

# Thought, Policies and Politics: How May We Imagine the Public University in India?

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## Introduction

The university is often imagined by many in the teaching profession as a crucible for critical thought, autonomy and democratic practices, even as the reality of our intellectual and professional existence in such spaces may belie such ideas. This is because the university is a paradoxical space – at once intimate and embattled – and because teaching is hierarchical, conducted in classrooms that are often deeply stratified and sometimes fraught spaces, where the mismatch between desire and actualisation is always present as an undercurrent. As Indian sociologist Shiv Visvanathan said rather provocatively in an early iteration of how one might envisage the university, ‘One must begin by stating that the university is an outrageous hypothesis, and its survival a miracle. Yet one also feels that if it did not exist, it would have to be invented.’<sup>1</sup> In this paper, which has two different, though mutually constitutive parts, I wish to think about the sites from where we ask the question: ‘What is the university for?’ This mutual constitutiveness – that of the intersection of state policies on higher education with student politics – may seem somewhat counterintuitive yet is, I would argue, integral to understanding one of the most significant contemporary sites of crisis today: the steady erosion of the public university. This crisis is a matter of concern not merely for the global South, but is one that has generated heated academic and political debates all over the world.<sup>2</sup>

The first part of the paper, then, is an attempt to read an older imagination of the university against India’s draft National Policy on Education (NPE) 2016,<sup>3</sup> announced by the Bharatiya Janata Party government last year, which threatens to undo the last vestiges of a state-supported, liberal education system and replace it with privatised skills building. This move is not unfamiliar, and aspects of this are visible in different parts of the world where a managerial imagination is helping to create educational systems that are geared towards generating ‘economic value’. While this is usually

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1 Shiv Visvanathan, ‘Democracy, Plurality and Indian University’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 35(40) (30 September 2000), 3597.

2 For an excellent set of recent essays on the political economy of the university, see the special issue, ‘The Political Economy of the University INC’, *World Social and Economic Review of Contemporary Policy Issues*, 8 (April 2017). For a critique of the Bologna process, seen by its critics as representing the foundations of the neoliberal shift, see A. Curaj, P. Scott, L. Vlasceanu and L. Wilson, eds., *European Higher Education at the Crossroads: Between the Bologna Process and National Reforms* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2012).

3 See ‘Ministry of Human Resource Development, National Policy on Education 2016, Report of the Committee for Evolution of the New Education Policy’, <http://www.nuepa.org/new/download/NEP2016/ReportNEP.pdf>. See also <http://www.financialexpress.com/jobs/draft-national-education-policy-2016-20-salient-features/301984/> (both accessed 21 November 2017).

interpreted as the outcome of the neoliberalising agendas of modern states, in the Indian instance we find that this dovetails, quite neatly, into a cultural right-wing project. In the second part of the paper I address certain aspects of the problem of 'what the university is for' by using the example of Ambedkarite student activist Rohith Vemula's tragic suicide. Here the hope is to unpack the relationship between students, universities, politics and pedagogy that are unfolding against the backdrop of the ongoing political and policy initiatives of the Indian state. In the protests that followed Rohith's death, students redesignated his suicide as 'institutional murder', marking the space of higher education as exclusionary and casteist and demanding, amongst other things, the resignation of Appa Rao, the vice-chancellor of the University of Hyderabad (UoH). This, however, was not to be. On the contrary, as part of its attempts to delegitimise students' protests, the state honoured Rao, who had been responsible, through his callous behaviour, for Rohith's suicide. Despite many setbacks, continued student protests have succeeded in foregrounding the complex issues regarding caste discrimination and violence on university campuses, and keeping alive their demand for the Rohith Act.<sup>4</sup>

Briefly, in terms of the Indian campus, where social and political movements have pushed for the meaningful implementation of the constitutionally mandated right to education, there has been a steady change in the demography of the public university. As Satish Deshpande's careful work shows, 'as long-standing concerns of the state, they [higher education and social justice] are both older than the Indian republic.'<sup>5</sup> Yet the history of contemporary India does not live up to the promise of equalising access to education, which is a necessary precondition for rendering other kinds of access (be it wealth or status) equal. On the contrary, under the guise of doing so it masks the lack of translation of principle into actuality, and

allows higher education to render 'hidden services' to the old order by 'concealing social selection under the guise of technical selection and legitimating the reproduction of the [old] social hierarchies by transmuting them into academic hierarchies.'<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, without the continuous anti-caste struggles of modern India, it is unlikely that the public university would necessarily have been socially inclusive. Predictably, such gatekeeping is deeply invested, and as Pierre Bourdieu alerts us, flows from the need to control the modes of reproduction of cultural capital.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the chequered history of Indian higher education, and the public university, is testament to the ways

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4 The Rohith Act is a legislative proposal for educational institutions to ensure the prevention of discrimination in higher education on grounds of caste, religion or social status.

5 Satish Deshpande, 'Introduction: Beyond Inclusion' in Satish Deshpande and Usha Zacharias, eds., *Beyond Inclusion: The Practice of Equal Access in Indian Higher Education* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2013), 1.

6 Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* (London: Sage, 1977), quoted in Deshpande, 'Introduction: Beyond Inclusion', 1.

7 See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984) and 'Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction' in R. Brown, ed., *Knowledge, Education and Cultural Change: Papers in the Sociology of Education* (London: Tavistock, 1973), 71–112, for an elaboration of the relationship between education and cultural capital.

in which access alone – which itself was acceded to the socially and economically marginal after decades of struggle – cannot be seen as an index of an equitable system of education.

The Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), for instance, from its very inception in the early 1970s, radicalised the idea of education by treating it as a right, and created an extremely enabling admission policy that helped widen the social base of its student body.<sup>8</sup> This policy has only been bettered over the years, though part of this was the result of the struggles of the JNU Students Union and the wider student community. Consequently, the present admission policy takes into account, over and above the constitutionally mandated modes of affirmative action in relation to caste, ‘tribe’/indigenous communities (Adivasi), and, more recently, the disabled, regional, gender and linguistic disparity in the country. This has meant that over the years the classroom has become truly diverse, and a large proportion of students are first-generation learners in higher education.

