

# Rohith-Movement, Conversion, and Renaming

## Notes from Hyderabad

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**ABSTRACT** Reflecting on the “suicide” of the anti-caste student activist in India, Rohith Vemula, now a Dalit icon, this paper looks at the various meanings that his suicide note generates for the Dalit present. Mobilizing historical and philosophical material, particularly the work of anti-caste intellectuals such as Ambedkar and Iyothee Thass, the paper argues that conversion and renaming, among the oppressed, are acts that move toward becoming-other.

**KEYWORDS** anti-caste movement, conversion, Rohith Vemula, Ambedkar, Iyothee Thass, Jean-Luc Nancy

To be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be  
in a rage almost all the time.

—James Baldwin, “The Negro in American Culture”

This statement from the African-American writer James Baldwin suitably parallels, and well applies, to a “relatively conscious” Dalit (ex-untouchable) in an alienating caste-context anywhere in the world, particularly in India. Rohith Vemula committed “suicide”<sup>1</sup> on January 17, 2016, and his death sparked massive student agitation and widespread Dalit mobilization across the globe, as he became an anti-caste icon across the subcontinent. They called it an institutional murder. A new meaning to student struggles was added after Rohith’s “suicide” note was circulated far and wide, which I’ll discuss in detail later. Ever since, the institutions of higher education have increasingly become sites of anti-caste struggles. Hyderabad, in South India—home to an assertive anti-caste student politics since the 1990s—has become a particularly fierce battle ground for such an incessant rage.

Though there have been many anti-caste student movements across the country since the 1960s, they have largely worked within vernacular or regional spaces. The post-Rohith movement, and the events that followed, brought to light the newer political energy of an anti-caste consciousness and an emergent mobilization not only within an English-speaking audience, but also across vernacular, regional, and global spaces as well. Dalits across the globe agitated, mobilized themselves, and publicized protest statements. Academics, writers, journalists, workers, street-hawkers, and students together became a part of this uprising. Many public personalities came out openly about their Dalit identity. It became a social movement across the country, starting from a university in South India. Perhaps for the first time in India, agitation in a university became a rallying point for global resistance against caste. And Rohith became an iconic presence in any protest against caste discrimination thereafter.

Discouraged after struggling against a social boycott at the University of Hyderabad, five Dalit research scholars—student leaders from Ambedkar Students' Association—bore the brunt of the institutional powers of the nation. A social boycott, unlike in a civic-resistance movement, is a caste mandate against a community of people considered untouchable. It deploys a social sanction as a practice of caste against the most oppressed, particularly in India and even today. In late 2005 five Dalit PhD scholars from the University of Hyderabad were mandated to be punished by the administration; they were not allowed to gather in groups, were denied access to the library and common places in groups, and, more importantly, were locked out of their hostel rooms. In protest, the five students decided to sleep in the open in front of the shopping complex at the center of the university during the first week of 2016. They named the shack they built out of posters bearing the images of anti-caste icons a Dalit Ghetto—a *Velivada*, or cordoned-off space which is separated from a caste village, which in this context was the university itself. Rohith, among the five Dalit scholars, committed “suicide” against this injustice within two weeks.

Rohith's death sparked wide-spread protests across the world, and Dalit politics converged with student and social movements against caste discrimination in higher educational spaces in India. His death was considered an institutional murder, and a case under the Prevention of Atrocities against SC/ST Act was filed in the Hyderabad high court. However, Rohith's desire to be a writer was fulfilled only in his death, and all he was able to write was this “last letter for the first time.”<sup>2</sup> Rohith Vemula—an aspiring writer and academic—son of a single Dalit mother (divorcee) became an iconic catalyst for a movement against caste discrimination in contemporary India. However, Rohith and his family are now denounced as non-Dalits, and even in his death, his birth is clarified through enumerative categories to apprehend his life.<sup>3</sup>

However, in the eye of the storm was Rohith's haunting yet philosophical "suicide" note:

I loved Science, Stars, Nature, but then I loved people without knowing that people have long since divorced from nature. Our feelings are second handed. Our love is constructed. Our beliefs colored. Our originality valid through artificial art. It has become truly difficult to love without getting hurt. The value of a man was reduced to his immediate identity and nearest possibility. To a vote. To a number. To a thing. Never was a man treated as a mind. As a glorious thing made up of star dust. In every field, in studies, in streets, in politics, and in dying and living.

