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Fabricated Claims

Over 70 United Kingdom and Europe-based scholars concerned with South Asia have written to the Vice Chancellor of the Central University of Haryana (CUH).

We, the undersigned, strongly condemn the attack on faculty members and students of the Department of English and Foreign Languages at CUH by members of the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) for the performance of a play on 21 September 2016. The play was based on a short story by the eminent Bengali writer Mahasweta Devi. We understand that the staff and students involved in the performance had sought and received all the necessary permissions for the event, which was organised to commemorate the literary achievements of Mahasweta Devi, the recipient of some of the most prestigious Indian and international awards.

We write to express our serious concern over this attack on the freedom of academic expression of the staff and students at your university. Mahasweta Devi's story "Draupadi" was written in 1971 and represents her creative expression of the exploitation of India's tribal people. It is regularly taught as part of course syllabi all over India and the world, including at the universities of some of the signatories to this letter. The claim by the ABVP and the local press that the play is an attack on Indian soldiers is manifestly fabricated. As one of the faculty members involved in the production, Snehsata, has explained, students and teachers saw the programme as an academic and creative pursuit and their intention was certainly not to hurt the sentiments of soldiers as the ABVP has claimed: "In this event, I read the epilogue of the play recounting the data about atrocities on tribal people, especially sexual crimes against women by the Indian army. How ordinary soldiers are used by the state as a tool against its own people and how the body, especially the female body, becomes the site of revenge in the hands of Indian soldiers by the same state. All the teachers and students who were present there came up and congratulated us."

We stand in solidarity with the courageous faculty members and students who performed the play and strongly oppose the sedition charges being brought on them. The university should be a place for the free expression of ideas, and thoughts; it should create space for dialogue and debate, and even disagreement. It is therefore further regrettable that the university caved in to political pressure and has instituted an inquiry into a matter that it had previously approved.

We appeal to you and other involved authorities to stand in support of your members of faculty and students who are courageously promoting the importance of literature and art in education.

Rashmi Varma, University of Warwick,
Kalpana Wilson, Birkbeck University,
Subir Sinha, School of Oriental and African Studies, London,
Pritam Singh, Oxford Brookes University,
Gilbert Achcar, Nadje Al-Ali, SOAS, University of London, and others

Power to Dalits through Self-help Groups

After reading the article "Women Break Hierarchies, Walk to Freedom" by Swapna Majumdar (EPW, 1 October 2016), I am shocked that, as recently as 14 August 2016, Dalits were being discriminated by the so-called higher castes in Uttar Pradesh. I have heard and read of Dalits not being allowed to enter temples earlier but this incident is different as Dalits have to take off their footwear while passing by the houses of the upper castes.

According to the article, "over 300 women from marginalised communities in the villages of Jhansi district came together to celebrate their freedom from the tyranny of an age-old social custom requiring them to take off their footwear while passing the houses of the upper castes. On Independence Day, by wearing their footwear in doing so, the women reaffirmed not just their liberation from this humiliating custom, but also underlined their power of self-determination and collectivisation."

The women could do this because they all were under the umbrella of self-help groups (SHGs), so kudos to SHGs, as they are not only meant for economic

development of below poverty line (BPL) households, but also for empowerment. Further, according to the article, the 24 SHGs were formed with 300 women, mostly marginalised, and the subsequent federation of the SHGs empowered everyone. This is undoubtedly a positive sign. More and more SHGs should be formed by the marginalised and Dalit women of the state so that they can express their defiance to the so-called upper-caste people.

Without any bloodshed, Dalits and the marginalised could lead to a social change in the area. Of course, the leaders of the state have always had a feudal attitude. Perhaps this is the reason that the police and administration could not take any measures. However, this example should be emulated in other areas of the state as well as in the country so that marginalised persons are empowered.

