

The curse of being a 'Dalit' student

BBC ONLINE

"My birth is my fatal accident... I always was rushing. Desperate to start a life... I am not sad. I am just empty. Unconcerned about myself. That's pathetic. And that's why I am doing this."

These are excerpts from the last letter that Rohith Vemula, a PhD student at Hyderabad Central University wrote before he killed himself on Sunday.

It is, at once, an eloquent and chilling suicide note: a young man who loved "science, stars, nature and people", and aspired to become a science writer like Carl Sagan, ended up defeated and crushed by discrimination and apathy.

Vemula, 26, was one of five Dalit - formerly known as untouchable - students who were protesting against their expulsion from the university's housing facility. India's 180 million Dalits are among its most wretched citizens, because of an unforgiving and cruel caste hierarchy that condemns them to the bottom of the heap.

Vemula and the four other students faced allegations last August that they attacked a member of the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) - the student wing of the governing Hindu nationalist BJP -

August federal minister Bandaru Dattatreya, a BJP junior minister, wrote a letter to the federal education ministry complaining that the university had become a "den of casteist, extremist and anti-national politics".



on the campus. Some reports say an investigation had found no "conclusive evidence" of the assault.

The university stopped paying his monthly stipend of 25,000 rupees (\$369; £258) allegedly because he raised issues under the campus's Dalit-led students union.

It also began an investigation into his - and his friends - conduct. In

In September, Vemula and four other students were suspended - although the minister denies this was linked to his missive, which he says was not about the Dalit students, but a general comment on the restive campus.

Vemula's death has sparked off a firestorm of protest across India.

But Vemula's is not an exceptional

story of caste discrimination on India's campuses. One report said eight Dalit students had taken their lives "unable to cope" with caste politics at Hyderabad University in the past decade. Between 2007 and 2011 alone, 18 Dalit students ended their lives in some of India's premier educational institutes, according to another estimate.

A federal investigation into complaints of caste-based harassment and discrimination against Dalit and tribal students in Delhi's All India Institute of Medical Sciences, India's leading medical school, uncovered a shocking picture of abuse. The probe found most of the Dalit and tribal students complaining that they "did not receive the kind of support other students received from their teachers". The students said teachers did not give them the marks they deserved in exams. More than 90% of the students said they were routinely humiliated by examiners in practical and oral examinations.

Vemula is just the latest victim of India's scourge of untouchability.