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# Caste Representation as a Tool of Elimination: Identifying unbridled Caste-Fetishism of Indian Media through the comparative case studies of M M Kalburgi and Rohith Vemula

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Representation, if assessed in Foucauldian perspective that calls for the production of knowledge in discursive space, that refers to the historical context for the development and understanding of the meaning; identifies abnormal man, dangerous man and several different anomalous category, (Bannet102) as propounded by Professor John Fiske; purportedly creating social boxes for ensuring oppression and discrimination (Fiske 53). Society in this manner, through relentless categorization, objectifies identities on the basis of caste, gender, race, normalcy, sensibility, conformity, uniformity and consumption, to inflict maximum discipline on them and to eradicate any 'monstrous' activities that can doubt the political, social or cultural serenity, expected out of normalized social agents. The socio-political categories thus availing and having maximum access to the power, gradually, outcast the 'others' and use them, both for maximizing the production value and for gaining their consent in favour of continuous suppression through reserving their numbers of participation in the mainstream course of actions.

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Bearing incessant reiteration of their congenital, precisely cultural identity, they let themselves ritually marked with it; allowing the ceremonies of exclusion through either of the means of reservation or right-based agitation; favouring the judiciously-determined numbered berths, seemingly secured to cure imbecility, partially; for that any otherwise interpretation is obliterated and if not, then at least regulated. In such conditional obligation to identify any being out of its marked ceremonial identity, preferably representational category, happens to be the sternest task to perform, as the media along with the state machineries technically encapsulate and resurface the space to which it compulsively belongs, reaping out the immediate benefit, in terms of political or other gains.

This paper intends to point out at the representative caste system in India taking the comparison of both of the state sponsored assassination of Kalburgi and Rohith Vemula and the category of the consequential outrage in the media, to locate the intention of the power in discriminating even the subversive voices in the lines of caste. It locates the manufacturing of the mark ‘Dalit PhD Scholar’ with the name of Vemula and the subsequent preparation of his identity approval, through different forms of interrogation, investigation and continuous examination of the slain student leader, as if his caste identity validates his dissidence. It digs into the details of the case as emerged in the media and tries to explore the political necessity of representation through caste that mitigates the vehemence of dissent and substitutes the perennial disgruntlement with caste; for sustainability of its suppressive and propagative instruments.

August 30, 2015, some miscreants guised as students knocked the doors of a veteran literate- his wife, unsuspecting and clueless about the probable massacre allowed them to enter- the goons entered the room where Hindu rituals used to get shot at gun point- certainly the

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bullets took a Volta face- the Kannada Erudite breathed his last within moments leaving behind his injunctions stymieing the growth of fundamentalist Hindu sycophants. M.M Kalburgi, the name which has been avowed several times in the recent context of emerging religio-political intolerance, had to put an end to his journey against social menaces, nevertheless, without revealing his caste identity that could have booked him with sympathy, homogenous caste-based solidarity and perhaps, in behest of its media-propagators, with ceremonial caste-consciousness, precisely false-empathy emboldening further negligence and elimination.

Had anybody asked which caste did he belong to? Had his 'VeershaivaLingayat' identity come to the light in midst of the threats he had been encountered with during his 'inciting' speeches against Hindu customs and ritualism? Kalburgi's notions in favour of 12th century 'Vachana' literature that critically opposed and confronted the caste-based society rather took the centre stage of discussions. His assassination further evoked the oppressive and thwarting despotic ideations of the Hindu rabid vowed to scythe down any non-conformist identity. Relentless support in favour of Dr. Ananthmurthy's criticism to the idol worshipping put him into the box of non-compliance which inevitably received the barbs of Hindu fanatics.

The consequential reactions from pan-India intelligentsia though condemned the Government for its reluctance and expressed their fear over the growing socio-political intolerance; the caste discrimination had never been referred to. Rather, any reference to his Lingayat identity would have mitigated the vehemence of the incident. Nevertheless, for time being, if the root cause of the gruesome lynching could be apprehended in terms of the caste-based oppression, the reference to Basava's ideology would definitely be upheld. Kalburgi was even the promulgator of such theosophical

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reflex that confronted the basis of Hinduism unravelling several opportunities to the Political authorities to treat his lynching as an outcome of caste-discrimination. As the Lingayat community in no sense belonged to the traditional ‘antyaja’ (Antyaja literally means ‘the last-born’; in the traditional Hindu Caste System it generally refers to the ‘untouchable’- the lowest rung of the social ladder) the prominence of caste-based valuation of the assassination perhaps failed to find political berth in the competition of getting electoral benefit out of it.