Shankar Chatterjee

Professor & Head (CPME), NIRD & PR,
HYDERABAD

Omitting Tamil Literature

In the book review “On the Origin and Progress of the Novel” by Bhoomika Meiling (*EPW*, 24 September 2016) of *Understanding the Novel: A Theoretical Overview* by Albeena Shakil, Meiling mentions novels in Bengali, Marathi, Hindi, Malayalam, English and Urdu. However, she fails to mention Tamil, which has a tradition of literature longer than other Indian languages. While earlier much of literature was in poetic form, the novel made its appearance quite early in Tamil. *Prathapa Mudiliyar Charitram* was the first novel in Tamil written in 1857 by Samuel Vedanayagam Pillai and published in 1879.

Maithreyi Krishnaraj

BENGALURU

Beware the Dalit Fury

This is with reference to the article, “Everyday Dalit Experiences of Living and the Denials” by Sitaram Kumbhar (*EPW*, 27 August 2016). The country is marching from feudalism to postmodernism, yet the practice of untouchability, like poison, is slowly eating into the very vitals of Indian culture.

According to the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) on the Prevention of Atrocities against Scheduled Castes, 2010, a crime is committed against a Dalit every 18 minutes. It goes on to detail the percentages of sexual crimes against Dalit women, the poor state of health of the children, the humiliation in government schools and the denial to water sources in our villages.

With a view to prohibiting employment of manual scavengers, the Government of India enacted the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993 followed by the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act, 2013. But, despite enactment of all such acts, manual scavenging is still a reality in various parts of the country. We have unashamedly doomed Dalits to clean our gutters, our garbage and our sewers. More than three lakh sanitation workers, all Dalits, are manually cleaning filth and human waste. They are working in horrible conditions under a contract system that is in effect a bloodsucker. Surveys reveal that 90% of India’s sanitation workers die before they turn 60 after contracting various infectious diseases.

Mahatma Gandhi pointed out that “Swaraj (independence) is a meaningless term if we desire to keep a fifth of India (untouchables) under perpetual subjection, and deliberately deny to them the fruits of national culture.” “Beware the fury of the patient man,” John Dryden had warned 300 years ago. Perhaps we should modify that to “Beware the fury of the patient and long-suffering people.”

Jaydev Jana

KOLKATA

Sramajibi Hospital

Once upon a time, there was a steel manufacturing company, Indo-Japan Steels Limited (IJSL), at Belur in Howrah district, West Bengal. The workers of the factory felt the urgent need for a health centre and formed their own organisation, Belur Sramajibi Swasthya Prakalpa Samity (BSSPS) in 1983. The establishment of the organisation converged with the junior doctors’ movement in the city of Kolkata in the early 1980s, demanding

better health facilities for patients. The unique joint initiative of the workers and some doctors ultimately led to the establishment of the Sramajibi Hospital at Belur in 1994. It was the abandoned office house of the sister concern of IJSL that was transformed into Sramajibi Hospital. The organisers still remember the parallel health venture initiated by Shankar Guha Niyogi in Chhattisgarh.

Though the IJSL liquidated in the second half of the 1990s, making the fate of about 800 workers and their families uncertain, and there was police assault on the hospital staff and patients in an eviction drive, the hospital survived through a legal battle. The patients who cannot afford private medical treatment come to Sramajibi Hospital for treatment at a much lesser cost.

The Sramajibi Hospital at Belur has now grown into a 100-bed hospital. A modest outdoor service launched in Serampore in the adjacent Hooghly district by the BSSPS has now reportedly been transformed into a 150-bed hospital, with 47 doctors and 200 support staff working in these two hospitals.

It is reported that the joint initiative of the workers and doctors is now aimed at building a large third hospital on 33 acres of land near Santiniketan in the Birbhum district. It is quite remarkable that about 100 ex-workers of IJSL are still associated with the BSSPS, which started its journey more than three decades ago.

(Current information about Sramajibi Hospital is taken from Bibhas Bhattacharyya’s article in *Hindustan Times*, 11 September 2016.)

Arup Kumar Sen

KOLKATA

I Stand Corrected

I am grateful to Amiya K Bagchi for pointing out a few errors that crept into my article “The Heart Has Its Reasons: A Story Untold” (*EPW*, 20 August 2016). It was put together from a number of conversations with me. Unfortunately, the final text could not be checked since I was gravely ill at that time. This is the primary reason for the factual errors.

Ashok Mitra

KOLKATA

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