

Claiming a History: The 2012 Cartoon Controversy and Public History debates in Contemporary India

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Abstract

This paper looks at the widening split between academic and public histories and their role in shaping contemporary Indian politics. This paper illustrates the axes of this divide through the NCERT textbook controversy (2012) that saw numerous petitions and lawsuits filed against reputed academic historians in India for their ‘unflattering’ portrayal of certain marginalised castes (Dalits), communities and organisations in school history textbooks. This paper discusses the politics of their production and takes into account the claims and contestations that surround them. It goes on to argue why the pedagogies that inform secular history writing in India have fallen short in their understanding of popular historical narratives produced by Dalit communities and how they speak to larger narratives of caste, class and capital.

Keywords: National Council of Education and Research Training, Cartoon Controversy, Dalit Identity Politics, Critical Pedagogy, Caste

Deconstructing a cartoon

In 2005, after the secular nationalist Congress party came to power in India in 2004, the National Council of Education and Research Training (NCERT), the national body that is tasked with framing school curriculum and producing textbooks, instituted the National Curriculum

Framework (NCF). The NCF was a massive bibliographic enterprise that marked several important departures from earlier postcolonial exercises in writing textbooks for Indian schoolchildren. It attempted to undo the distortions and rewritings of the immediately preceding government in power, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), ideologically affiliated to the Hindu Right. It also focused on fostering “critical pedagogies” of teaching rather than foisting cultural and political ideologies on schoolchildren. Knowledge, the NCF emphasised, was to be conceived not as “finished products” to be transferred to schoolchildren but built upon the experiences of the teacher and the taught (National Curriculum Framework 2005, p 25). The new social science textbooks posed history, along with other disciplines such as political science and sociology, as open-ended projects, emphasising a plurality of narratives that sharply interrogated presumptions of homogeneity. Professionally established academics were engaged as authors, discussants and vetters of these paradigm-shifting textbooks. Cartoons were introduced as a central pedagogic tool in many of the social science textbooks. The new centrally-produced textbooks and these methods of production became a new grand standard for state-level educational boards to aspire to and emulate (*Aarti Dhar*, 20 May 2012).



Figure 1: Constitution. Cartoonist K. Shankar Pillai drew this illustration in 1949, when B.R. Ambedkar was the Law Minister and Chairman of the Constituent Assembly.

It was not until 2012 that a furore erupted on a national scale. At the heart of the debate was a cartoon that portrayed B.R. Ambedkar, the iconic leader of the Dalit (ex-Untouchable castes) movement and Chairman of the Constituent Assembly in independent India, being whipped by Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, for the slow progress in drafting the new Constitution. The cartoon itself was published in 1949 and had raised no outcry then, with both individuals still alive. Its inclusion in the new textbooks in a chapter on the making of the Indian Constitution and the subsequent outrage by members of Dalit communities, almost after 70 years of the cartoon's publication, seemed ironic and unreal to most in the academic public sphere. The controversy exposed the massive divide between the Dalit intelligentsia who wanted the cartoon to be removed from the textbook and the left/liberal, secularist and feminist scholarship that rallied behind the authors, not only in India but also Indian scholars located in elite western universities. I understand the serious critical sleight performed in clumping distinct, if not disparate categories

such as left, liberal, secularist and feminist together but the cartoon controversy saw precisely a convergence of sorts between these groups. The point is not to collapse these categories of scholarship nor its scholars as a monolithic unit but rather to show how the cartoon controversy throws light on the pedagogical hierarchies created, informed and sustained by such a nexus. Scholars from the Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi, whose faculty was heavily involved in the writing of these new textbooks, readily came to defend these cartoons along with their supporters. An early statement, somewhat grandly titled “In Defence of Critical Pedagogy”, was issued by prominent JNU historians Neeladri Bhattacharya (also the Chief Advisor for the NCERT History textbooks), Janaki Nair, and Kumkum Roy (both pioneering feminist historians), among others. Defending the cartoons in question, the authors argued:

India has a long creative tradition of satire and irony. The productive power of laughter has been used not only in movements for social justice, but in children’s literature as well. If we celebrate this tradition, we celebrate democracy. Only in non-democratic countries is there a fear of cartoons (“In Defence of Critical Pedagogy”, 2011).