However, this has also raised serious challenges for the pedagogic process, most of which to my mind are inadequately addressed by pedagogues and university administrations alike; more importantly, they rarely become the site for thought. In one powerful exception to this norm, Sharmila Rege brings questions of access, caste and the asymmetries of linguistic power (especially the positioning of anglophony in Indian higher education) into the same frame to interrogate the pedagogic and disciplinary preoccupations of the Indian university.<sup>9</sup> Her work demonstrates that truly meaningful education cannot happen unless the process is dialogic, with the difficult questions posed by the pedagogic speaking creatively to the radical criticality raised by student and other protests. More importantly, it demonstrates that universities must not just be equitable, but also ethical institutions. Student campaigns against discrimination have repeatedly raised fundamentally serious questions about the classroom as a space that can replicate power structures that exclude students on the basis of their caste or religious community. More recently, the student movements erupting all over India, and indeed the world, are also pointing to two other broad sets of issues: the first relates to what ‘access’ might mean in an everyday sense to students, economic and educational; and the second opens up new ways of engaging questions of student subjectivity. For instance, these campaigns have powerfully engaged different kinds of questions, from the right to a life free of paternalist patriarchy on university campuses (the Pinjra Tod campaign started by women students in Delhi and in Hyderabad’s Maulana Azad National Urdu University); the right to protests (Hok Kolorob or the right to cacophony in Calcutta); the fight for social justice and the enactment of the Rohith Act (in Hyderabad); to the battle for the right to dissent (in JNU and Delhi universities). These are all ways in

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8 This is done through awarding a series of ‘deprivation points’ to candidates, calculated on the bases of different kinds of conditions of social deprivation, like gender, regional location in the country and so on. See <https://admissions.jnu.ac.in/prospectus/jnuce/deprivation%20points.pdf> (accessed 21 November 2017). This is over and above the constitutionally mandated reservation for the hitherto socially marginalised castes (Scheduled, and Other Backward), Scheduled Tribes (ST) and the Physically Handicapped (PH).

9 Sharmila Rege, ‘Education as *Trutiya Ratna*: Towards Phule-Ambedkarite Feminist Pedagogical Practice’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 45(44–45) (30 October 2010), 88–98.

which students, as political subjects, are demanding the right to determine what the project of education ought to be. These sets of issues also pose serious questions about the sites and modes of learning, without necessarily offsetting the classroom and its outside (road/administrative block/‘velivada’)<sup>10</sup> as oppositional, even as they produce a counterimagination of the university, the ‘nation’ and indeed the very process of change and transformation.

A small example then. On 10 February 2016, a day before he was picked up and thrown into jail on charges of sedition, JNU Students Union president Kanhaiya Kumar gave an impassioned speech on the campus. This was in response to the state-sponsored police charge that a programme organised by some students the previous day, entitled ‘The Country without a Post Office’, was ‘anti-national’.<sup>11</sup> As part of his speech Kanhaiya said,

Some media people were saying that JNU runs on taxpayer money, on subsidy. Yes, this is true. JNU runs on taxpayer money. It runs on subsidy. But a question arises: What is a university for? A university is there to critically analyse society’s ‘common conscience’. To promote critical thinking. If universities fail in this job then there can be no nation, there will be no people’s participation. The country will only be fodder for capitalists. It’ll only be fodder for loot and exploitation. If the people’s culture, values, rights are not included, then there will be no nation. We stand by this country and that dream that Bhagat Singh and Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar saw. We stand by the dream of equality for all, the dream of the right to live, the right to food, water and shelter. We stand by these dreams. Rohith gave his life to stand by these dreams. But I want to tell these Sanghis,<sup>12</sup> shame on your government. I challenge the Central government, what you did in Rohith’s case, we won’t let happen in JNU. We will remember Rohith’s sacrifice. We stand by the side of freedom of expression...<sup>13</sup>

Student leader Kanhaiya’s speech captures, with great eloquence and lucidity, the essence of the concerns of this paper. If universities are indeed meant to foster criticality, in its many different aspects, then it is imperative that one brings within the same frame the discussions of policies that choose to direct education in specific ways, and the forms in which the push-back against this takes place. By juxtaposing these different, though not entirely unrelated, phenomena, I am trying to think about

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10 The student movements from 2015 onwards have introduced a new mode of pedagogy – the ‘teach-ins’. These are usually classes and intellectual engagements that take place outside the classroom. In 2015, a ‘teach-in’ was held on the road outside the University Grants Commission in Delhi; in 2016, both Hyderabad University and JNU had similar ‘teach-ins’. In Hyderabad, it was at the ‘velivada’ – the space meant to replicate a ‘Dalit ghetto’, built by the students who had been rusticated by the university authorities; in JNU, it was at the administrative block, renamed ‘Azaadi Chowk’ or ‘Freedom Square’.

11 The programme, held annually, was a critique of the judicial killing of Afzal Guru, a Kashmiri suspected to have been involved in an attack on the Indian parliament in 2001.

12 The term used to refer to the Hindu Right Parties that have banded together under the umbrella category ‘Sangh Parivar’.

13 See <http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/kanhaiya-kumar-speech-jnu-row-is-this-sedition/> (accessed 21 November 2017). Anonymous translator.

how one can use the space between privatisation and protest as a site from where to produce a critique of the ongoing changes in Indian higher education. Alongside, I hope to think also about the ways in which the relationship of ‘thought’ and ‘action’ can be productively mobilised to revitalise the idea of the university.

## Imagining the university

The developmental paradigm of the early decades of independent India has often been referred to as Nehruvian, deriving from its first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru’s vision to make India modern, and an equal player, in the new postcolonial world order. An advocate of what has been characterised as ‘democratic socialism’, Nehru envisioned a strong role for the state in all aspects of development. His political economy was based on an Indian version of the welfare state, where issues from planning and public health to education and industrialisation were all to be part of the state’s developmental agenda. Part of this vision was the idea of state-sponsored education, which would enable the growth of an Indian education system with ‘quality’. He supported academic freedom and was not against collaboration with foreign academics, recommending training for Indians abroad if needed (which he considered preferable to ‘second-rate’ foreign experts being brought in to help in the postcolonial development process).<sup>14</sup> This brief reflection about an early postcolonial vision of what Indian education ought to be highlights where we are poised at the moment, when privatisation through (m)any means is accompanied by a right-wing and militarised state that speaks disingenuously of education as an ‘ancient value’ even as it steadily dismantles state-funded systems of public education.

However, before moving on to a discussion of the draft NPE in India, a brief digression to think about the ways in which we imagine the university. It is striking that with all its local variants, Wilhelm von Humboldt’s<sup>15</sup> imagination of the university as a space for academic work and life seems to have created a lasting template for how we imagine the university today, despite political alterity, postcolonial rethinking or a critique of the political present.<sup>16</sup> The notion of the modern university, complete with academic autonomy, the space for teaching and research, and a demarcated role for the state is something that can be traced back to a version of his early iteration, and became a model, with modifications, for different parts of the world, including India. André Béteille shows that the ‘new type of university’, which uses Humboldtian ideas, is based on ‘three fundamental principles. These may be described as (i) the unity of teaching and research, (ii) the freedom to teach and to learn, and (iii) the principle of self governance.’<sup>17</sup> This means that teaching, research and autonomies of

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14 Much has been written on Indian development and its Nehruvian variant. For a representative overview, see Pranab Bardhan, *The Political Economy of Development in India* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984).

