

## Symbolic Injury as a Site of Protest

The case of the offending cartoon

SHEBA TEJANI

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Sheba Tejani ([shebatejani@gmail.com](mailto:shebatejani@gmail.com)) works with the International Labour Organisation, Geneva, Switzerland.

As the protests over the cartoon controversy suggests, symbolic injuries have increasingly become the site for articulation of subaltern political claims because they carry less political risk and offer the prospect of a quick but less than meaningful “justice.” At the same time they give the political establishment a relatively easy way to mollify and subvert those very claims.

The recent controversy surrounding a cartoon in a Class XI National Council of Education Research and Training (NCERT) political science textbook has raised a raft of issues that have been debated vigorously in the press, on the internet and in the pages of the *EPW*. The textbook reproduces Shankar Pillai’s 1949 cartoon depicting prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru wielding a whip on B.R. Ambedkar, who is also wielding one and is perched on the snail of the Constituent Assembly. The issues that have been raised include Parliament’s stand and role in the affair; whether pedagogy is better left to academics or members of the “political class”; the wider context of educational reform within which the textbook was produced by the NCERT; the place of political satire in a democracy; and the implied inherent “emotionality” of dalits and how this translates into a denial of their political claims. Nevertheless, one salient question that perhaps underlies all these is why protests have erupted over the question of an offensive cartoon when many other egregious crimes against dalits slip past without much notice. One can simply attribute the affair to the cynical machinations of political parties like the Bahujan Samaj party (BSP) and Republican Party of India (RPI)<sup>1</sup> but that does not explain why this particular issue was raised rather than another and why subsequently such a heated national debate has ensued.

### Symbolic Injury

Anand Teltumbde’s June 2, 2012 article “Bathani Tola and the Cartoon Controversy” articulates this question in concrete terms by asking why the recent acquittal of all the accused in the killing of 21 dalits in Bathani Tola in 1996 by the Patna High Court did not elicit a response from dalit leaders while the issue of the offending cartoon threatened to shut down parliament. His answer to this question is that proliferation of the “politics of

empty symbolism," foregrounds emotional issues while giving short shrift to real material injury such as continuing atrocities against dalits. In fact, Teltumbde's answer does not get to the heart of the matter for it leaves unanswered the larger question of why such a politics comes into being. Or, more specifically, why protests by dalits, or for that matter other subaltern groups, seem to coalesce around issues of symbolic injury to a greater extent than instances of violence or discrimination that constitute grave violations of human rights or even a threat to life itself. I argue here that in fact the two are intimately connected and that symbolic injury, rather than being a discrete or separate instance of "taking offence" represents a fissure or moment in which deep political discontent is expressed. Further, not only have instances of symbolic injury become more available as a site and idiom of protest in a globalised world, they are also increasingly recognised and validated as such.

In this respect, the present controversy bears a distinct parallel with the offending cartoon in a Danish newspaper that sparked vigorous protests in a wide swathe of countries in 2005-06. Here too objections have arisen in response to an image, a visual representation that communicates in abstract terms and simultaneously calls forth subjective interpretations. Some dalit activists have commented on the symbolic currency of the whip as an instrument to subjugate slaves, women and dalits historically.<sup>2</sup> Others have remarked on the whip as a symbol of the abuse, prejudice and exclusion dalit pupils face in educational institutions and that serve to maintain caste hegemony in the classrooms.<sup>3</sup> Still, as Aditya Nigam has pointed out on *Kafila*,<sup>4</sup> it is noteworthy that the second whip wielded by Ambedkar himself on the "snail" of the Constituent Assembly that places him in a position of relative power and authority goes unnoticed and un-remarked upon. But this points to the inherent slippages involved in the act of interpreting images; the question is not about which interpretation is "right" or "wrong," but rather that the subjective act of interpretation is inextricably wound up with a long-standing history of political grievances. In this case, the image becomes interpreted by dalit groups as humiliating for it re-enacts the very moment of the subjugation of the dalit self through violent means although the context and purpose of the cartoon, pedagogical in this case, was different. Of course, this also makes the use of symbols particularly potent as tools of manipulation.<sup>5</sup>

