

AUTONOMY AND DISCRIMINATION

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What ails the AIIMS, the premier institute in the country? It is a question, which has been raising its head for quite some time. 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 the 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.

A shocking write-up in one of the leading dailies provides details of the deliberate herding together of the reserved category students and their 'victimisation' by a section of the faculty members.

According to the reporter 'Parts of AIIMS (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.' (*The Telegraph*, 5th July 2006)

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 (Nos 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 in the wake of the recent anti-reservation agitation spearheaded by the upper caste students. A graffiti engraved on one of the rooms of a SC student in hostel one makes it clear how this transfer was achieved. It warns the occupant to "get out of this (hostel) wing".

The SC/ST students also shared with the reporter how they are 'failed' in the examinations if they dare complain against the discrimination faced by them. The sub-dean of the Institute, who himself is a SC, corroborated what was being shared by the students.

Incidentally a memorandum submitted by 'Medicos Forum for Equal Opportunities' to the President of India a few days back had expressed similar concern about the internal situation in the premier school. It may be reminded that this forum of doctors had supported reservation for OBCs in the educational institutions and had then launched a novel form of campaign to further its viewpoint. The representatives of the forum apprised the President of "the 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". (*The Hindu*, 28 June 2006). A spokesperson of the forum also alleged that the incumbent director Dr Venugopal and a section of faculty aided and abetted the anti-reservation protest supposedly for maintaining the autonomy of the institute. He also cited instances of the use of official machinery in the day to day

running of the agitation, which according to him was an 'open challenge to the constitution of India'.

It was worth noting that none of media channels which provided latest update in the 'sacking' episode, did not found 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 would have also exposed the irresponsible behaviour of the medicos which went on a lightening strike in support of the 'sacked' director leading to deaths of two innocent people.

Of course it cannot be said that incidents of such nature are an exception among educational institutions like AIIMS. It was only six year ago that University College of Medical Sciences, situated in Delhi had metamorphosed into a new theatre of conflict between the scheduled category students and the non-dalits. The dalit students studying there had 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.

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. *z z*

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