15 Much has been written on Humboldt; for a good discussion on his ideas of the university, see Peter Josephson, Thomas Karlsruh and Johan Ostling, eds., *The Humboldtian Tradition: Origins and Legacies* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

16 See André Béteille, ‘Universities in the Twenty-First Century’, The Third Foundation Day Lecture of the National University of Educational Planning and Administration, 2009, <http://www.educationforallindia.com/universities-in-twenty-first-century-by-andre-beteille-nuepa-august-eleventh-1999-foundation-day.pdf> (accessed 21 November 2017).

17 *Ibid.*, 7.

all kinds, including financial, are integral not only for knowledge production but also for imagining the university itself.

Reflecting on the German experience, Jürgen Habermas wrote a couple of decades back on the changes in the German university, arguing that the shifts that one could see were in line with what ‘society’ wants.

Humboldt and [Friedrich] Schleiermacher see the solution to the problem in a governmentally organized autonomy of science which would protect the university from both political interventions and economic imperatives. At the same time – and this is the second notion – Humboldt and Schleiermacher want to explain why it is in the interest of the state itself to guarantee to the university the external organizational form of an internally unlimited freedom. Both thinkers were convinced that, if only scientific work were turned over to the dynamics of research processes, the universities would serve as focal points for moral culture, and indeed for the spiritual life of the nation generally...These two notions combine to form the idea of the university, and to explain several of the more striking characteristics of the German university tradition...Of course, this scientific autonomy is supposed to be perceived only in ‘solitude and freedom,’ at a clear distance from bourgeois society and the political public sphere.<sup>18</sup>

He goes on to suggest that the

working conditions for research were tailored less to the functions of general education than to the functional imperatives of the economy and administration...[and]...the establishment of a clear professional differentiation between popular and academic education confirmed class structures which negated both the universalist intent of the university idea and the promise it had held for an emancipation of society as a whole.<sup>19</sup>

Habermas’ revisionist reflection is significant as it goes to the heart of many continuing dilemmas regarding the university, and versions of his positions can be heard not only in the critiques of the Bologna process, but also in the ongoing debates on higher education in India. Here, I wish to focus on the problems posed by abstract ideas like freedom and autonomy in the university, which simultaneously bear the expectation that they would be state-supported and -sponsored.<sup>20</sup> Alongside is an equally difficult dilemma about higher education – whether it should be functional (‘serving economy and administration’) or if it should have some other, often rather vaguely defined, purpose. These issues continue to dog our discussions regarding

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18 Jürgen Habermas and John R. Blazek, ‘The Idea of the University: Learning Process,’ *New German Critique*, 41 (Spring–Summer 1987), 8–9.

19 *Ibid.*, 13.

20 The next section elaborates in greater detail on the risks entailed in an unreflective embrace of state-sponsored education.

higher education, discussions which hinge on the difficult relationships between the state, education, the university, employment, funding and political existence – in other words, what is assumed and expected when one asks the question, ‘What is a university for?’ While most of us would wish to retain certain notions like autonomy or freedom as values in our lives in the university, it is also significant that such liberal notions mask complex histories of inequality and injustice, the by-products of the project of modernity, that continue to thrive in the very same domains of higher education and learning. I shall return to this issue in the second part of this paper. I now briefly engage with the recently proposed education policy in India, and the implications that such state policies have for higher education in our contexts.

### **NPE and its implications**

The 2016 report of the Committee for the Evolution of the New Education Policy identifies values, awareness, knowledge and skills as the goals of the educated.<sup>21</sup> While situating India within the predictable culturalist rhetoric of the Hindu Right, underscoring the importance of ‘ancient values’ in education, this is rapidly discarded to accommodate the needs of the current moment. India, the report claims, is an ‘aspirational society’ which ‘need(s) good education.’<sup>22</sup> The key to this is meant to be information and communication technology (ICT) and, in order to ensure this, the report claims that

[T]he Government of India have [sic] launched several social and developmental initiatives such as *Swachh Bharat Abhiyan* [Clean India Movement], Digital India, Skill India, Make in India and Smart Cities. All these initiatives have significant backward and forward linkages with the education sector that need to be taken into account in the new NPE. For example, the induction of ICT also underlines the imperative necessity of providing electricity and connectivity, and making computer hardware, software and technical support available in every school, especially in rural areas. Similarly, Skill India and Make in India require the mainstreaming of vocational education, practical knowledge, hands-on projects and courses oriented towards meeting the needs of industry and employment.<sup>23</sup>

The answer to the developmental predicament that the country finds itself in is to be resolved by creating new institutions that focus on ‘Digital India’ and the information technology (IT) sector. The only way in which these will thrive is through ‘their regular evaluation.’ This would in turn ‘help reduce political interference and corruption and restore credibility in the system.’<sup>24</sup> Indeed, it is striking that the support for

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21 See ‘Ministry of Human Resource Development, National Policy on Education 2016’, <http://www.nuepa.org/New/download/NEP2016/ReportNEP.pdf> (accessed 24 November 2017).

22 Ibid., 35.

23 Ibid., 36.

24 Ibid.

a proliferating sector supporting IT education is meant to be free of state or at least ‘political interference’.

The Committee cannot ignore this repeated assertion brought to its attention in different forms in diverse circumstances – the clear conclusion is that ‘political interference’ is almost certainly the most important reason for poor outcomes. This significant factor negates any effort to administer the system or reward efficiency and dedication.<sup>25</sup>

Though not stated explicitly, the suggestion is that this would benefit from private funding.

In a panel discussion, ‘The University and its Worlds’, held at the University of the Western Cape in South Africa,<sup>26</sup> the participants addressed the ways in which the logic of a neoliberalising state creates models of higher education; the university, where research is to be measurable, and effective policy-making become the yardstick to evaluate its success.<sup>27</sup> The draft Indian NPE reflects precisely this trend. Alongside, it suggests that the development of ICT and Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs) would ensure the availability of ‘skill-based’ courses for a large section of education-seeking Indians. Keeping with the logic of treating education as a consumable good would require ‘quality control’, and the government’s solution suggested in the NPE is unsurprisingly the strengthening of a system of accreditation and evaluation, not dissimilar to those present in different parts of the world. This, we are told, would ensure the necessary ‘quality and excellence’ that is required of such an education system.