I am writing this kind of letter for the first time. My first time of a final letter. Forgive me if I fail to make sense. My birth is my fatal accident. I can never recover from my childhood loneliness. The unappreciated child from my past . . .<sup>4</sup>

He went on further to state, in a Christ-like manner, "No one has instigated me, whether by their acts or by their words to this act. This is my decision and I am the only one responsible for this. Do not trouble my friends and enemies on this after I am gone."<sup>5</sup> While his death was considered a sacrifice, it was also widely perceived that his aspiration was humiliated, rejected, and reduced to death. The Dalit presence is then perhaps ontologically never human enough, as increasingly cows are holier than a Dalit and a Muslim in contemporary India. And the Dalit presence in academic spaces haunts the privileged and the dominant as they are made to belong to a different time, who however occupy—non-meritoriously—the present, "modern," spaces that are largely populated and designed by and for the "upper" castes. Though rejected in favor of dead meat, Dalits haunt in their presence as socially dead beings. They are subjected as incompatible beings in life but become powerful icons in their deaths. They, perhaps, are ghost presences. However, Rohith rejected this rejection, willfully, through his death.

### Rohith's Shadows

Rohith Vemula wrote in his *un*-departing note (and I repeat) that for some birth is a curse; and his birth is a fatal accident. Is there any birth that is not a fatal accident, one wonders? One could also extend the question of whether the birth of nation, the birth of what is to be human, who is an untouchable—are they not accidents? If they are indeed just accidents, why is the value of a person never treated as a glorious being made out of stardust? Why is she or he reduced to an identity, to a number, to a vote, to a thing? Desiring to be a writer of science, Rohith became a ghostwriter of sorts in his eventual death.

Rohith's gesture against violence—his sacrifice, his gift of life and death<sup>6</sup>—is perhaps against caste, which “things” human beings to their immediate identity and nearest possibility.<sup>7</sup> A question of values against the notion of “what it is to be” was raised. Did Rohith's death signify the death of a community? Or did it signify the political valence of the community of deaths? Is death an offering to the community, a gift? What about the death—a living social death—before the physical death, which is inscribed in the corporal experience of an untouchable Dalit-ness? Is death a gift then, for a community to come? Did Rohith's death embody the lack or a failure of an anti-caste community, located and positioned from an outcaste ontology, especially in modern spaces in this country?

Can (caste) death be one's own? As births are never treated as fatal accidents; deaths, too, are never incidents of choice. Perhaps there is nothing in caste that transcends one's death from birth. Defiantly, Rohith's departing note is about the life of death as an incident of choice and a lack-of-choice. It is a gift—that community's give-and-take—where death defies and refutes one's own birth and becomes an open call for a *movement* to come. Perhaps Rohith's movement taught us in an Ambedkarite sense that “the battle is in the fullest sense spiritual. . . . It is a battle for freedom.”<sup>8</sup>

When Rohith was not given a proper burial, and his body was taken away and burned on a pyre in haste, his kith and kin decided to have a Buddhist death ceremony in an Ambedkarite fashion with his ashes. On his twenty-seventh birth anniversary (January 30, 2016), around eight thousand people clad in white walked in silence from Deeksha Bhoomi to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh headquarters at Nagpur in protest. Ambedkarite Buddhists received students throughout the train stations from Hyderabad to Delhi, when students traveled to Delhi to seek justice for Rohith. And on April 14, 2016—the 125th birth anniversary of Babasaheb Dr. B. R. Ambedkar—Rohith's mother and brother, Ms. Radhika and Mr. Raja Vemula, converted to Buddhism in Mumbai, thereby inaugurating another debate on conversion and caste. Perhaps death raises the question of community, sociality, and fraternity much more intimately for the Dalit community, as a social death precedes an eventual physical death.

Rohith's life and death seem to suggest that Dalit-ness is accepted and romanticized only if it remains socially dead. It threatens if it rejects passivity, exits out of social death, and exhibits a will to life. He had signed off his death desiring *movement*—“from shadows to stars.” His death can be evaluated as a gift of death toward life. It is a call for a future, perhaps for a coming community. This prophetic call could treat someone as “a glorious being made of star dust.” This clarion call is against caste that “things” human beings to their immediate identity and nearest possibility. His martyrdom raised the value of what it is “to become.” It is a call for a community that values how one dies, rather than what is one's birth. It is a call

toward a community of death, not birth—which is an exciting freedom from social death—a call toward “exscription.”