January 17, 2016- he left the space vacant for the people who are yet to confront the ideological atrocities of rituals and taboos- he made it clear that no Government has the authority to enforce the choice of food- he got himself waded into the debates of the judicial killing of unidentified and mistaken identities- he craved to unravel the clandestine faces of riot-mongers- he tried to propagate Christopher Hitchens’ message that ‘God Is Not Great’- stunningly, he found himself tied within the realm of controversy of which he was the sturdiest disparager.

Rohith Vemula, the expelled PhD Scholar of University of Hyderabad in a sudden morning became a Dalit student devoid of his rights to be in the same plane with the higher caste associations. The media and the political parties across the ideological line took the bid to establish his Dalit identity surmounting rather overruling his contributions in the movement against the Hindu fundamentalists. The reasons for his expulsion as divulged with the time, in no means, were related to his caste entity rather his actions against the taboos of the Hinduism paved the way of the political fray between Ambedkar Students’ Association and Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad, the student wing of ruling BJP. His decision to oppose sudden hanging of Yakoob Memon along with his colleagues of ASA awarded him with the tag of anti-nationalist. It irked even the leadership of BJP and

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subsequently the ABVP provoked ASA to get into direct physical confrontation.

As the organization arranged 'Beef Mela' and even organized the public screening of Nakul Shawney's controversial documentary '*Muzaffarnagar Baaqi Hai*' (The 136-minute long sprawling documentary revisits the communal riots that broke out in Muzaffarnagar and Shamli in Uttar Pradesh in August and September 2013, preceding the famous BJP victory of 2014), the attacks got sharpened. The mundane provocation from ABVP's leaders acted as an impetus behind the political skirmish among the two leading organizations of the University and smacked off the flows of political intolerance trickling from Amit Shah's deprecating propaganda. A committee had been formed to hold the defaulters culpable of ruining the educational environ of the varsity. However, the reports denied charging anyone for such offense and the situation was found to be far away from being tampered with the supra-political motive of the central leadership.

The Union Minister Bandaru Dattatreya in this context appeared as the major motivator of further chaos and addressing the HRD Minister Smriti Irani wrote, "This could be visualised from the fact that when Yakub Memon was hanged, a dominant students union, that is Ambedkar Students Union had held protests against the execution. When Shushil Kumar, president, ABVP, protested against this, he was manhandled and as a result he was admitted in hospital. What is more tragic is that the university administration has become a mute spectator to such events."<sup>1</sup> Even endorsing the fact he termed the ASA leaders as 'Anti-social' and claimed the immediate action from the authority.

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1 "Read Minister Bandaru Dattatreya's Letter To Smriti Irani On Hyderabad University". NDTV. 19 January, 2016. Web. 12 July 2016.  
<http://www.ndtv.com/india-news/read-minister-bandaru-dattatreyas-letter-to-smriti-irani-on-hyderabad-university-1267471>

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Consequently, the University following the instructions of the central leadership deployed an investigating committee and announced the expulsion of five ASA members. Not only Rohith, even Prashant, the former President of the Students' Union was named among the expelled students. The ASA members started protesting outside the University and screeched for the freedom of speech and expression. They ardently claimed the immediate action from the authority to revoke the punishment and accused the ruling party's student organization for impeding their campus freedom. In such circumstances, no reference to their Dalit identity had ever been evoked- none had ever mentioned the fact that they were being reinforced to leave the campus and the hostel due to their caste. The situation took the fresh turn with Vemula committing suicide.

The PhD scholar and the ASA leader certainly turned out to be a Dalit scholar. The espouser of the thoughts of Hitchens, who throughout his life condemned any religious practice, posthumously had to bow down in front of the representative identity which he had not even shown during his admission to the varsity. The reports from the Police clarified the fact that Vemula had been selected on the basis of merit and no reservation even paved his way toward his academic excellence. However, even if it was shown, it should have never searched, approved or investigated, as his death, as per the letter he wrote, had rarely any reference to his caste-based identity, through which his media representation was enshrined and gradually cultivated.