Finally, privatisation is no longer to be restricted to seeking funding from philanthropists or domestic industry, but should encourage ‘appropriate collaborations with select foreign universities.’ The key here, it is stressed, is that the ‘collaborating partner’ should be amongst the top 200 in the world.<sup>28</sup>

While ranking and accreditation systems and the language of ‘world-class’ universities are not unfamiliar in those parts of the world that are ahead of India on the path of privatisation and in neoliberal modes of development, they are far more recent in India. The past decade has witnessed a steady shift in this direction, with the processes of paving the way for the entry of foreign universities into India and of privatisation (with its attendant attempts at dismantling state structures supporting higher education, like the University Grants Commission) having been successfully

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25 Ibid., 35–40. See G. Arunima, ‘Who’s Afraid of Public Education?’, <https://thewire.in/113311/public-higher-education-privatisation/> (accessed 21 November 2017) for some of the ways in which privatisation is being effected presently in the public university.

26 See ‘The University and its Worlds’, <http://www.chrflagship.uwc.ac.za/portfolio/video-the-university-and-its-worlds-a-panel-discussion-with-achille-mbembe-judith-butler-wendy-brown-and-david-theo-goldberg/> (accessed 21 November 2017).

27 See ‘Ministry of Human Resource Development, NPE’.

28 Ibid., 145.



initiated.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, I see this NPE as a continuation of policies that were initiated by the previous political regime in power in the country, and not as something entirely novel.

The question, however, is how to read the coming together of two divergent trends in the manner in which the present government envisions higher education: on the one hand, encouraging ICTs, MOOCs and the entry of foreign universities into the Indian educational sphere, and, on the other, pushing an aggressively right-wing culturalist agenda. Within the last year alone, between the release of the draft NPE and now, the Indian government has been attempting to push through many changes in a steady fashion. While the outright privatisation of the public university cannot be accomplished that easily, some of the steps in this direction have been put in place, including changing the funding structure of the University Grants Commission, the principle funder for Indian public universities.<sup>30</sup> Many of the government's ongoing schemes, be it Skill India or Digital India, find resonance in changes being made on public university campuses. These include being pushed to introduce new disciplinary streams like engineering and management, where they had not existed earlier, to developing new schemes like short-term certification courses with a fee structure that is at variance with the usual highly subsidised education for regular students. In universities like JNU, this has also been accompanied by a steady undoing of its ordinances and conventions that, in the long run, will make the structural transformation of the university far simpler. Concurrently, as part of its cultural agenda, the government, through university administrations, has attempted to influence ideological changes on campuses, including attempts to curb campus protests, influence curricular changes that would increasingly be in keeping with Hindu fundamentalist ideas, and control dissenting voices through a combination of repressive legal and economic<sup>31</sup> measures. These are pitched as necessary for the making of a new Indian and for enabling India's role as a global player.

It does not need great elaboration that India is a country with enormous disparities, and when speaking of access to education, and the public university especially, one needs to bear in mind the kinds and histories of deprivation that confront the average Indian. Judith Butler's reflections on the university stress the difference between affordability (in relation to access to education) and democracy within the academic institution.<sup>32</sup> Even as I recognise the importance of this distinction, and

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29 See Suhas Palshikar, 'Quality in Higher Education: Complex Issues, Superficial Solutions', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 45(20) (15 May 2010), 29–32; Emon Nandi and Saumen Chattopadhyay, 'Quality, Accreditation and Global University Ranking' in Infrastructure Development Finance Company (IDFC) Foundation, *India Infrastructure Report 2012: Private Sector in Education* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2013), 167–177, for a discussion of 'measuring' the quality of education. For a critique of both the National Commission for Higher Education and Research and the Foreign Educational Institutions Bill, see J.B.G. Tilak's important essays, 'The Proposed NCHER: A Solution Worse Than the Disease?', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 45(18) (1 May 2010), 10–13, and 'The Foreign Educational Institutions Bill: A Critique', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 45(19) (8 May 2010), 12–15.

30 Arunima, 'Who's Afraid of Public Education?'

31 For instance, the change in the Indian Council for Social Science Research's constitution in the past year has meant a drastic decline in funding for anything that is considered to have a Left, liberal, feminist, Dalit and other minority rights perspective, and a generally progressive orientation. An extreme version of this has been the attacks on scholars critical of such a political perspective, and attempts to ban their books, especially if these are on any aspect of Islamic history. For a recent controversy on a research work on the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb, see <https://scroll.in/article/838539/aurangzeb-is-controversial-because-of-indias-present-not-past-says-audrey-truschke> (accessed 21 November 2017).

32 In Butler's talk in 'The University and its Worlds'.

that one cannot be merged into the other, I differ from Butler. In countries like India the right to education has been won by hard battles against complex histories of discrimination, thereby changing the manner in which one may pose the problem, or engage the meanings, of both access and democracy. The changing demographics of campuses like JNU or UoH are possible because of long histories of struggles against caste prejudices, which have ensured reservations, or affirmative action, in public education. Many of these struggles have underscored the demand that people from across the country, irrespective of differences in language, community, region, gender or physical ability, be ensured the same rights to education. In other words, these struggles have insisted that the mandate of the Indian constitution be implemented. Needless to say, this has not been an easy task, and without pitched political battles a large part of what can be seen as the achievement in ensuring 'access' could not have happened. But access alone, as the second part of this paper will suggest, does not translate into making universities, or their priorities, more just. The relationship between continuous political pressure and the shaping of priorities in education must therefore not be underestimated.

Keeping this in mind, if we return to some of the issues confronting us with the NPE, it is evident that many of the mechanisms that have been put in place in public universities in India would be quite easily and deftly sidestepped in the future, should the NPE experiment be a success. Carefully worked out admission policies such as the one at JNU, with its commitment to the socially and economically disadvantaged, are already being disregarded, thereby hampering the entry of many into the university.<sup>33</sup> This predictably will also disallow them employment opportunities. While these issues are going to be the fallout of privatising (whether indigenously or via the entry of foreign universities into India), MOOCs and ICT present slightly different kinds of worries. In brief, these are linked to two unrelated sets of issues. First is the manner in which the disciplinary focus of higher education will be affected, with the already abundant prejudices against the humanities and social sciences finding easy justification and speedy substitution with applied sciences and vocational studies. Second is the impact of naturalising the idea of online education, misappropriating as it does the language of democratic access. While the apparent success of Open University systems, and therefore the language of expanding access, legitimises the push for MOOCs, ICT is seen as providing the necessary skills to a largely uneducated population. What the discussion neatly sidesteps is the actual question regarding pedagogy and what the process of education entails. Substituting teachers with online education will not only involve a pedagogic shift requiring a specific kind of teaching that may be possible only in some subjects, but will also reduce the numbers of teachers in the workforce. At a time when the contractualisation of labour across sectors in universities is increasingly palpable, a MOOCs-type system may well be the last nail in the coffin. The gradual process that is meant to lead up to this kind