### **Exscription (*In the Light*) of Shadows**

The Dalit subject is often objectified by an existential brokenness and is a subject of venomous prejudice. Pain, trauma, and scars are its markers, though many have intervened to change this phenomenon. However, it is generally understood that this broken image is deprived of any positive memory. Dalits as oppressed communities have foregrounded exscriptions of castelessness against various hermeneutics of caste—be they colonial, missionary, nationalist, brahminical, and casteist. In this attempt, they have continuously engaged and conceptualized a theory of anti-caste community that is generated from Dalit experience, which invariably exposes inscriptions of caste. Thinkers like Iyothee Thass and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar have creatively retrieved a civilizational memory through Buddhism from a vernacular resource. This act of exscription, perhaps, is a specific kind of modernity that is both “closed and open-ended, fragile and ecologically just.”<sup>9</sup>

French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy introduces the term *exscription* to refer to “becoming-other-than-itself,” whereby writing and reading exposes oneself to the other—to “exscription.”<sup>10</sup> He states, “Writing, and reading, is to be exposed, to expose oneself . . . to ‘exscription.’ The exscribed is . . . that opening into itself, of writing to itself, to its own inscription as the infinite discharge of meaning.”<sup>11</sup> Nancy distinguishes exscription from inscription thus: “The being of existence can be presented . . . when exscribed . . . where writing at every moment discharges itself, unburdens itself.”<sup>12</sup> Moreover, it “distances signification and which itself would be communication . . . they communicate as complete what was only written in pieces and by chance.”<sup>13</sup> Nancy argues that it is an exscription of finitude as against inscription toward infinity. And this could be applied to Dalits’ disengagement with caste and Brahminism, and their creative exploration with anti-caste religions—specifically as writing and reading—as ex-scribing a casteless community.

Thus, anti-caste intellectuals treat naming as a political act—as an exposure, discharge, and unburdening. This is reflective even in their adopting and exploring the Other’s names—or in other words, exscripting themselves. For instance, Iyothee Thass<sup>14</sup> was born Kathavarayan in the year 1845. And as he admired his teacher Tondai Mandalam Vallakalatinagar V. Iyothithaasa Kavirayar Pandithar, he changed his name to Pandit C. Iyothee Thass, coincidentally, just like Dr. B. R. Ambedkar did five decades later. Bhimarao Ramji Ambavadekar also changed his name to B. R. Ambedkar in memory of his teacher. And later, in “Away from the Hindus,” Ambedkar explores a very interesting search and theory of names in the wake of the resolution passed in the 1936 Mahar conference in Bombay, where

the community decided to abandon Hinduism and convert to some other religion. Ambedkar argues,

The name matters and matters a great deal. For, the name can make a revolution in the status of the Untouchables. But the name must be the name of a community outside Hinduism and beyond its power of spoliation and degradation. Such name can be the property of the Untouchable only if they undergo religious conversion. A conversion within Hinduism is a clandestine conversion, which can be of no avail.<sup>15</sup>

A little earlier, in the early twentieth century, the Tamil intellectual Pandit Iyothee Thass (1845–1914) had run the magazine *Tamizhan* (1907–14), which revived interest in Buddhism as an anti-caste religion. Thass was born a Dalit from the Parayar community; nevertheless, he contested the category Parayar throughout his life. He floated alternative, open identities such as *poorva Bouddhar* (ancient Buddhist), *Jaadhi pedha matra Tamizhar/Dravidar* (casteless Tamils/Dravidians), and *Tamil Bouddhar* (Tamil Buddhist).

A man of anti-caste ideas, Thass was a major leader, intellectual, and activist whose life, work, and legacy have regrettably remained neglected by historians until recently.<sup>16</sup> In many ways, a precursor to towering anti-caste figures like Periyar E. V. Ramasamy (1879–1973) and Babasaheb Dr. B. R. Ambedkar (1891–1956), Thass was the first to develop an anti-caste narrative by espousing and writing on Buddhism. He was a practitioner of *Siddha* medicine, who during the 1881 British-India census, appealed that the *panchamas* (ex-untouchables) were not Hindus and that they must be recorded as original Tamils—*Adi Tamizhar*.<sup>17</sup> He used Tamil literary resources and palm-scripts, so as to field anti-caste, Tamil literature, and folklore-based explanations of Buddhism.

