

NOTE

Freedom in Diversity

Vinay Bhat writes :

The Indian liberals screaming “freedom of speech” have completely lost the plot. This is the most saddening part in the whole Ambedkar cartoon controversy. Of course, a close second is the vandalising of Suhas Palshikar’s residence and, it deserves outright condemnation of the hooliganism exhibited by the RPI activists. For a historically marginalized group, acts such as sticking a cartoon of a Dalit icon being whipped in a textbook are a stark reminder of the immense violence perpetrated on them in the past and present. A reminder of histories being distorted to serve the more privileged group—in this case determined on caste lines. The eventual capitulation of the Government to the protest, and immediate withdrawal of the cartoon was also perhaps an unfortunate result, and the need of the hour was a more reasoned debate.

The argument of breach in freedom of speech is completely flawed. The cartoon remained someone’s opinion when it was portrayed in the realms of a newspaper. When it reaches the realms of a textbook, it translates to a factual illustration. People have now spoken and written ad nauseum of why the cartoon does not accurately depict the circumstances into the delays of framing the constitution. For a nation as diverse and as divided as India, it was no mean feat to have this completed within three years.

On going through the NCERT textbook, it is commendable that the book itself is far improved from the textbooks of the past. It tries to incorporate nuances, and in the case of the cartoon, it goes on to provide additional context. However, is this really the best representation to explain the delays that occurred? Wouldn’t it have been more pertinent to perhaps depict conservative Congress men opposing any reform in the Hindu code, or providing increased rights for women. These are facts the country is adept at burying under the carpet.

Prominent Dalit academic Gopal Guru has noted that while this incident has sparked off varied responses from Dalit circles, the non-Dalit voices have largely remained united in their stand against the opposition to the cartoon. Does this not say something more telling about upper caste biases that exist even within the liberal sphere? Dalits have specially pained memories of these attacks which manifest in different ways. In this case it is a cartoon used to lampoon Ambedkar, which in itself is not an act of malice perhaps. However, the untoward results where images have special connotations causes a *deja vu* of sorts, bringing nightmares of incidents like Ramabai Colony where Dalits were shot down while protesting a desecrated Ambedkar statue.

It may be important to note here, that Yogendra Yadav and Suhas Palshikar have also received support from some circles of the Ambedkar movement for their integrity. However, the more gaping hole in this incident going beyond the honesty of two individuals is the lack of

addressing one's individual biases that exist and are hard to get rid of. Whatever honesty an individual exercises, questioning of one's biases must be an unending tryst, and this is the true test of one's honesty. If there were more Dalits in the NCERT committee, would the same cartoon have been published will now remain an unanswered question. The need of the hour is to debate the lessons learned from the whole incident. Yes, the National Curriculum Forum in India brought far-reaching improvements to the NCERT curriculum. This does not absolve it from further introspection though.

Yogendra Yadav in his defence wrote that, now future academics might self-censor, which is extremely dangerous. True, it is dangerous, but more dangerous is the individual who does not question his or her beliefs. From the perspective of liberals issuing lengthy statements in this instance, it would perhaps behove them to seek diversity in their endorsements as well. □□□