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33 See for instance <http://www.hindustantimes.com/delhi-news/jnu-announces-new-admission-policy-amid-student-protest-teachers-seek-president-s-intervention/story-JIEfdwpsyQyEksfsEfnO.html> (accessed 21 November 2017).

of e-learning process will itself render many modes of teaching untenable as these will increasingly be subject to surveillance in the guise of ‘recording’ classes. More immediately, it would reify the recorded, and frozen, lecture as the source of ‘knowledge’, thereby slowly enabling the conditions for erasing both the classroom, with its complex dynamics of dialogue and debate, as well as the campus, the site of politics. The last becomes explicit in the injunction in section 5.4 of the NPE, entitled ‘Need to Restrict Political and Other Distractions in University and College Campuses’. In a short section that details the dangers of student activism, the NEP strongly recommends the end of campus politics, arguing that this is what disrupts the ‘main-line’ interests of the ‘serious students’ and the university.<sup>34</sup>

## Campus and politics

In this part of the paper I wish to think about campus politics and how it may speak to the question of ‘what the university is for’. I suggest that the ongoing debates and protests in public universities, and on higher education in India, reveal ways in which campus politics is an important site for understanding the complex relationship between education and the pedagogic processes in the university, political life and critical thinking. It is amply clear from the ongoing students’ (and to a lesser extent teachers’) movements worldwide that the world of ideas and action cannot be easily demarcated. Equally, these seem to be disrupting the easy distinctions between the outside/inside in the case of the university. This is evident in the issues raised, the manner in which campaigns are organised, and the modes in which protest itself is continuously reviewed and reconceptualised.

As noted, students’ movements, which have always had a visible presence in India, have been at the forefront of protests against the present government’s repressive ideology, and its public and institutional manifestations on campuses. Two incidents in contemporary times have shaken up not merely universities but also the very fabric of Indian political life. Both relate to young Indians whose very existence – as students and activist-subjects – has been called into question. One resulted in a tragic death, the suicide (subsequently redesignated by the student community as ‘institutional murder’) of a politically active student at UoH, Rohith Vemula.<sup>35</sup> The other, by questioning the ‘nationalism’ of an entire university community (JNU), has effectively attacked the foundation of every kind of freedom – from expression and

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34 ‘5.4.5 Universities and colleges are temples of learning. Some self-imposed restrictions surely should be in place to ensure that the primary work of the universities should be conducted without hindrance. Ideally the universities ought not to lend themselves as play grounds for the larger national rivalries, inequalities, inequities, and social/cultural fault-lines; these need to be tackled by society as a whole in other fora such as parliament, courts, elections, etc. The point in short is that it is now essential to review the current situation, and find the balance between free speech and freedom of association guaranteed by the Constitution, the needs of various sections of society, and balance them with the primary purpose for which the universities and institutions of higher learning have been established.’ See ‘Ministry of Human Resource Development, NPE’, 52.

35 Rohith, along with four others in the Ambedkar Student Association (ASA), had been suspended by the university administration on unproven charges of violence, which then triggered a series of events that ended in his suicide. He stated in his Facebook post of 9 September 2015 that he and other ASA activists had been suspended because of their critique of the Hindu Right, and the present political dispensation in India. See <https://www.facebook.com/rohith352/posts/10207537340580148> (accessed 21 November 2017).

dissent to thought and life itself.<sup>36</sup> This part of the paper focuses only on Rohith's death, using some of the publicly available discourses produced in his case, but is tentative as the fallout of the incident is still unfolding. Here I wish to think about what may seem to be the limits of the university, as we have imagined it, and what may be needed in order to produce a truly ethical alternative.

### 'First time of a final letter'

Rohith Vemula, a bright research scholar, ended his young life on 17 January 2016. The letter he left behind, now read possibly by thousands of people across the world unknown to him, gestures poetically, with brevity, on the crises of self and subjectivity. 'My birth is my fatal accident. I can never recover from my childhood loneliness. The unappreciated child from my past.'<sup>37</sup> Rohith's letter speaks with uncanny clarity of a sense of deep desolation, and has galvanised an entire generation of young people in colleges and universities across the country (as well as teachers and others affected by it) into a renewed fight for visibility for the socially marginalised, for the right to protest and for a capacious notion of social justice.

In an anguished response to Rohith's tragic suicide, written soon after the event, Dalit scholar and activist Chittibabu Padavala wrote movingly about his sense of shock and disbelief at the loss of his dear friend Rohith, a young Dalit Marxist student leader, who embodied the possibility of transforming the idiom of social justice politics. Invoking another Dalit leader, Vulli Dhanaraju's, words, he said that although suicides of Dalit students were common on campuses, it was never activists and leaders who ended their lives. For Dhanaraju this was an act of 'supreme sacrifice' and not one of 'desperation'.<sup>38</sup> In a rare and empathetic gesture, Susheel Kumar, from the opposition Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (students' wing of the Hindu nationalist group, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh), who had been at loggerheads with Rohith and had claimed to have been manhandled by ASA activists, spoke of feeling depressed after hearing the news of his suicide.

First thing Rohit Vemula's death...when he committed suicide even I felt depressed. I could not come out of my room for three days. I read that suicide note for 100 to 200 hundred times in which he did not mention anyone's name that so and so person is responsible.<sup>39</sup>

In the more sensitive reports in the early days after Rohith's death, statements, reminiscences and anecdotes from those close to him bring alive a young man

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36 See Janaki Nair, Mallarika Sinha Roy, Mohinder Singh and Rohit Azad, eds., *What the Nation Really Needs to Know: The JNU Nationalism Lectures* (Noida, Uttar Pradesh: Harper Collins, 2017) for a comprehensive discussion of the debates on this issue.

37 See 'My Birth Is My Fatal Accident: Full Text of Dalit Student Rohith's Suicide Letter', *Indian Express*, 19 January 2016, <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/dalit-student-suicide-full-text-of-suicide-letter-hyderabad/> (accessed 21 November 2017).