## **Protests over Symbolism**

But why do symbolic injuries seem to inspire more fervent and even frequent protest? One, because such injury always involves an entirely subjective and personal interpretation of the symbol in question, the legitimacy of the hurt, grievance, humiliation or anger cannot be disputed beyond a point. It does not demand that one get into the "facts" of the case as it were, or undertake an exercise in argumentation and persuasion because the matter is personal. The object simply offends (or not) and there is nothing more to be said about it. There have, of course, been vigorous debates about the extent to which offending material should be allowed to constitute a limitation on the freedom of expression, though this does

not interfere with the claim that the material still offended somehow. More importantly, symbolic injury does not involve establishing the veracity of a claim that discrimination or injustice occurred on political, social or legal grounds, a considerably more thorny and risky enterprise that carries with it the possibility of confronting real powerlessness, failure or setback, particularly for marginal groups. Symbolic injuries thus allow the group in question to make a political claim or express a political grievance through a less fraught and hazardous route. "Justice" too then can come more easily.

Two, redressing symbolic grievances does not demand much from those in power other than accepting that the material was offensive and removing, banning or retracting it. It does not demand the taking of real political risks, or setting in motion processes that would deliver real justice or address the underlying causes of marginality of the group in question. Thus claiming grounds for insult and injury not only acts as a vent for particular groups to discharge political grievances but also offers the state a relatively easy political route to pay obeisance to marginal groups and their sensitivities. In fact, India has a long history of the secular state mollifying subaltern groups by being sensitive to their sensitivities while doing scarce little to deliver justice.

Even more than the present incident, the violent protests that erupted in different parts of Maharashtra in 2006 over the desecration of Ambedkar's statue in Kanpur suggest that the incident became the site for the expression of anger over the brutal killings in Khairlanji of four members of a dalit family a few months earlier and the pervasive casteism that hampered subsequent investigation and prosecution.<sup>6</sup> Although the killings themselves led to some demonstrations, the scale, violence and impact of the protests against the desecration was far greater. Similarly, it begs explanation as to why Taslima Nasreen's ostensibly "anti-Islamic" writings incited violent protests by Muslims in West Bengal, leading to her eventual exile from the state, but the killings of thousands of Muslims in Gujarat in 2002 and the lack of justice a decade on does not witness a mass uprising.

## **Indian State's Response**

Three, the Indian state has shown itself to be particularly vulnerable to sensitivities of all kinds. Even the murmur of an insult is enough to throw the state into a tizzy as it goes to lengths to demonstrate its secular or anti-caste character and makes use of the presenting political opportunity. The Indian government was one of the first in the world to ban the *Satanic Verses* and was complicit once again as Salman Rushdie was forced to withdraw from the Jaipur Literary Festival earlier this year due to threats from the Darul Uloom

Deoband that "appropriate action"<sup>7</sup> would be taken if he was allowed into the country. The Shahbano case has gone down in history as an instance in which the Congress government overturned one of the most progressive rulings for Indian Muslim women delivered by the Supreme Court that entitled them to maintenance under secular law because it hurt Muslim religious sentiments. Offense caused to Hindu religious sentiments was the ostensible

reason for the wholesale revision of NCERT school textbooks under the rule of the Bharatiya Janata Party led National Democratic Alliance from 1999 to 2004 and the impetus to make education “value-based” and “India-centric.” Even the sentiments of the armed forces have been taken into consideration. When the justice Rajindra Sachar Committee—charged with preparing a report on the socio-economic status of Muslims in the country—requested information on the religious composition of the armed forces in 2006, it created such an uproar that the government finally withdrew the request. Such information it was deemed would destroy the “secular” and “apolitical” character of the forces even when there was no evidence to suggest they were either.<sup>8</sup> In the end, three major government services, the army, air force and navy were left out of the purview of the survey, implying that they were free of discrimination on religious grounds apriori!

