

Statement from Sri Lanka in solidarity with protesting students of India

We, the undersigned organizations, civil society activists, academics and students from Sri Lanka vehemently condemn the institutional murder on 17th January 2015 of Dalit research scholar and activist Rohith Vemula of the Ambedkar Students Association (ASA) of the University of Hyderabad (UoH), India and the violence meted out against those seeking justice for Rohith's death.

Earlier this year, five (5) Dalit students— Rohith Vemula, Dontha Prashanth, Vijay Kumar, Seshaiiah Chemudugunta and V. Sunkanna—had their entry into hostels, administration buildings and public areas restricted by the administration of the University of Hyderabad and later expelled after sustained pressure from local politicians and the Ministry of Human Resource Development, over what appear to be clearly trumped up charges relating to an incident that occurred in August 2015¹²³⁴. After a prolonged sleep- in strike protesting against unjust actions by the University and condemning casteist discrimination and harassment, Rohith Vemula died by suicide on January 17th. However, Rohith was not the first Dalit student to die by suicide as a result of systematic caste discrimination at the University of Hyderabad, or at a higher education institution in India⁵. Since 2008, as many as 12 Dalit students, including Dalit scholars Senthil Kumar and Madari Venkatesh⁶, have reportedly⁷ died by suicide at the University of Hyderabad alone. Further, the harassment of organizations such as the Ambedkar Students Association (ASA) and Ambedkar- Periyar Study Circle (APSC) in recent years, and the ostracization of Dalit scholars⁸ bring into sharp focus the systematic nature of caste oppression. We condemn discrimination of students and staff based on caste, ethnicity, religion, gender and sexual orientation in higher educational

¹ "Injustice In University of Hyderabad: Social Boycott of 5 Dalit Research Scholars".

http://roundtableindia.co.in/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=8419:injustice-and-social-boycott-against-5-dalit-research-scholars-at-university-of-hyderabad&catid=129:events-and-activism&Itemid=195

² "Social Boycott Of Dalit Scholars: Locating Caste In Modern Context".

<http://www.countercurrents.org/amala080116.htm>

³ "Violation of Constitutional Rights of 5 Dalit scholars By University of Hyderabad administration: Fact Finding Report". http://roundtableindia.co.in/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=8432:violation-of-constitutional-rights-of-5-dalit-scholars-by-university-of-hyderabad-administration-fact-finding-report&catid=119&Itemid=132

⁴ "The Suicide Of Dalit Scholar Rohith Vemula: A Caste Instigated Political Murder".

<http://www.countercurrents.org/samar180116.htm>

⁵ "List of Dalit students committing suicide in last four years in India's premier institutions".

<https://thedeathofmeritinindia.wordpress.com/2011/04/25/list-of-dalit-students-committing-suicide-in-last-four-years-in-indias-premier-institutions/>

⁶ "Report on Recent Dalit Student Suicides at University of Hyderabad".

http://roundtableindia.co.in/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=7079:report-on-recent-dalit-student-suicides-at-university-of-hyderabad&catid=122:atrocities&Itemid=138

⁷ "Suicides of Dalit students not new in Hyderabad University". <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india/suicides-of-dalit-students-not-new-in-hyderabad-university/story-cbPCCWPAF98q22uDihzb9L.html>

⁸ "Ancient prejudice, modern inequality". <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/dalit-student-rohith-vemula-suicide-ancient-prejudice-modern-inequality/article8124315.ece>

institutions in India, and abhor the majoritarian imposition of Hindutva hegemony on Dalits and other numerical minorities.

For decades Sri Lanka has witnessed persecution, oppression and violence borne from a hierarchical State structure, built to consolidate a dominant ethno- religious community's domination. As people who have shouldered the cost of majoritarian political ideologies we stand in solidarity with our brothers and sisters protesting the most visible rise of majoritarian politics in India in recent times.

While acknowledging that Rohith was not the first to fall victim to Hindutva tyranny, we hope that the struggle that he was part of, would now gain national importance and not be subdued by the narrative of the State and criminalized by the establishment, or be appropriated by vested interests pursuing their own ends.

Further, we stand in solidarity with protesting students and staff of the UoH, the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), Delhi and other higher educational institutions around India. Freedom of speech and dissent must be at the vanguard of any democratic society and must be cherished and nurtured for a democratic society to flourish. We condemn the arrest, on sedition charges, of Kanhaiya Kumar (President, JNU Students Union) and the violent assault on him and media personnel recently. We are outraged by the hounding of other members of the JNUSU, including Umar Khalid and Anirban Bhattacharya (General-Secretary, JNUSU).

We also note, with sadness, the role of certain media organizations in suffocating debate and inciting violence against protesting students. We recognize all too well the stifling of dissent through criminalization, under the guise of 'patriotism' and 'treason', and condemn the politically motivated witch hunt to which student leaders, staff of the JNU and other institutions, and journalists have now been subjected to.

We are also able to draw eerie parallels to the criminalization of groups, individuals and opinions related to, but not limited to, the Dalit struggle and Kashmiri self- determination to events in this island where Tamils, journalists, activists and academics have been branded and continue to be labelled as "terrorists", "traitors" and "extremists". Thus, we believe that it is no coincidence that Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), Delhi, its scholars, and alumni—many of whom have constantly and peacefully advocated for Kashmiri self- determination and continue to condemn State violence there—have come under renewed attack by the State, establishment and media organs.

Finally, we wish to state that it would be futile and counterproductive to frame the current protest movement as one concerning only freedom of speech or dissent. We believe that deep seated democratic reform, honest debate and, vitally, the recognition of collective rights, socially and politically, of its various marginalized peoples would be essential first steps in dismantling Hindutva hegemony, caste oppression, and discrimination based on gender and sexual orientation. These, we should remind ourselves, are the collective lessons of oppressed and marginalised people all over the world and in particular in the South Asian communities.

Signatories,

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88. People's Movement for Nonviolence
89. Sri Lankan National Fisheries Solidarity Movement (NAFSO)
90. Tamil Civil Society Forum (TCSF)
91. Vadamardchy Christian Union