38 See <http://raiot.in/last-words-of-rohith-vemula/> (accessed 21 November 2017).

39 See <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india/dalit-s-death-abyp-leader-demands-fair-probe-denies-lying-about-assault/story-WclnaTuf041xBO78KGCWn.html> (accessed 21 November 2017).

grabbing life and everything it had to offer with both hands, thinking, reading, debating, fighting. From a reading of his own social media expressions, he seems to have been politicised by books, ideas, friends and the Hyderabad university campus that he clearly loved dearly. From someone who walked into Hyderabad university campus, carefree and eager to learn and make friends – ‘Me joined in hyd central uni. the environment here is fantastic.....nice people around.....feeling quiet [quite] happy.....seeking for some good friends here’<sup>40</sup> – Rohith’s politicisation was rapid. By the end of 2012, his response to Jyoti Singh’s<sup>41</sup> gang rape and death was powerful and articulates an understanding of gender violence that is at variance with other more familiar formulations that were doing the rounds at that time. For Rohith, the crisis was the political apathy he saw around him, and his response situated Jyoti’s death in the intersection of a crisis of parliamentary democracy, citizenship and patriarchy.

...India: A nation where 545 elected members (with 33% women candidates) failed to take a stand on the side of a girl child.....A nation where politicians behave as elected brokers, where no one does any work without a commission....A nation where students feel shy, timid and embraced [embarrassed] of raising their voice against an odd thing.....A nation where educated intellectuals run for money like machines.....In a nation like our’s, death could be the only thing which can rescue us....<sup>42</sup>

Rohith’s radicalisation seems to have combined Karl Marx and Bhimrao Ambedkar, but, more importantly, by 2015 he seems to have been deeply influenced by Malcolm X’s ideas of black liberation and militancy. This he combined with the more radical pedagogic impulse of Ambedkar and nineteenth-century lower-caste reformers like Jyotiba and Savitri Bai Phule. The result was a radical militancy within an Ambedkarite articulation, the challenges of which were, according to him, to bring together questions of communal and anti-caste violence, gender-based violence, the Adivasi question and the privations of capital. Many friends who were interviewed after his death spoke of his intelligence, warmth, friendship, militancy and the fact that he was easily provoked and didn’t back off from arguments and fights. Some mentioned, rather poignantly, that what set him apart was his anglophony. For them, he was the one who could break their language-based isolation and articulate Dalit politics within a larger public political arena.<sup>43</sup> English here was the weapon of the weak, and a militant Rohith, armed with English, became an icon of radical alterity to the mainstream Left and its self-perception of embodying ‘progressive’ politics.

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40 Rohith Vemula, Facebook status, 22 July 2010, <https://www.facebook.com/rohith352/posts/139031662785891> (accessed 21 November 2017).

41 Often referred to as the ‘Nirbhaya [the fearless one] case’, the brutal rape and subsequent death of a young woman, Jyoti Singh, in the Indian capital Delhi in December 2012 produced an almost spontaneous national outpouring of protests. For an important analysis, see Pratiksha Baxi, ‘Understanding Rape Law Reform’, *Yojana*, 58 (June 2010), 38–42.

42 Vemula, Facebook status, 29 December 2012, <https://www.facebook.com/rohith352/posts/10200220047852403> (accessed 21 November 2017).

43 See Rege, ‘Education as *Trutiya Ratna*’, for the intersection between language, caste and questions of inclusion.

However, to my mind, what set Rohith apart was that, unlike many young male activists in Dalit or Left movements, he was able to address and conceptualise different aspects of gender-based violence and oppression. This is reflected in many of his posts in what must now be treated as his personal archive, his Facebook page. A status update on 24 July 2015 is relevant in this context.

Who is Gurram Jashuva and Why is it important to remember him on his death anniversary day (July 24th). Mahakavi Gurram Jashuva (1895–1971) was the first compelling organic Dalit voice in Telugu literature, who exposed the hypocrisy of caste ideology. Jashuva was born to a Dalit (Madiga) women and Golla (BC) father. He, in his whole life strongly asserted his mother's identity and voiced for the abolishing of untouchability and for women rights. Jashuva was a great creative poet, but his creative genius and literary talent was not fully recognized. He was humiliated, subjected to an intense mental agony and treated as a literary outcaste by the scholarly world that was dominated by the upper castes...<sup>44</sup>

Rohith, like Jashuva, chose a matrilineal identity.<sup>45</sup> That, together with his ability to identify with a women's rights agenda as an intrinsic part of his political self-expression, are perhaps aspects of him that find no mention in the more popular memory of an assertive, confident, anglophone Dalit student activist. In identifying with his mother's caste through a device of fictive kinship, and adopting Dalit identity (instead of his father's Backward Caste identity), Rohith positioned himself politically and affectively. His mother, Radhika, was raised by her adoptive mother, Anjani Devi, in a Vaddera household. Subsequently, on discovering her 'real' Dalit Mala caste identity after marriage to Rohith's abusive father, who was Vaddera and higher in the caste hierarchy, and facing escalated abuse at the hands of her husband, Radhika left him and returned, along with her three children, to her adoptive mother's home.<sup>46</sup> Yet her life there was no better than that of a domestic servant, and in time she moved away to an independent one-room home with her children. Rohith's fierce attachment to his mother, and his early experiences of labour as a child, perhaps added to his subsequent political growth.

In the absence of a well-developed mode of reading social media utterances like Facebook status updates and posts, I would suggest that these be treated as a series of practices – of life writing, self-fashioning, politicisation and political interventions, and perhaps a new mode of public expression that does not follow the protocols of conventional writing.<sup>47</sup> From 2012 onwards, Rohith posted about many ongoing

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44 Vemula, Facebook status, 24 July 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/rohith352/posts/10207184209352088> (accessed 21 November 2017).

45 This has led to the state questioning his Dalit identity, and refusing his mother's right to seek justice for her son's 'institutional murder'. See <http://www.thenewsminute.com/article/rohith-vemula-not-dalit-uoh-disciplinary-action-justified-roopanwal-report-made-public-66849> (accessed 21 November 2017). See Anand Teltumbde, 'Robbing Rohith of His Dalitness', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 52(9) (4 March 2017), 10–11, for discussion of the issue.

46 See <http://www.hindustantimes.com/static/rohith-vemula-an-unfinished-portrait/> (accessed 21 November 2017).

47 For a good overview of the debates on socially mediated modes of writing, see Michael Mandiberg, *The Social Media Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

political movements in India, indicating his own politicisation, and sometimes engaged in online discussions which were perhaps continuations of his offline ones. What is striking is his ability to take positions publicly that were perhaps at variance with those of his peers, especially other young men who were being politicised similarly, and who engaged in contexts of common struggle. His empathetic solidarity with Jyoti Singh/‘Nirbhaya’ and the question of violence against women is particularly striking, especially as many political groups distanced themselves from the countrywide protests that followed this gruesome incident.

plz join the event at 5.30 pm on 23rd Dec 2012 at HCU...Such a horrifying, brutal, heinous and intolerable incident has taken place in Delhi our national capital, that ashamed the whole country, I am shocked why the student community of University of Hyderabad is silent till now, we should definitely make our voice with rest of the country, so My dear friends, Please spread this message to all.” There is a Candle March at 5.30 pm on 23 dec 2012 (SUNDAY) from Shopping complex to Gopes "we will protest and demand for women safety and dignity in this country....So come forward with maximum number and join hands to make our country a respected place for women.

