

# Lapis Lazuli

## An International Literary Journal

ISSN 2249-4529

[www.pintersociety.com](http://www.pintersociety.com)

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GENERAL ISSUE VOL: 8, No.: 2, AUTUMN 2018

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UGC APPROVED (Sr. No.41623)

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BLIND PEER REVIEWED

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## **The Paradox in the Politics of “Jai-Bhim Lal-Salaam”: The Language of Student Protest in India**

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### **Abstract:**

“Jai-Bhim Laal-Salaam”, both rhetorically and historically a paradox, brought forth a promise of representation. Amidst, a political paradox unveils: A Dalit usurped, and the Left touched by the untouchable. Finally, the paper posits that riddled between these paradoxes, is the Dalit body of Rohith Vemula, with some provocative answers.

### **Keywords:**

Student Movement, Student Politics, Jai-Bhim, Lal-Salaam, Ambedkar, Dalit, Marxist

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This paper assumes that cultural expressions in the form of slogans, have political ramification. Hence, this paper seeks to interrogate the coupling of “Jai-Bhim Lal-Salaam” that brings Left and Dalit politics together. The premise of this uncanny convergence was the suicide of Rohith Vemula. Hence, in his death Vemula becomes the harbinger of change for Dalit politics. This paper seeks to critically interrogate the rhetoric coupling of Ambedkarite and Marxist politics of “Jai-Bhim Lal-Salaam”; questions the necessity for such an alliance; to understand the reasons behind the resurgence of Dalit students’ politics; to understand the politics of exclusion and assimilation vis-à-vis “Jai-Bhim Lal-Salaam”; and to critically examine if places of higher education are also spaces for the marginalized to articulate resistance. Political scientists have spoken about the importance of convergence of Dalit and Left politics; If such an alliance is indeed indispensable, the aim of this paper is to suggest the way forward, for such alliances to function.

### **Convergence of “Jai-Bhim” and “Lal-Salaam”**

The “event” of Vemula’s death continues to haunt the academe, and yet, it was an important moment for Dalit politics, that highlighted caste-discrimination in higher education. Vemula’s death was a moment of radical social transformation that marked the resurgence of Dalit students’ politics; Ambedkar Students’ Association in the University of Hyderabad (UoH), Birsa Ambedkar Phule Students’ Association in Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) and other organisations across India. Ever since, these student organisations have carved a “niche” in student politics across India. Moreover, this was a moment of introspection: would Vemula’s death still be an important moment in Indian political history “if he had not died so eloquently?” (Anand 2016). The idea of Vemula’s eloquence is an important one, something that this paper will return to at a later point.

That said, after Vemula's death in 2016, slogans of "Jai-Bhim" reverberated campus spaces. Thereafter, the thought-provoking coupling of "Jai-Bhim Lal-Salaam" and "Lal Neel Salaam" ensued, in cultural practices of slogans, music and art, during the JNU movement in 2016. Rohit Azad asserted, that what he "found most remarkable about the JNU movement was a transition from 'Lal Salaam' to 'Jai Bhim-Lal Salaam'" (Kumar 2016).

Several political commentators supported this alliance. In "Bridging the Dalit–Left-Liberal Divide: Language of Recent Student Protests", B Rajeevan says: "Dalit and Adivasi politics, long enslaved by liberal civil society, has found a new voice in the aftermath of Vemula's suicide and subsequent student protests. The Left–liberal establishments will benefit from standing together with this subaltern democracy in resisting the Hindu right-wing forces." Further, speaking about Kanhaiya Kumar's address to JNU students where he invoked "Jai-Bhim Lal-Salaam", Rajeevan says, "This was a political manifesto of contemporary social and political challenges faced by Indian society" (Rajeevan, 2016).

Later, the slogan "Jai-Bhim Lal-Salaam" was familiarized during the Una movement in 2016, led by Rastriya Dalit Adhikar Manch and Una Dalit Atyachar Ladat Samiti, along with trade unions like Gujarat Federation of Trade Unions and Gujarat Mazdoor Sabha, and with civil rights bodies such as Jan Sangharsh Manch.

In "When Jai Bhim meets Lal Salaam", G Sampath says, "Such an alliance of Jai Bhim and Lal Salaam, if translated into a political programme, could mark a significant departure for both Left and Dalit politics. The recent Dalit agitations in Gujarat offer a glimpse of what may be possible if a fusion of Jai Bhim and Lal Salaam were to go beyond sloganeering into the realm of praxis" (Sampath 2016).