The statement exemplifies this kind of convergences – critical pedagogues, feminists, leftists, secularists who came together in defence of the cartoon’s use in textbooks and happened to be, incidentally, mainly savarna or upper caste. Nivedita Menon, another celebrated and radical feminist voice, noted with unhappy concern that Dalit intellectuals had unwittingly played into the “political strategy of stifling democratic critique of the political classes” (Ajay Skaria, “Violence and laughter: The Ambedkar cartoon controversy”, 30 May, 2012). K Satyanarayana, a Dalit scholar and academic based in Hyderabad, comments on this extraordinary coming together of the left-liberal academic community:

In fact after Mandal¹, I think this is the first time that left-liberals and Gandhians and Marxists to other ML [Marxist-Leninist] groups came together unanimously in response

¹ The Mandal Commission was set up in 1979, chaired by B.P. Mandal, to identify backward communities. Its recommendations to create a 27% quota for a new category of ‘Other Backward Classes’ created a massive outrage among ‘general category’ students who were not part of the affirmative action instituted under this provision.

to dalit protests to say that these textbooks are good and revolutionary and there is nothing wrong in them (Satyanarayana, “Ambedkar Cartoon, Dalit Objections and Indian Left Liberals – I”, 03 June 2012).

Within a week, it received more than a thousand signatures and major statements of support from scholarly communities mobilised not only from elite academic institutions in India but also abroad. The easy equation of celebrating satirical humour as celebrating democracy romanticises the cartoon as a critical tool, as if it is a text which exists beyond the social structures and asymmetries that produce it. That any kind of laughter could also be structured innately by the caste hierarchies that create objects and subjects of laughter is completely missed in the whole statement, and Dalit insensitivity is implicitly posited as a sign of immaturity of its politics.

The cartoon controversy also opened a barrage of complaints, mostly from ex-marginalised communities who considered portrayals of their victimisation as an emasculating exercise that went counter to their own attempts at upward mobility. Janaki Nair, historian and an author of the NCERT Textbook Committee, argued that the ability of historians to claim any kind of academic authority seemed seriously tested:

Recent protests against the protocols of academic history have shown only the most cavalier respect for such claims to authority. In fact, ‘unreason’ could become the starting point for a new kind of historical claim, especially among peoples such as Dalits (the name taken by people from hitherto ‘untouchable’ castes) who are increasingly making a claim to their histories based on oral and performative traditions, rather than searching for non-existent archival sources. (Nair, 01 October 2016)

Community assertions such as this went directly against the enlightenment assumptions of history as a discipline: of scripting a story of rationality, progress and the spread of secular, liberal knowledge in homogenous empty time.

In sharp contrast to the non-identitarian secular-speak of India's elite public sphere, Dalit discourses explicitly invoked identity politics to mobilise their claims and enter history by rewriting existing narratives. How did Dalit discourses reach such an impasse in postcolonial practices of secular history writing? From its anti-colonial context where Indian nationalism was shaped, forged and pitted against the British empire, articulations of narrow community interest were generally perceived as playing into strategies of imperial consolidation by the largely liberal nationalist vanguard. Community interests were actively tamed and disciplined, even subverted by the rhetoric of a greater nation that was always more than the sum of its parts. This anti-colonial nationalism, particularly of the kind espoused by the Indian National Congress, whose leaders generally came from an upper caste/class social background, defined and dominated the trajectories of nationalist discourse. Ambedkar was the first nationally acclaimed leader to come from outside this rank and file of majoritarian Congress nationalism.

