

Political Production of Shock Absorbers

The failure to engage with a legitimate critique places limits on the assertion of the freedom of expression.

The inability of the organisers of the Akhil Bharatiya Marathi Sahitya Sammelan—the literary meet scheduled on 11 January in Yavatmal, Maharashtra—to defend their own decision to invite Nayantara Sahgal for inaugurating their 92nd annual meet has been widely condemned and criticised by many, literary personalities prominent among them. However, such a decision—which is deeply disturbing not just for Sahgal, but for all those who have a stake in democratic values such as freedom of expression—gives rise to three questions. First, the decision to withdraw the invitation certainly involves the loss of self-respect, but is this a loss for the invitee or the host? Second, what implication does this kind of about-turn have for the moral calibre of those who are directly or indirectly responsible for such a decision? Finally, would such a decision succeed in diminishing the essence of self-respect of the defenders of democratic values, such as the freedom of expression of thought?

The resignation of the secretary of the Akhil Bharatiya Marathi Sahitya Mahamandal (the organiser) goes to prove that he has been humiliated or his self-respect has been diminished. The question that one has to raise is: Why should anyone, including the secretary in question, participate in one's own humiliation? Much more importantly, why should the ruling political power force anyone into an experience of humiliation? In response to the last question, it could be argued that some members from the organising committee of the meet tend to offer themselves to play the role of shock absorbers, as it works towards the realisation of their political as well as professional ambitions and aspirations. It is due to this compulsion of ambition that the organisers prepared themselves to absorb the shock of scathing public criticism that resulted from the unilateral decision to withdraw the invitation. In addition to this, the organisers also absorbed the pressure from the ruling power in the state.

The Maharashtra chief minister and education minister have sought to dissociate themselves from the decision of the organising committee. It is quite possible that the government may not have any actual role in the decision to cancel the inaugural speech. But, one cannot ignore the fact that the government stands to benefit from the consequences of such a decision.

The state government cannot escape the responsibility of having pushed the organisers into a state of humiliation. In

view of the fury of robust criticism mounted by the leading members of the Marathi literary community, the members of the ruling coalition in Maharashtra sought to hide their own embarrassment behind these shock absorbers. The political production of shock absorbers is the result of the lack of moral will to create space for the discussion of democratic values within the party and the government.

Obviously, Sahgal's speech was speaking truth to power, and it seems that the defenders of the ruling combine, both at the centre as well as in Maharashtra, showed their inability and unwillingness to listen to a legitimate critique of power. In stark contrast to this, one may recall how Durga Bhagwat had condemned the imposition of Emergency in her address at the 51st edition of the literary meet held in Karad in 1975, with the then Union Minister Y B Chavan in attendance. The inability of the governing class to participate has to be understood in terms of their lack of interest to discuss issues that are normatively charged. For example, the members of this class often focus their attention on pure strategy of how to capture power. But, they seldom make efforts through which normative ends such as equality, justice and dignity can become an integral part of the discussion. Such discussions are important for self-clarification or clearing self-doubt. If one is not interested in discussions with others, then one could at least discuss them in-house. We have no idea whether members of the ruling party in governmental forums or at party meetings give credence to discussions on human values and universal principles, or whether they spend their time and effort on strategies to gain and control power. Serious discussions, both at the level of the party and the government, get continuously deferred. Thus, such a dual suspension makes ideological prejudice the only plank that is used to defend their position in the event of it being challenged, as was done by B R Ambedkar in his undelivered inaugural address for the Annual Conference of the Jat-Pat-Todak Mandal of Lahore in 1936, and now by Sahgal in 2019.

The growing and widening support of leading literary personalities for Sahgal and their firm rejection of the offer made by the organisers to replace her with leading writers from the Marathi literary field only shows an ascending sense of respect for Sahgal, a crusader for democratic values. And, a descending sense of moral worth for those who are the adversaries of freedom of expression.