Courtesy-: Mukesh kumar<sup>48</sup>

This, along with many of his other posts ranging from an engagement with feminism(s) and critiquing mansplaining provide new ways of engaging not simply ‘what’ but ‘whom’ the university is for. Without wishing to force a tendentious reading on to a range of different ‘posts’ springing possibly from very varied concerns, I would want to read these as part of biography of political subjectivity. Education in universities isn’t simply academic; a substantial part of it is an education in political life – supposedly the essence and enabler of democracy – and happens in different spaces and in different ways. From hostel rooms and tea stalls to protest sites, blogs and social media sites, we witness different ways in which ideas circulate, are discussed, appropriated or discarded. The demands for radical equality made by many of these students’ struggles, to learn, to differ and to articulate in a personal, often unacademic voice, lie at the heart of this dense and fractured discursive field. Their claim, in many ways, is not dissimilar from Joseph Jacotot’s – that equality be a pre-supposition and not a goal,<sup>49</sup> something that the inherent asymmetries of pedagogy are unable to engage with in any meaningful way.

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48 Vemula, Facebook status, 23 December 2012, <https://www.facebook.com/rohith352/posts/10200185921039254> (accessed 21 November 2017). Many Dalit groups, including Dalit feminists, distanced themselves from these protests on the grounds that the kind of public or media response to the ‘Nirbhaya’ rape case was absent in the quotidian experience of rape and other forms of violation that Dalit women suffered. See, for instance, <http://www.refinery29.com/2015/10/95759/dalit-untouchable-women-india-sexual-violence> (accessed 21 November 2017).

49 Jacques Ranciere, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, translated by Kristin Ross (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991).

In Rohith's case, perhaps even more striking are the occasional posts that reveal a quietly lyrical quality, that unmoor the programmatic and reflect the dilemmas and struggles of someone attempting to reconcile the need for solitude within a charged multitude, of seeking silence amidst noise.

First you are alone.  
Like all of those beautiful things.  
and Invisible. And jealous.

Of everything that is colorful  
You think all that shines around is  
Happiness....

...This time it is different.  
You are not quite alone.  
not quiet.  
Coz you are not free now.  
You are visible alone now.  
And you would wish for invisibility.

This solitude is noisy.  
You would wish for silence.  
Inside and outside.  
But then it is already too late.

Suddenly all lonely things  
In world make sense.  
You would understand why  
numbers are valued backwards.  
Why One is more respected.  
And hundreds are feared.

Anonymous. (Read somewhere, took freedom to break and make it all again)<sup>50</sup>

In the context of reading a very different archive, visual and cultural theorist Allan Sekula makes a powerful argument for recognising what he calls 'fragmentary and incomplete utterances'.<sup>51</sup> I find this a powerful way of organising what we have left of Rohith Vemula, variously student activist, young Dalit Marxist ideologue, poet and dreamer, and much-loved friend of many in and outside UoH. Due to the context

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50 Vemula, Facebook status, 27 November 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/rohith352/posts/10208034124679440> (accessed 21 November 2017).

51 Allan Sekula, 'Reading an Archive: Photography between Labour and Capital' in Liz Wells, ed., *The Photography Reader* (London: Routledge, 2003), 443–452.



of Rohith's suicide, and the protests that followed, a sharp polarisation has emerged between seeing it as a 'supreme sacrifice' or as a 'desperate' act born out of 'depression'. While appreciating the spirit in which the former claim is made, and recognising the more routine manner in which the latter attempts to thematise suicides, I would suggest that one needs to move beyond this binary to think about the political subject in question – the student activist.

For this, I wish to address what I found to be the 'fragmentary and incomplete utterances' in Rohith's public statements, made available to us through Facebook posts. Death as a motif recurs uncannily in Rohith's utterances, as both solace and an angry recognition of a condition to which the marginalised and the oppressed are routinely condemned. Yet in Rohith's anger there is neither fatalism nor fear of death. 'In a nation like our's [ours], death could be the only thing which can rescue us,'<sup>52</sup> is a critique of living death that is a condition of the incompleteness of Indian citizenship. In her fine reading of the fractured and unequal reality of Indian citizenship, Niraja Gopal Jayal examines the ways in which structural inequality and injustice coexist with a perfectly enabling constitution.<sup>53</sup> Her critique, however, points to the more fundamental problem of 'difference blindness', which is intrinsic to universal conceptions of citizenship. Rohith's defence of death as 'rescue' thus speaks back to the existence of a 'national consciousness', and echoes G. Aloysius' more pertinent question of why the nation 'failed to emerge'.<sup>54</sup> Death here is a metaphor for the right to dignity, another idiom for articulating one's 'self-respect', rather than a life of enduring injustice.

However, Rohith also invoked death in a more enigmatic, poetic way when he said:

...Everyone knows that she takes off lives, ripping the sense out of your life, yet no one has ever escaped her. Like death, like love. Some say she has an agenda, like saving the world. How to tell her that I am also a part of world? Some say she loves everyone. Why am I not in everyone part? Every lip I kiss taste like loneliness. Every hug I make is shrinking me further. Every glass of alcohol seems like an elder with an advice I need to decode...<sup>55</sup>

While the specific circumstances of this post will perhaps always remain unknown, at least to many, in speaking to the inevitability of death and love, even as he marked his own sense of alienation and loneliness, he voiced a human condition that simultaneously craves solitude and yet fears loneliness. This affective connection between love, death and transformatory politics, sometimes named 'revolution', is to my mind a fundamental condition of 'being' political. I return to this towards the end of this essay.

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52 Vemula, Facebook status, 29 December 2012.

53 Niraja Jayal, *Citizenship and Its Discontents* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

54 G. Aloysius, *Nationalism without a Nation in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998).

55 Vemula, Facebook status, 3 July 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/rohith352/posts/10207026079358937> (accessed 21 November 2017), with a hashtag that says #LooseTranslationFromUnpublishedPages.

In an important early reading of Baburao Bagul's short story 'Aai' (Mother), Susie Tharu questions emancipatory notions of feminist subjectivity that do not engage the realities of caste and social death.<sup>56</sup> This is in keeping with, in the African American context, Jared Sexton's trenchant critique and reworking of Orlando Patterson's classic *Slavery and Social Death*. Engaging and developing Saidiya Hartman's idea of the 'afterlife of slavery', he calls for a far more radical reworking of the notion of 'social death'. This enables 'practitioners' (theorists and activists) to demand answers regarding the persistence of 'anti blackness' in a post-emancipation society.