Sampath adds that while the movements in Gujarat were primarily Dalit movements, the issues and demands were purported "not on identitarian but a material basis." Supporting the alliance, Sampath says that such an alliance will benefit both parties as, "Land ownership and permanent employment with social benefits make a big difference to the material existence of Dalits. But a militant articulation of material demands has rarely been a consistent feature of Dalit politics"

Sampath asserts that the Left politics needs the Dalit, and vice versa. He further adds:

This lacuna finds an inverse parallel in Left politics as well, which has never seriously taken up caste issues — neither atrocities against Dalits, nor casteism in general. It has restricted itself to class politics without challenging the caste underpinnings of class exploitation. A major reason, apparently, was the fear of dividing the working class along caste lines. The Dalits need the Left because there is no other political formation that programmatically raises working class issues such as a living wage, job security, pensions, and abolition of contract labour. As for the Left, sheer survival requires it to raise Dalit issues. Given that

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the overwhelming majority of Dalits are working class, there is a natural affinity of political interests.

##### **Student Politics in Flux**

Student leaders like Kanhaiya Kumar and Jignesh Mevani are taking forward the staff of “Jai-Bhim Lal-Salaam” into the ambit of national politics, asserting the importance of caste and class based politics to work together. However, the same cannot be said about student politics. In JNU, Birsa Ambedkar Phule Students Association (BAPSA) and the Left-unity fought elections separately. In comparison to 2017, BAPSA lost seven percent vote share in 2018 (Ibrar 2018). In the 2018 elections at UoH, former allies Student Federation of India (SFI) and Ambedkar Students Association (ASA) parted ways and decided to contest separately. This Left-Dalit divide resulted in Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad sweeping the UoH election after eight years (Nilesh 2018).

Seemingly, the “Jai-Bhim Lal-Salaam” alliance is falling apart at the university level, and student political groups are not able to forge a strong Dalit-Left alliance. There seems to be a trust deficit between them. Moreover, several Dalit student organisations were formed not only as an opposition to the right wing politics, but also Left wing politics. As Sampath pointed out earlier, historically the Left has “never seriously taken up caste issues.” In “The Doctor and the Saint”, Arundhati Roy suggests that adding caste in political debates seems to be an additive impulse. She says, “In the current debates about identity and justice, growth and development, for many of the best-known Indian scholars, caste is at best a topic, a subheading, and, quite often, just a footnote. By force-fitting caste into reductive Marxist class analysis, the progressive and Left-leaning Indian intelligentsia has made seeing caste even harder” (Roy 14).

Moreover, Dalit politics’ distrust arises not just from the political history of the communist party, but also from Ambedkar’s own disenchantment and distrust of Left politics. In 1928, Dange (an illustrious figure in the communist pantheon of India) led a major union strike where Ambedkar proposed that the issue of “equality and equal entitlement within the ranks of workers” be spoken about, to which Dange did not agree (Roy 60). This led to a long and bitter disagreement between the two which angered the communists who accused him of being an “opportunist” and an “imperialist stooge” (Roy 64).

In *History of the Indian Freedom Struggle*, E.M.S. Namboodiripad, reflected about the conflict between Ambedkar and the Left: “However, this was a great blow to the freedom movement. For this led to the diversion of the peoples’ attention from the objective of full independence to the mundane cause of the uplift of Harijans” (Namboodiripad 492).

Ambedkar argues that a socialist must talk about the social order and stratification, before they delve into the issue of economic reform and revolution. In chapter 21, section 17 of *Annihilation of Caste*, Ambedkar explains that when Marx

says “‘You have nothing to lose except your chains.’ It does nothing to excite the Hindus against the caste system.”

Further, speaking about the socialists, he writes with cynicism:

Now the question that I would like to ask is: Is it enough for a socialist to say, “I believe in perfect equality in the treatment of the various classes?” To say that such a belief is enough is to disclose a complete lack of understanding of what is involved in socialism. If socialism is a practical programme and is not merely an ideal, distant and far off, the question for a socialist is not whether he believes in equality. The question for him is whether he minds one class ill-treating and suppressing another class as a matter of system, as a matter of principle—and thus allow tyranny and oppression to continue to divide one class from another (3.9).

### Usurping the Dalit voice

It is now established that student politics had found it difficult to negotiate with “Jai-Bhim Lal-Salaam”; primarily due to historical distrust. The discontinuity of these alliances and losing an important share of electoral support in student politics is especially detrimental for the Dalit parties. Unlike the Left, that has established student political parties, some of the Dalit and Ambedkarite student groups are new. These parties came into existence due to lack of representation within existing political parties. Therefore, they brought forth a promise of representation. The socio-political notions and ideas these parties seek to espouse were not represented in a predominantly *savarna* academic space.