Nevertheless, the media came to the fore to discover his caste identity, in a bid to attach the political relevance to the issue. Rahul Gandhi jumped into the well of controversy and visiting the University commented that the actions of the Government transpired their anti-Dalit stance. Bahujan Samajwadi Party, the self-proclaimed messiah of Dalit community sent their delegations and

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claimed the immediate revocation of the expulsion notice against the rest of the four students.

The HRD minister Smriti Irani on whose instructions perhaps the University was being reinforced to take the despicable decision of expelling the students, added further boilers to the brewing situation that his Dalit entity should not be considered as the reason for his death. The visit of the chairperson of the National Commission for the Minorities even reinforced the similar narration of caste discrimination. The consequence was apprehensive- Police started working on to excavate his caste identity to frame charges against the accuser- the political parties started upholding his caste for ensuring the vote bank- the professors belonged to SC community in the University resigned from the administrative posts to maintain their relevance in such political symposium- some even were trying to find out the entity of Rohith's father who had left his mother long days ago- the student communities across the country went on screaming for equal rights and justice to Dalit community- the newer statistical data appeared to establish the dreadful condition of these people- moreover the country started brewing to book the persons accused of caste discrimination.

In these brewing political tensions, perhaps, the objectives of Vemula have been forgotten. He never tried to prove his Dalit identity and the organization he belonged to hardly expanded in the Varsity through accommodating only Dalit people. ASA though had commenced on its journey after the stirs regarding Mondal Commission and claimed equality for the students of Dalit community in mid 90s; their stance got changed throughout the last decade. In 2011-12, when ASA triumphed over the election with the support of SFI, they had won over the confidence of the common students not only of the Dalit community.

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The transformation of Vemula from a PhD scholar to a Dalit student bears on the intention of the power-structure to put each and every agitator into some box for categorizing the levels of oppression. In the midst of intricate discussions over the caste-battling the original narrative of Rohith's fight had been lost.

The reference to Kalburgi's identity in the initiation of the paper at this juncture seems to be relevant enough as none had questioned his caste when he was brutally lynched. His notions and the philosophy had been discussed and the condemnation of the political intolerance gained momentum. Rohith in his suicide note alleged none for his death and his last letter reflected his scepticism toward the society. The cynical view of Rohith could have been found from his very statement that love is second handed. The departure of human enterprise from the nature made him felt that the people were not ought to suffer much, had there been no cultural obligation to life. His last verses, however, were standing in the verge of absolute loss.

Both of the cases as referred to, clearly indicate the differences of media representations and verify the fact that the absolute commodification of caste identity plays the major role behind exclusion of ground narrations leading the path toward production of meta-narratives and consequentially social myths. Second order signified of the signifier Vemula, abysmally reduces it to 'Dalit identity' that negates the significance of his philosophy and actions. The persisting conflicts between the castes, during such representations are being technically taken into consideration for ensuing further repercussions from the political classes, for deceiving the culpability of the state and obviously for producing easy-to-read substances that have the capacity to delegitimize any alternative uproar. Referring to Clifford Geertz's coinage 'experience-distant' concept(Geertz,57-58), the cultural perception of caste in Indian context though could be comprehensively



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understood, the formation of posthumous caste imposition over the subject reflects the ‘experience-near’ attitude of media, that calls for an immediate reaction from the society, on which the stigmatizing intensity of sensitivity or caste-fetishism unavoidably depends. The term caste, thus, itself adds the sense of traditional socio-cultural oppression to the identity and furthers the growth of sympathetic ground which otherwise could have been encountered with the political verses of religion and could have discarded the casteist outrage, that it is expected to emanate.

The elimination of representative caste identity for the development of class struggle thus appears as the immediate way toward the radical emancipation of people against the political orthodoxy, desisting their participation. The conclusive note to this understanding requires the year-old comments of E.M.S. Namboodiripad to be resurfaced for igniting the immediate struggle against the narratives of caste-based recognition overruling their ideological identity and class consciousness-

*“One has to realize that the building of India on modern democratic and secular lines requires an uncompromising struggle against the caste-based Hindu society and its culture. There is no question of secular democracy, not to speak of socialism, unless the very citadel of India’s ‘age old’ civilization and culture – the division of society into a hierarchy of castes – is broken. In other words, the struggle for radical democracy and socialism cannot be separated from the struggle against caste society.”<sup>2</sup>*

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