To ask, in other words, what it means to speak of 'the tragic continuity between slavery and freedom' or 'the incomplete nature of emancipation', indeed to speak about a type of living on that survives after a type of death.<sup>57</sup>

Such 'Afro-Pessimism' demands the recognition of the 'social life of social death' – in other words, to 'pay the price' of 'living a black social life under the shadow of black social death'.<sup>58</sup>

Rohith's continuous invocation of death, and the recognition of the 'social life of social death' of Dalit students in his impassioned and contemptuous denunciation of this (vice-chancellor Rao's demand to serve sodium azide and give each Dalit student's room a 'nice rope'),<sup>59</sup> are parts of those 'fragmentary and incomplete utterances' that speak to one significant part of his politics, that of continually underscoring the experiential while disavowing any illusion of building easy solidarities. The uncanny parallels between Dalit and black lives have also been one of the reasons why many Dalit activists have turned to an intense engagement with the writing and politics of slavery and race, especially within the African American critical traditions.<sup>60</sup> In inhabiting the dark spaces that most people seldom dare to venture into, Rohith had written many iterations of his 'final letter'. Except that each of those accounts was not final, but more argument, political assertion, expose, sometimes even soliloquy.

## Belonging

So how may one think of 'belonging' – an affective property that is usually understood as something that grounds, becomes rooted and anchors – in the 'social life of social death' of this young activist? In her important work on the intersection of caste, gender, campus life and higher education in Kerala, Ritty Lukose points to the unmaking of a modern notion of a secular citizenship in the contexts of quotidian life on campuses (both hostels and the wider social) via assertions/rejections of caste and religious identity. This is accompanied by imagining the ideal student-citizen as

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56 Susie Tharu, 'The Impossible Subject: Caste and the Gendered Body', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 31(22) (1 June 1996), 1311–1315.

57 Jared Sexton, 'On Social Life and Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism', *InTensions*, 5 (Fall/Winter 2011), 23.

58 Ibid.; see also Saidiya Hartman and Frank B. Wildersen, 'Position of the Unthought', *Qui Parle*, 13(2) (Spring/Summer 2003), 183–201.

59 See <http://www.news18.com/news/india/give-poison-to-dalit-students-hyderabad-ph-d-students-suicide-note-1191489.html> (accessed 21 November 2017).

60 Sharmila Rege's, 'Dalit Women Talk Differently: A Critique of "Difference" and Towards a Dalit Feminist Standpoint Position', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 33(44) (1998), WS 39–WS 46, is one of the earliest explorations of this intellectual connection.

one aligned with the developmentalist project of the state.<sup>61</sup> Such a 'civic-minded student', engaged only in the process of education, is then intensely anti-political – the 'productive-patriotic' subject of education.<sup>62</sup> Reports by citizens' groups and journalists based in Hyderabad have extensively documented the quotidian histories of discrimination, humiliation and alienation that Dalit students have experienced on college and university campuses.<sup>63</sup> If one reads this alongside the growing histories of both Dalit/Bahujan, and now more recently Adivasi, anti-caste assertions, and the simultaneous growth of right-wing groups like the Youth for Equality and Akhil Bhartiya Vidyarthi Parishad on campuses in the last two decades, their twinned genealogies can be traced back to the anti-Mandal (anti-reservation) agitations of the late 1980s. Rohith was an inheritor of this legacy and its implications for everyday life on campus, and this was central to his political subjectivity.

Yet, his 'final letter' also demands that his value, and that of thousands like him, be understood as also that of the life of the mind.

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 star dust. In very field, in studies, in streets, in politics, and in dying and living.<sup>64</sup>

His lament is for a humanity that has lost its affinity with nature, of being where stars, ideas, mind and body could all be one. The 'hurt' that consumed him is the realisation that it was impossible to be in a world where artifice substituted nature, where there was no more space to recover an a priori humanness that was untainted by 'construction'. In some ways it seems almost like a call for urgently rethinking contemporary activist/theoretical conceptualisations of the political.

Roland Barthes' 'Ideas of Suicide' in *Lover's Discourse* includes a section from the German lyric poet Heinrich Heine:

2. Sometimes, in the brilliant light cast by some trivial circumstance and swept away by the reverberations the incident has provoked, I suddenly see myself caught in the trap, immobilised in an impossible situation (site): there are only two ways out (either....or) and they are both barred: nothing to be said in either direction. Then the idea of suicide saves me, for *I can speak it* (and do not fail to do so): I am reborn and dye this idea with

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61 Ritty Lukose, 'Re(casting) the Secular: Religion and Education in Kerala, India' in Diane P. Mines and Sarah Lamb, eds., *Everyday Life in South Asia* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), 205–210; Ritty Lukose, 'Empty Citizenship: Contesting Politics in an Era of Globalisation', 2005, [http://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1055&context=gse\\_pubs](http://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1055&context=gse_pubs) (accessed 21 November 2017).

62 Satish Deshpande uses the idea of the 'productive-patriotic' student, quoted and developed in Lukose, 'Empty Citizenship'.

63 Susie Tharu, 'Message about Rohith Vemula', <http://www.insafbulletin.net/archives/3133>; Nikhila Henry, 'Dalit Student Suicide: University Missed Warning Signals', <http://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Hyderabad/Dalit-student-suicide-University-missed-warning-signals/article14006899.ece>. Dalit Camera has documented many of the protests and discussions about Dalit students' suicides, and Rohith's in particular. See <https://www.youtube.com/user/kadhirmilavan> (all accessed 21 November 2017).

64 Vemula, 'My Birth Is My Fatal Accident'.

the colors of life, either directing it aggressively against the loved object (a familiar blackmail) or in fantasy uniting myself with the loved object in death ('I shall lie down in the grave, pressed close against you').<sup>65</sup>

I do think Rohith wished to be at one with his mind, brilliant, febrile and unrelentingly courageous.

### **Postscript**

I worry about reducing someone with such complex sensitivity, burning passions and profound honesty as Rohith to mere martyrdom or to being iconicised. His words and his political being, which he has left behind, are an invitation for us to examine the political and affective conditions of education afresh. It also is an urgent reminder that we need to think about the student as subject, and not mere consumer, when imagining the university.

In asking the question, therefore, of what the university is for, it is imperative to shake off the tired and familiar modes of articulation that speak only to some abstract notions of democracy, and forge truly honest and ethical alternatives of politics, education and ways of living itself.

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65 Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, translated by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 218–219.