

Defining Discrimination and Autonomy

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Dan undergraduate medico student at the prestigious All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), till recently a resident of hostel 1, does not want to remember the choicest abuses heaped on him by his fellow students. Neither does he want to remember the 'warning' pasted on his room which asked him to leave that hostel wing immediately. Recently he has shifted to top floor of hostel 4 to live together with students who have shared similar humiliation. Here he feels more secure since the commonality of grief has everything to do with the fact that all of them belong to what is known in constitutional parlance as the 'scheduled category'.

It is disturbing to note that this herding together of these students on the top floors of the Hostel No. 4 and 5 is a recent phenomenon, which has unfolded itself in the aftermath of the anti-reservation agitation spearheaded by upper caste students of the institute. The outside world, despite the regular presence of media channels and bytesavvy reporters, is not even aware that when they were beaming 'live' telecast from the Institute, a counterdynamic was unfolding itself within the campus wherein students like D found themselves at the receiving end.

A report filed by 'The Telegraph' correspondent Charu Sudan Kasturi (5 th July 2006) titled 'Ghetto in medical hostel- Quota students in AIIMS allege being driven into a corner' tries to capture the plight of the reserved category students.

New Delhi, July 4: Parts of All India Institute of Medical Sciences hostels are turning into SC/ST ghettos. Reserved category students said they were being "hunted out of the remaining rooms" by upper-caste students and driven to two floors of the hostels.

An engraved message on the door of Room No. 49 (Hostel 1) bears testimony to their concern. The inscription, spiced with abusive language, asks the room's occupant Umakant—a scheduled caste student—to "get out of this (hostel) wing".

As things stand today of the 250 students at the institute, 55 belong to the SC/ST category. Out of them 27 students occupy the top floors of Hostel No. 4 and 5 which has a total of 32 rooms. A cursory glance at the hostel records makes it clear that 22 students out of these 27 have only recently moved to these floors. Many a scheduled category student also shared with the reporter how they are 'failed' in the examinations if they dare complain against the discrimination faced by them. The report further adds :

Sub-dean Dr Sunil Chumber said he had himself faced discrimination during his college years. "My room was broken into, and things destroyed, because I came from a reserved category," he said.

The SC/ST students said they were scared of the consequences of their identities becoming known for speaking out against discrimination.

The memorandum submitted by 'Medicos Forum for Equal Opportunities' to the President of India a few days back had expressed similar concerns about the internal situation in the premier school. It may be added it is the same forum of doctors which had supported 27 percent reservation for OBCs in the educational institutions and far away from the media glare had organised a novel form of campaign to further their demand. The most significant aspect of their protest was that instead of going on strike and putting the hapless patients at tremendous discomfort they had preferred to continue with their duties and organise demonstrations during lunch time.

The three-page memorandum apprised the President of what they called ,

"..[t]he open discrimination against the reserved category students and doctors being resorted to by certain members of the faculty and the administrative authorities in different medical colleges of Delhi including the All-India Institute of Medical Sciences". (Medicos Forum submits memorandum to Kalam, The Hindu, 28 June 2006)

The report further adds :

"Dr Anoop Saraya, a member of the Forum said: "The Director of the Institute P Venugopal and a section of the faculty took active part in the anti-reservation agitation in the name of maintaining the autonomy of AIIMS. The manner in which the Director allowed the official machinery to be used for the day to day running of the anti-reservation agitation is an open challenge to the Constitution of the country. Both the Government and Dr Venugopal are claiming to be working for preserving the interests of AIIMS without realising that the first and foremost interest of an institution like AIIMS lies in serving the multitudes of poor patients."(do)

Of course it cannot be said that incidents of such nature are an exception among educational institutions like AIIMS. Few years ago the UCMS (University College of Medical Sciences) situated in Delhi had metamorphosed into a new theatre of conflict between the reserved category students and the non-dalits. The dalit students studying there in association with other like-minded groups launched a vigorous campaign opposing the humiliation heaped upon them by the rest of the students. It was heart rending to know how they were herded together not only on a particular floor in the hostel, or how a few tables in the mess were kept 'reserved' for them. A senior journalist and well-known analyst of international

relations had himself covered the incident and filed a report on their campaign for dignity :

NEW DELHI: Vikram Ram, a Dalit student at the University College of Medical Sciences (UCMS) in east Delhi, got a rude shock when he sat down for his first meal at the hostel mess. "Bloody Shaddu", he was told fiercely by a group of upper caste students (using an abusive term for Scheduled Castes), "you cannot eat with us". Hurt and bewildered, he made his way to the row of tables where the Dalit students normally sit.

According to the Dalit students, even the hostel has de facto been ghettoised, with most of them on two floors. When Rakesh Kumar, an SC student, was assigned a room elsewhere, a neighbour said: "We will not let you stay here, Shaddu. Your kind of person cleans our toilets." Faced with the prospect of constant harassment, he asked to be shifted.

('Dalit Students Battle Prejudice and Violence' The 'Times of India', Siddarth Varadarajan)

What ails the AIIMS the premier medical institute in the country? It is a question, which has been raising its head since quite sometime. And the latest episode involving the 'sacking' and 'reinstatement' (through judicial intervention) of its director Dr Venugopal and the consequent brouhaha has further vindicated this query.

But it is disturbing to note that one of the most shocking aspect of the internal developments there has largely gone unreported in this whole fracas. The heated debate revolving around 'autonomy' of the institution and its alleged 'intrusion' has papered over the quantum jump in the discrimination faced by the reserved category students there. Neither the articulate sections of Indian society nor the media has felt bothered over the 'medieval' treatment meted out to these hapless students by a motley combination of upper caste students and faculty members.

It was worth noting that none of media channels which provided latest update in the 'sacking' episode, did find it even necessary to talk to the reserved category students. Definitely such an interaction with them would have provided alternative viewpoints, detailing the way in which 'autonomy' unfolds itself upon the most marginalised sections of the society and there is nobody to complain against it.

It is rightly said that the internal incongruities of an institution become the first casualty, if its conflict with some outside agency is presented in the simple binary of 'us' versus 'them'. Looking at the charged atmosphere in AIIMS, where a majority seems to be singing paeans to the autonomy raga , it appears to be a difficult task that there would be any takers for the grievances of the voices of the reserved category students.

Of course the last word has not been said about the developments in AIIMS. Recently the Supreme Court bench of Justices Arijit Pasayat and L S Panta has instructed the centre to release the salaries of the medicos who were on strike if they had complied with the apex court's direction to resume work in larger public interest. On July 5, the judges had expected the government to act like a "model employer".

Can one now expect that now the honourable judges would also see to it that the not-so hidden apartheid being practised against a section of the institute's own people ends and the custodians of the institute would also present themselves as 'model ones'. ❄️❄️❄️