Four, symbolic injury has become more available as an idiom and site of protest globally. Not only are instances in which some group claims it has been wronged by an offensive image, lyric, text or piece of art on the rise, they are also quickly and regularly amplified in the headlines as religious (or other) eruptions, thus providing a living template for political articulation globally. From the widespread demonstrations against cartoons of prophet Mohammed in the Danish daily mentioned earlier; to the prolonged debate and protests in France over the banning of the headscarf in schools; to protests against a Lady Gaga concert in Manila because her music ostensibly distorted views about Christ; the firebombing of churches in Malaysia when Catholic newspapers were allowed to use the world Allah for God; and more recently riots in Tunis over an objectionable art exhibition that supposedly insulted Islam; the list goes on and on. Some of these incidents can be interpreted as a sign of rising intolerance in the world, which they certainly are, though we would be missing an important piece of the picture if we did not look for the political aspects of the crisis in each case. This is not always an easy task but it is important to go beyond surface claims in order to make sense of the political dynamics of symbolic injury and produce a more nuanced analysis of them.

This article has argued that symbolic injuries have increasingly become the site for articulation of subaltern political claims because they carry less political risk and offer the prospect of a quick but less than meaningful “justice.” At the same time they give the political establishment a relatively easy way to mollify and subvert those very claims. Globally too, protests over symbolic injuries appear to be on the rise and offer a ready-made template to express political discontent.

<sup>1</sup> The issue was raised in parliament by Thol Thirumavalavan of the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal, a regional Tamil Nadu based party though members of the BSP, All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam and Rashtriya Janata Dal soon jumped into the fray. See “Ambedkar cartoon: MPs not amused, stall Parliament,” *Hindustan Times*, May 11, 2012 and “Ruckus over cartoon issue disrupts Parliament,” *Economic Times*, May 12, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> See “Whipping up ‘critical pedagogy: Uncritical defense of NCERT’s violence,” on dalitweb.org. <http://www.dalitweb.org/?p=612>

<sup>3</sup> See “Ambedkar’s Cartoon and Caste Question: Rajkumar,” by Rajkumar, May 31, 2012 on kafila.org. <http://kafila.org/2012/05/31/ambedkars-cartoon-and-the-caste-question-ra...>

<sup>4</sup> See “Red Herrings, Red Rags and Red Flags- Once more on the cartoon controversy,” by Aditya Nigam, May 23, 2012 on kafila.org. <http://kafila.org/2012/05/23/red-herrings-red-rags-and-red-flags-once-mo...>

<sup>5</sup> It is not the intention of this author to argue that it is simply political marginality that is being expressed in protests over symbolic issues; but rather that symbolic injury is a political terrain on which different groups struggle for power and recognition. In the case of the Hindu right-wing, which has perhaps perfected the art of raising hackles over injury to its icons, ideology and language, the political “discontent” being expressed is not marginalisation but rather *not enough* social, political or economic dominance. It is important to make this distinction because the historical context from which the claims of marginal groups and already dominant groups spring and their political quests are substantially different.

<sup>6</sup> Other commentators also remarked on this. See “Khairlanji to Kanpur,” Indian Express, December 2, 2006. <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/khairlanji-to-kanpur/17707/0> accessed on June 6, 2012. See also Kalpana Sharma, “Why are Maharashtra’s Dalits so Angry?” The Hindu, December 2, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> “Salman Rushdie trip in doubt after India protest,” BBC, 17 January 2012. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-16588835> accessed on June 6, 2012.

<sup>8</sup> See “No religious headcount in Armed Forces, says Antony,” The Economic Times, May 12, 2007. [http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2007-05-17/news/28443792\\_1\\_...](http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2007-05-17/news/28443792_1_...)