Hence, could the “Jai-Bhim Lal-Salaam” pairing be seen as an attempt to assume, appropriate, usurp and hijack the Dalit voice – leaving the marginal, again, voiceless? Seemingly, in this context, the politics of exclusion, works through a tokenistic politics of assimilation. The ideas of exclusion and assimilation for the marginalised, then becomes two diametrical points of a circle: always a part of the circle as well as distant and detached. The attempt is to constantly exclude as well as to assimilate the marginalised; a vicious circle, at best, a symptom of appeasement. Hence, for many Dalits, to say “Jai-Bhim Lal-Salaam” will be to act as partners in their own humiliation. While academic spaces in India stresses on criticality, draws vitality from Ambedkarite politics, and seats itself as a herald of political change; by its very existence, it re-institutes a space for *savarna* politics. This is a framework in which eight Dalit students have died in ten years in UoH and “dozens across India” (The Citizen, 2016). In March, 2017, yet another student committed suicide at UoH. Hence, the academic Weltanschauung is insufficient and inadequate to voice minority resistance. It seems that it has become increasingly difficult for minority students to articulate resistance and fight for their issues without hanging themselves to death.

The “Jai-Bhim Lal-Salaam” coupling seems to embody the meaning that, post this coupling the Left understands the victimhood of the Dalit. However, can

victimhood be simulated? Victimhood emanates not from being stuck at the lowest strata of the Varna system or having lack of socio-economic access – essentially, it is the lack of power.

### **Vemula’s Paradoxical Existence**

As mentioned earlier, Anand in his “opinion” piece in *Outlook* interrogates; “Would any of the self-righteous, concerned voices have bothered about Vemula’s life and travails if he had not died so eloquently?”

Further, Anand lampoons the brahmanical Left and the *savarna* academic space and writes:

“Your ‘eloquence’ has been praised by people who see writing as their calling, their profession. They praise your short sentences, your use of active voice. Never mind, some of them sound casually and habitually incredulous and patronising. After all, they are dealing with a Dalit, the son of single mother, who, after a Masters in Life Sciences, discovered Ambedkar and enrolled for a PhD in Science, Technology and Society Studies on ‘merit’, without availing quota.”

Perhaps, and ironically, the only reason Vemula’s death is etched in the political memory of India is because he died eloquently. Perhaps, his death became an “event” in the political history of India, only because he was both a Dalit and a non-Dalit. That is to say that while he was a Dalit by identity, with his grasp over the language, he could muster a certain sense of brahmanical eloquence. In his prowess on language, he was a symbol of intellectual Brahmanism. He became an attractive figure for us and for the political imagination of the nation because his death was laced with rhetorical brilliance.

Hence, the mix of Dalit by identity and Brahmanical by intellect, is where the paradoxical charm of Vemula lies. This is exactly why his charm clung so well; as it hit the inherently brahmanical political imagination of India. It was very easy for the brahmanical power structures in India to relate to him, because he could speak his death well, with near-brahmanical precision and persuasion.

Therefore, the coming together of “Jai-Bhim Lal-Salaam” could be looked at precisely as this strange paradoxical mix between the brahmanical-left and the Ambedkarite-Dalit political imagination. Vemula embodies this paradoxical coming together of Brahmanical intelligence and the Dalit body. He says in his suicide letter as well, where he pitches the right to intellectual flamboyance against the accident of a body and identity:

“My birth was a fatal accident. I can never recover from my childhood loneliness. The unappreciated child from my past.”

Yet, “If there is anything at all I believe, I believe that I can travel to the stars. And know about the other worlds.” Vemula becomes that strange paradoxical convergence between the accident of being a Dalit and the adventure of becoming a Brahmin. That strange moment of a conflict and paradox; what he is born as and what he wants to become: between Being Dalit and becoming Brahmin.

Vemula, in his suicide letter wrote, “It was always with myself I had problems. I feel a growing gap between my soul and my body.” This gap between his soul and body is an important one which suggests the paradox of his existence, as a Dalit in life and a non-Dalit in his death.

