

Ambedkar, Cartoon and Identity

Ram Puniyani

Parliament was rocked (May 2012) with the discussion on the alleged insult of Dr Baba Saheb Ambedkar in the cartoon in NCERT text book for standard XI. The MHRD Minister immediately declared the withdrawal of the book and asked for review of all books for which a committee has been appointed. This is yet another instance where the intent and meaning of the said cartoon has not only been misrepresented but also the hype has been associated with the alleged insult of Dr Ambedkar. Interestingly this cartoon appears in the book, which is part of a series, brought out by NCERT, which can easily be rated as of being of very high standard, being very lively and incorporating the core issues related to the politics of the country.

The cartoon by one of the foremost Indian cartoonists, Shankar Pillai, shows Dr Ambedkar sitting on a *snail* and prodding it to go faster. Behind the snail Pundit Nehru is standing prodding the *snail* to move faster. The whip in the hands of Nehru, in no way is directed against Ambedkar, but is directed against *snail*. Ambedkar is in command of the *snail*, which is depicted as the process of making of Indian Constitution. The reading of the cartoon, put extremely creatively in the book, is to show the slow pace of the constitution making process. In what way this is against Ambedkar, defies the logic in toto. The dalit leaders who have raised the issue, Ramdas Athawaley, and later supported by Mayawati and others needed to think more on the lines, as to why Constitution making process was at snail's pace rather than picking up a totally misreading of the point and making it an emotional issue.

On the same issue some youth rampaged the office of Prof Suhas Palshikar, who has been the advisor of NCERT committee, which went into the making of this book. What a paradox, the person who drafted a Constitution giving Indians freedom of thought and expression, in his name the same freedom of expression is being throttled. The cartoon was made in late forties, when Ambedkar and Nehru both were very much there, and surely both must have mused at the cartoon and realized their helplessness in pushing the speed of Constitution making rather than penalizing the legendary cartoonist Shankar.

The whole episode raises multiple questions. None of these relates to the plight of dalits and Indian constitution. One recalls that just a decade ago NDA Government led by BJP had undertaken the exercise to 'review' the Constitution on the grounds that it needs to change. That time dalits stood in unison and saw the designs of BJP, the political arm of RSS, to change the secular democratic structure of constitution and to replace it with one based on Hindu holy books as desired by the RSS in its pursuance of its agenda of Hindu Rashtra, was thwarted. A decade later one needs to be more concerned about the threat to the values of Indian Constitution rather than focus on an emotive issue related to the same.

Why was the Constitution making process slow? Is it because Dr Ambedkar wanted it to be slow? Not in the least. It was slow despite the best efforts of Dr Ambedkar and despite full support from Nehru, because the opposition to this process was prevalent all around. RSS chief M S Golwalkar articulated the opposition to this process by saying that they don't need a new Constitution as they already have the glorious constitution in the form of *Manusmriti*. One recalls here that the chief architect of Indian Constitution Dr Ambedkar had burnt *Manusmriti* on the grounds that it has provisions of slavery of Shudras and women. The process of Constitution making was slow because communal orthodox forces were not for the social change which the Constitution envisaged. Those following the values of Ambedkar need to focus more on the fact that the forces which were making the process slow have become stronger today and are posing an obstacle to the issues of social justice even today. Social justice was the major plank for Dr Ambedkar and even while introducing the draft of Constitution in the Constituent assembly he pointed out that with this Constitution India is entering the era of 'One Man One Vote', i.e. political democracy, but the social democracy seems to be still a goal not very easy to achieve.

Times are changing. In the decades of 40s to 70s the social focus was on the social, economic and political issues. From the decade of 1980s the issues related to identity have come to the fore and the freedom of expression is becoming the big victim at the hands of one or the other social groups. The paintings which Husain drew during earlier times were not destroyed at that time but were subjected to attack during these times. The Shankar Cartoon which must have given a food for thought at that time is under attack now. This transition from the focus on social issues to identity issues is a matter of deeper worry. The identity related issues harp on social status quo, while the social issues come up to ensure the social transformation.

Somewhere many dalit leaders, those who should be for social change, have also got influenced by the short cut to power riding on the shoulders of identity issue. Ram Temple was an easy enough path to come to power for BJP. It was a gross abuse of identity issue for games of power. *To use identity built around Dr Ambedkar or anybody else has similar function.* A section of dalit leadership is doing the same in the name of Dr Ambedkar. In the cartoon controversy also, those for social change need to identify as to why the process was going on at snail's pace? What were the forces which were opposed or apathetic to this major process of Constitution making for the nation? But it seems those who are raising the cartoon controversy themselves are rubbing shoulders with forces of status quo. Ramdas Athwalay is now part of coalition which aims for Hindu nation. Mayawati had time and again allied with BJP, had campaigned for Modi in Gujarat elections. K Sudrashan of RSS said (year 2000) that Indian Constitution is based on western values so it should be replaced by the one based on Indian holy books. It is time people need to look at deeper content of issues rather than turning them into emotive ones, they need to strengthen the processes represented by the Constitution rather than misread the cartoon to rouse the emotions.□□□