

## **Rohithvemula, Muslim Question and the Limit of Democracy**

MUHAMMED SHAH S

---

This is an attempt to articulate the political/personal struggle that I had endured as a Muslim student during the period of students' agitation following the sacrificial death of RohithVemula. The whole episode being stitched with my political experience as a student has made immense impact on my take on contemporary democracy vis a vis the Muslim question.

The 1968's historical students' upsurge in France led intellectuals like Sylvain Lazarus and Alan Badiou to a kind of departure from the conventional fabric of politics which was deeply steeped into the notion of democracy and parliamentarianism in west. Bearing witness to the upsurge of new questions towards democracy this event also pushed them to reconfigure the predicates of political that are mostly centered on the conventional categories such as class. In India, movements like Mandal and anti-Mandal had functioned in the same way as to replace the conventional political referents such as class and nation with caste and community. Events following the death of RohithVemulawas widely considered an explosive culmination of this particular trajectory in India. However Rohith does not only represent the democratic force of caste, but also the existential depth of an oppressed; a Dalit that has the capacity to outthink the same political democracy. My point of contention is: Is Rohith in fact marking the evolution of democracy or the blind-spot that is inherent to it? To me Rohith is simultaneously a negation as well as affirmation, or rather, an affirmation through negation. A negation of life which gave rise to the speech, language and canvas to the imagination of a larger outcaste community. I am not ready to add up this affirmation, which is emanating from a radical negation, to the linear evolution of democratic politics in India. I would rather take it as a creation of a language which is not obsessed with any object; be it an objective form of politics or that of community. For

I believe, the language Rohith provided in fact is existential, to which an oppressed from any sect can participate, articulate with and breathe in.

Rohith's 'event' has an often unacknowledged root to the un-divorceable episodes of Muslim students surprising in the campus. It is not just that Rohith stood with those who were offering final prayer to Yakoob Memon, but also it is something that frequently acquires a nature of inexorable yet spasmodic affect to the subsequent movement which had shaken the foundation of mainstream democratic discourse. This affect, created by Muslim presence, is actually more close to the existential cut -from democracy- that Rohith created, than to the democratic evolution which is widely celebrated and credited to the account of his death. In my reading maybe that is the only radical point a Muslim can go with a Dalit as long as the discourse of democracy is not yet ready to accommodate this 'going with'. Also, this is the only aspect which is radical enough to the extent of turning the mainstream discourse of democracy upside down which is where I find the theorization of Lazarus quiet pertinent.

Sylvain Lazarus, who made tremendous influence on Alain Badiou, offers a distinctive and fresher theoretical account of politics which is deeply informed by the 1968 event. His particular postulation of politics anchors around the denial of any (antagonistic) relations based on object of any form. He sets politics free from its antagonism towards state, or particular class etc and tries to articulate it as a thought outside political philosophy. Though this piece doesn't allow me to further penetrate into his project of re-enacting politics as a thought with no objective relations (his development is interesting to me for its separation from Schmittian tradition), I find myself drawn to employing this particular concept: a politics without an object, in articulating the affect created by Muslim presence in the campus. However, I believe that mainstream democracy and its newfangled inclusion of caste discourse, has reached a critical stake by the convulsion of this affect. As an affect, Muslim presence is in the critical requirement to express itself outside of any objective forms or relations such as that of the State. Subjectivity as rightly theorized by Lazarus assumes to be the source of this affect which harshly transgresses any relations to objects. To me this non-categorical affect prompts us to rethink even the idea of politics from a broader ethical ambit. Rohith in fact procures such a non-objective universality of ethics in his first letter to the world.

Rohith's event which has deeper implications about the existence of Muslim presence in the country provides another crucial instance of how the whole mechanism of state and democracy has been antagonized against the figure of Islam/Muslim.

Let me elaborate, with the instance of our arrest following the agitations in HCU demanding justice for Rohith. On March 21, 2016 we were taken by Miyapur Police allegedly for vandalizing the Vice Chancellor Mr. Appa Rao Podile's campus residence. During the 40 minutes of notorious police violence unleashed upon us, fifteen students, one teacher and a documentary activist in the police van, we all were designated as Muslims which is a potential threat to them. Recurrent punches on our faces were packed with the trepidation against the abstract Muslim ghost incarnated in our bodies. My faith, supposed to give me confidence in such moments, was often crushed down by the reverberating threat of "we will kill you in an 'encounter'". Warangal, a place where five former SIMI members were killed in a fake encounter starts to haunt me with the real fear of death. We were not even allowed to scream in pain, but only to be silent and passive recipients of the torture. Each moment was counted as each knock over the body. So, time was corporal in its surreal sense. We kept on counting till the van reached the station. It was not a particular Muslim man in the van who provoked them, but the pervasive Muslimness which they found inscribed in our being that was worthy of further torture.