### **Left is Not Untouched**

So it seems like when Vemula spoke with brahmanical eloquence, the Left did usurp him (but only because he could speak the brahmanical language with eloquence). The usurping by the Left happens due to the belief that Vemula (in his death), had risen to the heights of brahmanical intelligence. If his language did not appeal to the intelligence or intellect of the brahmanical Left, he would not have been usurped. He would have been considered far inferior, a far less political moment to piggy-back on. This is where the arrogance of the political Left lies. However, the moment of Vemula’s death makes the Left rethink and even compromise this arrogance by clinging onto a Dalit body as the symptom of its own politics. Vemula has forced the contemporary political Left to reimagine and rethink its ideology. In doing so, the Left has had to give up the language of privilege because there is an “attempt” to identify with a disprivileged body. Moreover, this disprivileged body has become a Left political mascot. While Vemula has been usurped by the Left, Vemula has forced the Left to contemplate and look beyond the Dalit body we imaginatively make contact with. So as much as Rohith has been usurped, Rohith has also usurped the Brahmanical language.

Historically, the Left has been in a position of power to usurp the other, and yet this time, the Left position has been touched. The other (Vemula) has become the symptom of the brahmanical Left self, hence the brahmanical Left self is not unadulterated anymore. If Vemula has become brahmanised, then the Left has been touched by the untouchable too. Hence, the Left has been brought out of its pedestal and its preferred isolation.

### **A provocative way forward**

The provocation is, perhaps, we could look at “Jai-Bhim Lal-Salaam” coupling as the Left and Dalit politics coming together, where neither the Left woos the Dalit political imagination, nor is the Dalit forced to forge an alliance with the Left. Rather, we can see the political imagination of student struggles coming together, culminating in a strange political paradox, which is perhaps the only future of student political struggles at this moment.

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As pointed out earlier, rhetorically speaking as well as historically speaking, this is a paradoxical coupling. However, this paradox is where possibilities lie. This paradox is where the future of student politics and political imaginations lie. This future of the political imagination lies not only in the form of a rhetoric coupling in the coming together of “Jai-Bhim” and “Lal-Salaam”; rather, the future of the political imagination lies in what Vemula embodied, the paradox.

With a degree of speculative conviction, this paper asserts that an important reason for the “event” of Vemula’s suicide to gain national attention was his suicide letter, where he confiscated “language” and used it with majestic eloquence to give direction to the politics he believed in. After all, eight Dalit students have committed suicide in UoH alone in the past ten years. Surely, Vemula’s death was not the only “fatal accident.”

With the moment of his death and the articulateness of his suicide note, Vemula has jolted the brahmanical Left of its slumber. It was as if, Vemula had to de-dalitize himself to talk to and address the brahmanical structures of power.

He wrote:

I always wanted to be a writer. A writer of science, like Carl Sagan. At last, this is the only letter I am getting to write. 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 his death Vemula did not die a Dalit death. Vemula had become a symptom of the brahmanical elite and intelligence. He, as I argued above, was at once a Dalit and a non-Dalit. He was both a Brahmin, and a non-Brahmin. This duality of Vemula is perhaps what bewitched the entire nation. This is exactly the kind of event he is talking about in his suicide note where he says that while his birth was an accident, he wanted live a life of adventure. He wanted a life of adventure, despite an accidental birth. Therefore, he speaks the language of adventure which has never been a prerogative of the Dalit body. He wanted to overcome or transcend the accident of his birth by the adventure of reaching the stars, and that is the classical romantic idea of adventure. The daring, courage to dream, is not a Dalit courage. It has historically been the prerogative



of the brahmanical man. Vemula, perhaps, was a very brahmanical Dalit, and hence, he could reach out to the nation and surprise them out of their stupor.

There have been dozens of Dalit suicides in universities and colleges across India in the past ten years. Why then did we need a Rohith for the “Jai-Bhim Lal-Salaam” to happen? It is perhaps due to this paradoxical enigma that was created around him. The way forward is to realise that it is in this paradox that possibility lies.

As mentioned before, Vemula’s identity, even in his death is precisely this paradox we have been talking about. If Vemula could make a paradox of his own life and death into a productive rethinking of politics, if Vemula could translate through his death a fundamental paradox into a possible political imagination, then why can’t we translate this possible political imagination into the paradoxical and the productive political imagination? It is in this paradoxical coupling that the future of the country lies, and for that to happen, one must first understand this moment of paradox.

This implies a space where Marxist politics and Ambedkarite politics have to come and work together, fully cognizant of the paradox. So the alliance cannot be a category where one usurps the other; it has to be a new politics that thrives on mutual respect.



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**BIO-NOTE**

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