

OPINION

India, Hindutva & Dalit Students - First Chennai, now Hyderabad: Has the government decided that all dissent is anti-national?

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The present regime seems to regard volatile student debates and protests on burning contemporary issues as subversive tendencies spreading hatred.

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There is a direct link between the circumstances leading to the tragic suicide of Ambedkarite Dalit student Rohith Vemula in Hyderabad University and the increasingly bullying tactics used by the Modi government to snuff out dissenting and anti-establishment views.

While the harassment of Dalit students in universities has been widespread over the past several decades and cannot be blamed on the Bharatiya Janata Party or the current regime alone, it is clear that the targeting of the Ambedkar Students' Association had a thinly veiled ideological agenda. It is linked to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh's plan to impose a Hindutva code through the Centre, as well as frontal organisations across various public institutions in the country, including university campuses.

Significantly, the Sangh appears to have pinpointed radical Dalit student groups that have mushroomed in various universities over the past few decades as specific threats to its Hindutva plan. In an eerie rehearsal of what happened in Hyderabad, another Ambedkarite Dalit student body - the Ambedkar Periyar Student Circle in the Indian Institute of Technology-Madras - faced the wrath of the Union Human Resource Development ministry last May. A remarkably similar arbitrary intervention from the central ministry forced the IIT authorities to derecognise the group and bar it from campus facilities.

There was hardly any provocation for the central ministry to accuse the Dalit student group in IIT-Madras of "creating hatred atmosphere", and a few months later in Hyderabad University of being "anti-national, extremist and casteist" without any proper inquiry whatsoever. In IIT-Madras, the Dalit students were punished for speaking out against the pro-corporate policies of the Modi government on land and labour reforms, as well as communally charged controversies such as the beef ban and ghar wapsi crusades. At Hyderabad University, even harsher action was taken against Dalit students after they clashed with the BJP's student wing, the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad, on issues such as the 2013 Muzaffarnagar riots and the hanging of 1993 Mumbai serial blasts

convict Yakub Memon.

Campus agenda

It is disconcerting that volatile student debates and protests on burning contemporary issues – customary in university campuses across India and other democracies in the world – are considered by the present regime as subversive tendencies spreading hatred. In neither Chennai nor Hyderabad were Dalit students found involved in or advocating a violent uprising against the state. While there was no violence at all in Chennai, the minor clash between the Ambedkarite group and the ABVP in Hyderabad was being competently handled by the faculty before New Delhi decided to step in. It is telling that in its letters pressurising the University, the HRD ministry did not seem worried about any outburst of campus violence but highlighted how the Dalit students were “anti-national” and “extremist”.

There has also been a disturbing tendency by the ABVP – perhaps egged on by seniors in the Sangh Parivar and emboldened by its clout in New Delhi – to impose some kind of ultra-nationalist code in universities. This was underlined this week when a mob of ABVP students did not allow well-known journalist and commentator Siddharth Varadarajan to speak at Banaras Hindu University and even held him hostage for some time before the police freed him. The mob apparently accused Varadarajan of being “pro-Naxalite” and “anti-national”.

It is ironic that the HRD ministry seeks to demonise Ambedkarite student groups as “anti-national” for raising confrontational questions challenging majoritarian and establishment views. Babasaheb Ambedkar himself did not shy away from making provocative and controversial statements about Hinduism or criticising the tallest leaders of the freedom struggle. So to expect Dalit students fired by Ambedkar’s radical thought not to be iconoclastic is clearly absurd.

Political hue

Similarly, there is little substance to the lament by BJP spokespersons that the Dalit student group had been influenced by left-wing politics or that the human tragedy of a student’s death was being needlessly politicised. Ambedkar himself emphasised how politics was the “master key” to Dalit liberation and those who espouse his ideology cannot but be political.

In fact, most of the Dalit student groups, although not affiliated with mainstream political parties, are stridently political nevertheless and hold strong views on a whole range of challenges facing the nation beyond just the caste question.

Indeed the clash between the Ambedkarite students and the BJP student wing in Hyderabad University was both ideological and political, with each group trying to jostle for space. This kind of combative student politics with an ideological hue is not unusual in Indian campuses and has indeed been the launching pad of many who went on to become state and national political leaders. However, what is not acceptable is the blatant interference by the central department in charge of national education in seeking to promote one student body over another.

Although the rush of various Opposition leaders to the current agitation by Dalit students in Hyderabad does smack of political opportunism, this is only to be expected. The Modi government’s current woes with Dalit students will certainly provide the BJP’s many political rivals with a big stick with which to beat the ruling party. Coming as it does in the wake of a concerted bid by the prime minister and other BJP leaders to pay lip service to Babasaheb Ambedkar with an eye on the Dalit

vote bank, the continuing storm in Hyderabad University could have serious political repercussions for the BJP.

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P.S.

* "First Chennai, now Hyderabad: Has the government decided that all dissent is anti-national?".

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