This anti-caste exscription gestures toward an autonomous embodiment, beyond just being restricted as a polluted shadow. It counter-views caste with an oppositional gaze, with a resistant touch, with an act of annihilation. Its struggle against civilizational violence unravels caste's direct, insidious violence, and its chronic inalienable dishonor. It hence fashions a "genealogy of loss" that integrates experience, understands social inheritances, and anchors the living present with a conscious community through civilizational memory beyond conscious rage.<sup>18</sup>

### **(Be)Coming outside the Fold**

Throughout India, the majority of converts out of Hinduism today, as in the past, are significantly Dalit, and the present Indian legal and political systems *minoritize* both Dalit and women in this context—in the sense that they are not fully capable of making their own decisions and therefore require supervision.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, religious conversion is portrayed in the national discourse as an attack on Indian



culture and the innermost essence of the nation itself. Religion, however, is conceptualized very differently by Thass and Ambedkar from how it is imagined by the nationalist public sphere. In a thorough borrowing of tropes and inspiration from various religions and regions across the world, and through a radical articulation from different cultural resources, anti-caste thinkers (Thass and Ambedkar) seem to set a different discourse on conversion—in the context where anti-conversion laws advocate that conversion disrupts social cohesion, and Christianity and Islam are portrayed as converting-religions which are made responsible for communal conflict.<sup>20</sup> They seem to counter this argument completely and turn the gaze on caste and Hinduism as ultimately responsible for creating conflict and violence.

The mass-conversion of half a million Dalits to Buddhism in October 1956 under the leadership of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, just seven weeks before his death, has been the single-most defining moment of conversion in history “outside the fold.” Since then, many Dalits in the subcontinent have converted to *Navayana* Buddhism as “a mass communicative action” in the Ambedkarite sense. The new Buddhism prescribes “the creation of a new collective body, in spirit and in letter.”<sup>21</sup> Ambedkarite Buddhism emerges from the perspective of “annihilation of caste” or as an assertive “rejection of rejection.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, anti-caste movements would consider “naming” and “conversion” as a movement toward an embodied ethical community that is exscribed beyond textuality—a “becoming” that could transform the “Dalit rage” and enlighten “the shadows” adequately.

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#### Notes

1. The protesting students, and the movement itself, have contested the idea of Dalit suicides in higher education institutions, and they refer to them as institutional murders.
2. Vemula, “My Birth.”
3. Mondal, “Rohith Vemula”; Henry, “It’s Official”; *News Minute*, “Year On.”
4. Vemula, “My Birth.”
5. Vemula, “My Birth.”
6. Sasheej Hegde’s “Gift of a Life and Death” purports that Rohith’s life and death demands an answer from all of “us.” Drawing from the works of Marcel Mauss, Jacques Derrida,

and Olly Pyythinen, he understands Rohith's life and death as a "gift." However, he states that this gift is challenged by an inherent sociality as well as transformative radicalism of thought and action. Hence, he forcefully argues that a pervasive sociality can constrict the idea of "gift." He asks whether one can transcend the limits of the frames of caste-sociality in a lived sense, as a free-standing "gift."

7. Rohith uses the word "thing" to describe caste as a reduction of value—of human life "to an immediate identity and nearest possibility" (Vemula, "My Birth"). In another context, Heidegger reflects on thinking and poetry as "thing-ing" in *verbal* language while writing on "The Thing" in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (163–80). Caste as thought, perhaps, "things" human life into a language that can only immediately identify a near possibility. Reduced as a thing to identify and defined—then and there—as Rohith stated.
8. Ambedkar, "Dr. Ambedkar's Final Words."
9. In a conversation with Prof. P. Thirumal. He suggests that these excriptions are about the "un-thought" of caste, and this "un-thought" is radicalized, articulated, and penetrated through various cultural resources by subaltern anti-caste thinkers. One could, in fact, grant this act of excription a specific kind of modernity that is both closed and open-ended, fragile, and ecologically just. He also terms that this excription is a relative and plural description rather than a singular inscription.
10. Nancy, "Corpus," 18–19.
11. Nancy, "Exscription," 64.
12. Nancy, "Exscription," 64.
13. Nancy, "Exscription," 65.
14. Iyothethaasa Pandithar (*Pandit*) is also termed as Iyothee Thass and Thass in this paper.
15. Ambedkar, "Away," 420.
16. Likewise, many such figures seem to have worked similar to Thass during the same period in the vernacular regions. Narayana Guru (1856–1928) from Kerala, Bhima Bhoi (1850–95) in Orissa, Poikkayil Yohannan (1878–1939) in Kerala, and, a little earlier, Jyotirao Phule (1827–1920) created a hermeneutic of anti-caste community in writing.
17. Aloysius, *Iyothee Thassar*, 69.
18. Leonard, "Casteless Community."
19. Roberts, *To Be Cared For*, 7.
20. Adcock, *Limits of Tolerance*.
21. Choudhury, "Ambedkar's Words," 18.
22. Guru, *Humiliation*, 212.

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