Every form of belonging, identification and affirmation was unified to this Muslimness and triggered them to act, brutalize every inch of our body. It was a great relief comparatively, once we reached the station as the physical torture was replaced with a 'police trial'. One of my fellow 'Muslim' wanted to open my bag to put his cigarette safe. It was my bad luck that a police man 'found out' my research reference book in my bag on Islamism, authored by a Pakistani-Western scholar Humeira Iqtidar. This rejuvenated intensity-of Muslimness-added up to their rage that triggered a new round of assault on me inside the station.

Later we were remanded to Cherlappally one of the highest security-central jails in the country, where we spent eight days in the camaraderie of much older Muslim under-trial prisoners. Most of them were implicated in various terror charges. It can be called an epiphany of sorts to observe their being Muslim. They were offering Namaz in time and regular in religious practices. Bizarrely, I felt only jail can safely facilitate it. There was nothing to worry about, nothing to conceal, nothing to be anxious about in prison. A disconnected belonging, an existential freeness and an order without time; life in prison showed me another kind of breathing. A different format of living that I fail to interpret. In retrospect, I realize none of us ever articulated these prison stories after we were released, maybe because of the existential unease it caused.

I, as a Muslim, continue to be bothered by the limit of the discourse that we had built up during this episode. To be precise, there is still a haunting absence of any acknowledgement from leftist organizations, as well as Ambedkarite organizations towards any kind of Islamic discourse in the campus. A Muslim, apart from being a leftist or Ambedkarite, still remains unimaginable in a normative political spectrum. This unrecognized existence of 'Another Muslim' (unacknowledged by left and ambedkarites) can be spotted as an integral part of the events leading to Rohith's death as well as the concomitant events. Subsequently, whether an academic talk or a public protest, if conducted by Muslim students, surveillance of state and administration has been essential. This surveillance often comes with the massive demonization of Muslim students' groups from the part of left political groups in the campus. State machineries as well as normative democratic practices equally look at any form of Muslim grouping in the campus, as a threat. Apart from the Muslim story of democracy that is existing, Rohith incident also inspired me to think about Democracy in the light of growing incidents of lynching Muslims and Dalits across the country. If we push the discourse on democracy a little further to the existential side of those who are being killed and thrown to eternal sufferings, it would be more convincing that the province of democracy has a very limited focus. That is, the province of democracy is always the province of those who can utter/make speech. Is not Identity an art of utterance or the speech of self? In that sense, what kind of speech possibility does democracy allow to the real wretched except for mainstream civil society discourse? I find this lacunae deeply troubling. How do they register their self, which is deeply negated in the larger civil society language or democratic discourse? This lack of language, impossibility of utterance in the dominant-language offered by democracy could be a blind spot that Rohith's words and actions tried to address, I believe. It's in this sense that I say Rohith's letter in fact offers another possibility of utterance, for the existential break of a larger mass who live in vulnerability in their daily life. Secondly, as long as this existential antagonism (antagonism without object as theorized by Lazarus) which is generated by the Muslim grouping in the campus can't register itself in the dominant-language of democracy (antagonism and fashioning around object), I consider Rohith's language as an existential possibility for them/those who lost the right to utter/right of speech/unqualified to share, worry, form themselves within the dominant democratic language.

And before I conclude this rumination, I will narrate here one more story to supplement this argument. We met an old Muslim man in the prison. He doesn't know what was the exact crime registered against him. He was not convicted, but under trial. Later on he learnt that his crime was that he allegedly transported some eight thousand rupees to Pakistan. Allegations against him of having link with Pakistani terror outfits left his advocate/

relative to him helpless, resulting in the abandonment of the case and the man. Now, this abandoned man is in prison without knowing how long he will have to spend there. He even didn't know about this crime till a point of time. He has no discursive means to convince his innocence nor any physical possibility. Once you are accused of having terror-link, you will hardly find any juridical-political-democratic possibility even to make your claim/position regarding the allegation. This in fact marks the serious dislodgement of Muslim subject from the democratic discourse for its very incommensurability to any structure of language/discourse. This incommensurability has been very well exposed during the whole episode of Hyderabad students' politics around and after the sacrificial death of Rohith Vemula. Life breaking affirmation of Rohith's death is in fact important to me as a Muslim, for its probability to seek the different narratives outside the dominant democratic conventional language.