The emphasis on an essential unity of the subcontinent fermenting through ages and centuries was a powerful nationalist invocation deployed recurrently in anticolonial politics. All struggles, movements and conflicts that involved tribes, castes, women, labour or religions and other community interests were subsumed within an ever-expansive nationalist movement. The autonomy of these struggles, the nationalist movement and its leaders repeatedly insisted, could be deferred to a future postcolonial moment; its time to be assertive was not now. In 1947, the creation of an Islamic state of Pakistan, the murder of Gandhi by a Hindu activist and the bloody legacy of partition proved repeatedly that nationalist myths of unity are often fallacies and fantasies. Yet, for the Congress leadership, now headed by Jawaharlal Nehru, these events were proof of the horrors that identity movements perpetuated, rather than major blowbacks to majoritarian politics. The immediate postcolonial decades of 1950s and 60s saw the creation of the National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT) that reflected the postcolonial state's agenda of national integration and secularism (Nair, 2016, p.4). The first history textbooks were written by nationalist historians who sought to write decisive and coherent histories for the nation, celebrating an ethic of 'unity in diversity'. In so doing, they managed to repudiate liberal/imperial notions of colonial history, but also borrowed extensively from an earlier generation of colonial Orientalist scholarship often invested in disciplining forms of power-knowledge, transforming them into received wisdom in the process (Bhattacharya, 2003). This also led to an almost complete cultural

hegemony of the liberal/left intelligentsia over state research bodies. Nehru's death saw the dissipation of the Nehruvian consensus on nationalism in the 1970s. The former approach to history as a public good informed by humanist and liberal values and a welfare state also waned (Chakrabarty, 2008, pp. 6-7). If the 1950s and 1960s were a period of enchantment with nationalism and modernity, the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s saw the dissolution of that enchantment with secular socialist nationalism and the emergence of more cultural nationalist forms that did not hesitate to be exclusivist (Bhattacharya, 2003, pp.5-7). The Cold War and its aftermath had produced a disenchantment with socialist utopias and India was all geared up to embrace the neoliberal world ushered in the 1990s with the New Economic Policy.

Dalit interventions

Thanks to decades of positive discrimination programmes, the emergence of a relatively well-to-do Dalit middle class politically, socially and academically from the 1990s onwards saw a major transformation in the nature of their struggle. From near illiteracy and marginalisation that involved struggles for livelihood and everyday experiences of caste humiliation, it took a distinctive mainstream turn. The rise of a middle-class Dalit-Bahujan discourse saw a massive production of low-caste histories and narratives often at sharp variance with academic historical scholarship.² They proliferate and flourish in the vernacular, with little or no engagement with the existing body of academic historians lodged in influential academic institutions in India and abroad. The claim to victimhood and emasculation is powerful and any attempt at interrogating it could cause sustained public outrage. Dalit senses of pastness, as the cultural anthropologist Badri Narayan explicates, are deployed through oral retellings of popular legends and mythologies to invoke guilt in upper caste audiences (Narayan, 2009, pp. 2-3). Orality converts narratives of suffering into thresholds of empowerment. This has led to significant debates in the Indian academia on the primacy of experience over theory when it comes to claiming authorship on matters relating to caste.³

² Bahujan refers to Other Backward Classes, a term used by the Government of India to refer to socially disadvantaged groups other than ex-untouchable castes.

³ See Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai, *The Cracked Mirror: An Indian Debate on Experience and Theory*, Delhi, 2012.

There is a certain lived experientiality to caste that defies any attempt at describing or defining. There is little written record of the histories of Dalit, tribal and other marginalised communities, whereas upper castes and classes, with their cultural and literary entitlements, provide easy access for historians to study them. These entitlements enable the reproduction of upper caste/class narratives far more readily than their less available and less visible lower caste counterparts. Histories of marginalised communities, however, thrive richly in oral, performative or musical traditions. Given the academic historian's preference for the written archive over other forms, these communities have generally suffered historical absence and inattention. The social locations of academic historians mattered precisely because any upper caste renditions of lower caste histories are seen as de-legitimising and devaluing lived experience. While upper-caste intellectuals have confidently laid claim to a universal language of humanism through specific ideologies, lower-caste intellectuals have generally regarded with suspicion such meta ideologies and universalist politics as new guises for old hegemonies.

