclusion that no conclusive evidence supported this complaint and hence the ASA activists could not be held responsible for any such attack. At this point, ABVP brought in current Union MoS for Labour and BJP’s

P.T.O.

शिक्षा नहीं कोई कारोबार, है यह जनता का अधिकार

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Secunderabad MP Bandaru Dattareya to demand that Minister of HRD Smriti Irani use her 'dynamic leadership' to ensure that University authorities do not remain 'mute spectators' to the actions of 'extremist, casteist, divisive and anti-national' elements on campus. Irani promptly forwarded the letter to the V.C. demanding to know what action the University was taking in pursuance of Dattareya's complaint. A formal letter was sent to the University authorities in September 2015 following which the Proctorial Board recommended strict action against five ASA student activists for manhandling the ABVP student leader, a recommendation which was rejected by the then V.C. Prof. R.C. Sharma who retired shortly after this. The new V.C. Dr. Appa Rao was clearly under pressure and took the decision to suspend the students. Following more letters and e-mails from MHRD through October and November 2015, on December 17th the University rejected the students' appeals denying all charges. On 7th January 2016, the suspension was made 'conditional' by barring the students from their hostels and from all non-academic and political activities on the campus.

This clearly meant that the students were subjected to a totally unconstitutional political and social boycott, which was aggravated by the fact of their status as Dalits. The experience of social exclusion and denial of dignity of Dalit scholars even at the highest level of academic and professional education in various institutes and universities as evidence of a deeply entrenched sense of caste hatred and revulsion in a society dominated by upper castes is by now an open secret. However, the recent actions taken by the authorities in many such institutes, for example IIT Madras, against politically conscious Ambedkarite groups – usually in conditions of direct confrontation with and in response to charges leveled by right-wing Hindutva forces – points to a heightened threat perception by the latter when they are faced with the growing confidence of radical, organized Dalit youth. Under the banner of the emancipatory ideologies associated with towering leaders like Periyar and Ambedkar these groups are steadily mounting a reasoned and open challenge to caste based Hindu ideology and refusing to be incorporated as socio-political appendages to organizations like the RSS and its Sangh Parivar affiliates that blatantly glorify caste as a celebration of ancient Hindu achievement.

Another shocking fact is that through the entire process of the University's flip-flop decision-making, Rohith had been denied his fellowship from July 2015 onwards. This violates the fundamental principle of all democratic norms of investigation of charges against persons that such punitive actions cannot be taken until the entire process of investigation is completed. It was a calculated move to financially mount severe pressure on students struggling for their political and intellectual rights and makes the university authorities and the V.C. responsible for driving the young scholar to his death.

AIFRTE therefore demands that

- Minister of HRD Smriti Irani and MOS Labour Bandaru Dattareya be immediately dropped from the Union Cabinet for their role in aiding and abetting the tragic death of Rohith Vemula;
- V.C. Prof. Appa Rao be immediately sacked from UoH;
- A completely free and transparent enquiry can only then be conducted into the whole tragic and shameful episode to identify all those who politically and administratively are to be held responsible;
- **Apart from payment of the outstanding fellowship dues of Rohith his family should be paid damages arising out of his untimely death;**
- All punitive action against the remaining four students to be withdrawn forthwith and any fellowship dues payable to them released immediately.

AIFRTE calls upon all its member organization and fraternal groups of students, teachers and democratic activists to hold protests and organize meetings to condemn the tragic incidents that have occurred at UoH. We appeal to them to condemn the call by government, certain political parties and sections of the media not to 'politicize' the issue. Caste oppression and the descent into fascist modes of action by right-wing groups, administrations and government are 'political' issues and they must be fought politically.

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