

Opinion | Rohith Vemula And His 'Dalit' Identity: Reality vs Fiction

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Rohith Vemula died by suicide in 2016 because of caste-based hostilities at a university in Hyderabad, where he was enrolled for a PhD programme. Eight years later, the Telangana police claim that Rohith was not Dalit and that it was likely the fear of his "real caste" being revealed that led him to suicide. At the core of this claim are some formalities of law and policy that must change.

Scheduled Castes (SC) status is legally determined by ancestry. More specifically, the bloodlines of men are the carriages of caste. That is to say, formal legal procedures require the SC certification of a father to grant an SC certificate to a child. This patriarchal character of law and policy has been contested in courts. As a result of judicial interventions, a mother's SC certification can be admitted for certifying a child's SC status. But this is an exception, not a rule.

A Process Of Humiliation

SC certifications at local governance levels have also changed over time. Plus, sometimes, these certifications can be outcomes of discretionary functions of power. In the past, SC certifications could be granted based on supporting statements of gazetted

government officers and ordinary neighbours too. In cases where neither parent has a formal caste certificate, that ordeal is worse as an individual - especially interstate migrant workers - runs from pillar to post trying to get their caste identity certified. All such processes inadvertently end up imposing varying degrees of humiliation upon those who want to obtain SC certification.

This kind of humiliation has been playing out openly for anyone to see, as in the case of Rohith Vemula and his mother, Radhika Vemula. Born to SC Mala parents, Radhika was adopted by an Other Backward Class (OBC) Vaddera woman, and later, she married a Vaddera man. Despite the two legalities - adoption and marriage - Radhika could retain her SC status because of the bloodline of her SC Mala father. Furthermore, Radhika later returned to her SC community after leaving her OBC husband. Patriarchy is so deeply entrenched in law and policy that Rohith Vemula's caste is now determined by the caste of an absent OBC father, not his present SC mother. Ultimately, legality here appears to operate as an informal tool for imposing humiliation and adding insult to injury at mass levels of Dalit consciousness.

A Sujata Story

Bimal Roy's famous movie *Sujata* (1959) is something along the lines of the current fanciful speculation about Rohith Vemula's caste identity. An "untouchable" orphan baby girl is adopted into a Savarna household. This girl is named Sujata. She's humiliated and abused routinely and grows up as an exploited, unpaid household servant. The movie ends on a Cinderella-like happy note, with Sujata's marriage to a Savarna man.

Now, hypothetically, a sequel to *Sujata* could show her as a happy wife of this Savarna man and a mother to their children, but somehow, she continues to be humiliated and abused and remains an exploited, unpaid servant in her marital home. This sequel would also end happily but on a more realistic note: Sujata leaving her Savarna husband, taking her children and returning to her "untouchable" community.

In *Sujata 3*, the woman could raise these children as proud Dalits, but the patriarchal forces of the law would impose Savarna caste ancestry on them, denying and obliterating

their matrilineal Dalit bloodline. The script of *Sujata 3* is what's currently being written, and the ending is unknown.

The 1959 *Sujata* and its hypothetical sequels outlined here are relatable conjectures into the life of Radhika Vemula. These are not claims to determine her reality. Similarly, the Telangana police should not be the ultimate arbiters to determine the "real caste" of Rohith Vemula.

The main point in both the reality and the fiction around Rohith Vemula's suicide is that the law and policy for SC certification must accept matrilineal bloodlines. This is not just a theoretical debate but a constitutional caste matter - related to equality and non-discrimination based on sex - with real-life implications for individuals like Rohith Vemula.

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