To return to the cartoon. When furore broke, almost the whole of the left-liberal academic history establishment rallied behind the authors of these textbooks, citing threat to the much (ab)used but universal rhetoric of our times: the need to protect our "freedom of expression". The protests were, these scholars argued variously in sophisticated universalist languages: un-reasonable, irrational, unsecular and undemocratic forces to critical pedagogies of learning. There was a 'global' outpouring of support for the authors of the textbooks, and Dalit responses were termed variously fanatic, frenzied, and most importantly, identitarian. Responses to the cartoon controversy saw Dalit responses being cast as regressive and against 'freedom of expression', rallied around by largely upper-caste/class intellectuals and their followers all over the country and abroad. They protested and condemned the cartoon and its Dalit interpretation as a symbol of derision. Yet, the government had to give in to the Dalit protests and constituted a commission to review the offending cartoon as well as the others.

Languages of universalism can couch exclusion in extremely insidious ways.⁴ It masquerades as social location, issues of access, audience and privilege in rather benign ways. The ability to speak the 'universal' is often itself an entitlement. They constantly need to be qualified by asking who and what they are for. Given that there are so few Dalits in national iconography, the way Ambedkar is portrayed becomes hugely representative. Texts change meaning over time, and to a newly empowered community of marginalised groups, this representation holds substantive political significance. Ambedkar has been a ubiquitous symbol of Untouchable pride, so much so that he is memorialised in Dalit marriage invitation cards, homes and public installations and this portrayal seemed insensitive to that legacy. The imagery of the whip was seen as a violent disciplining act to those who have a history of being on its receiving end. Dalit intellectuals invoked instances of colonial slavery and their own untouchable pasts to instantiate how cultural memories of their violent and exclusive pasts very instinctively shaped their responses to the cartoon. The cartoon for these groups, manifested a perverse and punitive symbolism, re-enacted by an upper-caste Brahmin man on the giving end and an ex-Untouchable leader on the receiving (Savari, "Whipping up 'critical pedagogy': Uncritical defence of NCERT's violence", 21 May 2012). Support in defence of the cartoon seemed to be an apt reminder of that assertion, this time by a modern, educated and 'critically aware' class of subjects. Before rolling ourselves into the sort of postcolonial debate on whether symbolic violence is real or not, we need to remember that the issue is not merely punitive symbolism but also memories and invocations of physical violence intrinsically attached to it. This violence is not only external but also experienced, as Gopal Guru and Ajay Skaria have aptly observed, in the form of humiliation that cannot be measured but festers as a wound (Skaria, 2012). As Skaria explains, Dalit experience of humiliation is difficult to render or rationalise into the political discourse of oppression and slips through the categories of public reason (Skaria, 2012). It is precisely this pre-political aspect that seems to make Dalit outrage seemingly unreasonable and simplistic.

⁴ Etienne Balibar discusses this in his debate with Alan Badiou, "On Universalism: In Debate With Alain Badiou", <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0607/balibar/en>.

Cartoons, like any other social text, could equally be implicated in the disciplining forms of power-knowledge and hence not necessarily innocent and intelligent expressions of freethought and satire as are often believed. If critical pedagogy be upheld, cartoons, like any other text, need to be deconstructed. The cartoonist Shankar was an upper-caste person – perhaps the punitive symbolism of Nehru whipping Ambedkar escaped him (Skaria, 2012). It's not critical pedagogy that is a problem per se, it is the way it is deployed to resist self-reflexivity when it comes to considering questions of location, access and audience. Critical pedagogy collapses into another false universal, which claims to speak for everybody and therefore, nobody.

If the language of popular Dalit protest remains so insistently 'identitarian', it raises more questions on the trajectory of progressive politics in postcolonial India and the nature of its exclusions. The inability of marginalised communities either to access, use or transcend the specificities of their identities and contexts reflects that they barely have the language or the resources to do so. The globalising tropes of human rights or class struggle have largely been unable to permeate the everyday spaces inhabited by Dalits, in the absence of which identitarian discourses have remained such a popular, even if fraught, mode.⁵

Postscript

As an academic historian, the ethical dilemmas of indulging identity claims while writing histories is understandable. But invisibilising identities, for academic historians not just in India but almost everywhere, is instrumental in producing what Dilip Menon has termed, the 'blindness of insight' (Menon, 2006). Endogamous socialising in academia, has for long produced, and continues to produce among the finest Indian historians, a belief and conviction of the utter casteless-ness of high academia, with its pretensions to merit and English language fluency. The Dalit student, upon being admitted to these elite, generally metropolitan institutional spaces that historians inhabit, is forever looking up to an aspirational universe dominated by upper-caste/class students and faculty,

⁵ This is not to say that Dalit intellectuals have not studied or remained disengaged with movements such as Black Panthers or the anti-Apartheid movement, among others but rather to state the very upper caste/class dominance in forging a global language of oppression.

their social values normalised as normative academic behaviour. The challenge remains for the high academic historian, largely Left/Liberal, among other things, to be engaged sensitively to the cultural worlds inhabited by such students, so that classrooms and seminars could forge new and inclusive ways of intellection.⁶

Given that the Dalit middle class, thanks to decades of positive discrimination, is only now beginning to enjoy the benefits of capital, the Left critique of neoliberalism takes away the very real benefits to which these communities only recently got access. Straddling and struggling with so many subjectivities simultaneously, the enchantments of neoliberalism impart meaning to their desires, demands and anxieties, without taking away their need for a past. The Hindu Right offers these communities an easy path of cultural appropriation to be part of a majoritarian dialectic that could offer social respectability, while also assuring guilt-free access to the enchantments of a neoliberal world. Negotiating a separate Dalit identity has been difficult, convoluted and elusive, and the Left, with its entrenched coterie of class privileged intellectuals, has often underplayed caste struggles in its preference for class. Dalits now seek an active rehabilitation of their pasts and politics in mainstream nationalist narratives, a project which the Hindu Right has been happy to accommodate in exchange for their loyalties to Hindutva. Very systematically, as North Indian electoral politics has witnessed, Dalit-Bahujan and tribal heroes and legends have been co-opted and recast to fit a unified Hindu narrative. Individual caste myths and legends are used to reinforce the contributions of specific Dalit castes while also transcending that specificity to be part of a wider Hindu nation and narration, converting them into potentially valuable foot-soldiers for Hindutva (Narayan, 2009, p.11). Yet, this is not without its difficulties. The diversity and difference of Dalit practices are too inconvenient to be mainstreamed into unifying narratives without practising serious epistemic violence.

⁶ Take for instance the recent deaths of Dalit students Mutthukrishnan (2017) and Rohith Vemula (2016), on elite but no less alienating campuses of the Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi and the University of Hyderabad respectively. See for instance “A violence no autopsy can reveal: the deadly cost of India's campus prejudice”, <https://www.theguardian.com/inequality/2017/jul/02/a-violence-no-autopsy-can-reveal-the-deadly-cost-of-indias-campus-prejudice>, for an understanding of how university and higher education spaces could be places of caste-based ridicule and abuse.

The looking-away from academic approval for these Dalit groups marks a disenchantment with academic history writing, while simultaneously bringing these groups closer to a neoliberal embrace than ever before. In other words, caste or community frameworks are being ruptured in contemporary India, but are also reinvented in different forms. As Dalits are becoming aware of their political significance as marginalised groups, attempts to placate and preserve their identity claims have gone hand-in-hand with their tethering for Hindu Right mobilisations. With the Hindu Right gradually emerging to become a true Right-wing force in South Asia, embracing the logic of capital while also being Hindu, the inclusion of Dalit communities in its fold aids a successful enactment of this move. Dalit insistences on holding on to identitarian narratives suggests how they disrupt homogenising impulses of neoliberal capital through a culturalist idiom, while also contributing to it.

The only way for academic historians to be relevant to the challenges of such popular histories is to reflect and rethink their own locations, positions and the ethical implications of their historical productions. As Partha Chatterjee has so thoughtfully commented, given that popular histories are generally articulated in vernacular mediums, it is time that English- educated bilingual historians in metropolitan universities begin to engage with such narratives in their vernaculars (Chatterjee, 2003). Only with emphases on discontinuities, breaks and ruptures that characterise historical narratives across space and time can academic historians perhaps finally begin to grapple with the writing of public histories. And always in the plural.

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