

# Virality in the environment of political cartoons: when history intersects representation

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## Abstract

*The context for the paper is the inclusion of a 64-year old cartoon in the Political Science textbook that caused an uproar in the Indian parliament in 2012. The controversy draws attention to the two-facedness of any political cartoon which is an artistic representation of a historical event. It is, hence, ambivalent by being an expression of artistic freedom as well as a humorous comment on history where the axis of representation intersects the axis of history. The representation of the Dalit icon, Ambedkar, was objectionable to the political party espousing the Dalit cause which, through its leader, Tirumavalavan, raised the issue in parliament. The paper posits that the reaction was an event that was hitherto dormant and that it erupted on account of elements that fed its potential for virality in the environment, thereby, turning it into a fact. To this end, the paper revives interest in the imitation theory of the French sociologist, Gabriel Tarde, who, incidentally, was an intellectual influence on Ambedkar. Moreover, it employs Zeno Vendler's distinction between an "event" and a "fact", the Deleuzian idea of "assemblage," and the idea of "conceptual metaphor" as laid out by Lakoff and Johnson. The paper reads the vicissitudes of the cartoon in order to theorize the elements that cause virality in a communicative environment.*

*Keywords: historical axis, representational axis, metaphor, ambivalence, imitation, event.*

## 1. Introduction

In 2012, the Indian Parliament erupted on the issue of a cartoon (“Ambedkar’s cartoon rocks Parliament Sibal apologizes”, 11 May 2012). Both the Lok Sabha (House of the People) and the Rajya Sabha (Council of States) were adjourned when Tirumavalavan of the VCK raised the red flag against a cartoon by Shankar (originally published in 1948) in the Political Science textbook for Class XI of the NCERT.

Amid uproarious demonstrations, the Union Minister for Human Resources Development (HRD), Kapil Sibal, rose to offer his government’s apologies. He also sought to allay tempers by announcing the immediate withdrawal of the textbook and constituting a Committee led by Thorat<sup>1</sup> with the mandate to examine the controversial cartoon together with others that were likely to fall into such an inflammable category. In all, 22 cartoons were expunged.

It must have been perplexing to Mr. Sibal that a cartoon that had been in the textbook since 2006 as an exercise for critical thinking should explode after six years. Even more baffling is the fact that the cartoon that had remained recognizably humorous for almost 60 years is suddenly in the eye of a political storm.



Figure 1. Cartoon by Shankar.

## 2. The implications

What the cartoon controversy foregrounds is the unbridled volatility at the “mutual embeddedness of art and history” (Gallagher and Greenblatt 2000: 7). The point of intersection brings forces that are constituted in diametrically opposed ways that the cartoon becomes the site of critical engagement. While the spatiotemporal aspects of history unfold as events that engender facts, the cartoonist works in a spatiotemporal frame over which he possesses greater control.

The representational dynamics which compel the cartoonist to choose his signifying elements carefully also drive his power to choose such elements as would satisfy his/her need

<sup>1</sup> Following the controversy, a committee was appointed under Professor Sukhadeo Thorat to scrutinise the cartoons which appeared in the NCERT textbooks. S. Thorat is Professor Emeritus in the Centre for Study of Regional Development, Jawaharlal Nehru University.

to manifest the unfolding “banal” (Arendt 1963: 134) as an opinion or a reaction or a critique or an interrogation of history. At the point where history intersects art, the cartoonist exercises his power to choose for the society at large. Sometimes, as in the Ambedkar cartoon, society questions that very choice of the signifying elements.

“Politics involves questioning how identities are produced and taken up through practice of representation” (Grossberg 1996: 90) – as it is motivated by embedded interests that choose to interpret the cartoon beyond its historical and representational frames. There is a disaffection, in such situations, with the manner in which the historical is constituted and, hence, a concomitant discontent with the representation. So, reading it as a political act (Wiedmer 2010: 1), must deconstruct the historical and representational aspects in order to open a discursive space that explains how, apparently, docile and dormant sites gather criticality for hostile reactions even amounting to violence.

Travelling along the historical axis, one admits that events have a ‘then-meaning’ and a ‘now-meaning’. Similarly, travelling along the representational axis, one admits that metaphors with an inherent ambivalence are bound to proliferate unpredictable reactions. However, the point of intersection where the historical event of the drafting of the Indian Constitution is cut by the representational act of a cartoon by Shankar is a “discursive field” (Foucault 2012: 28). It is a location involving specificities of representation and an environment of history in which the referentiality provided by location assumes emotive and affective overtones.

### **3. The historical axis**

The historical aspects of the cartoon would include its ‘pastness of the past’ (Eliot 1972: 72); the “eternal recurrence” (Nietzsche 2006: 177) of an event that presents itself in another time causing it to become a different fact; the act of reading it as a “gestalt” (Smith 1988: 11) which keeps one historical fact in blindness (Man 1971: 73) while assembling another and the thrust of identity politics which sustains the gestalt.

The representation of the protagonists of the constitution drafting saga lends itself to Nietzsche’s theory of eternal recurrence. There are finite elements or patterns which reappear that can be read/misread as manifesting otherwise hidden or subliminal attitudes and practices.

In the cartoon, Nehru is poised to whip the snail on which Ambedkar is seated. The visible and direct images of Nehru (standing) and Ambedkar (squatting on the snail) in full public view (the people as onlookers in the background) cause the recursion of images of slaves, convicts, felons, blasphemers, witches, who were, thus, flogged in public. The raised whip which may come down on Ambedkar too is not far from suggesting the intent to humiliate the Chairman of the Drafting Committee.

It could always be argued that it was never Nehru’s intention to whip Ambedkar as the history of the time will corroborate. So long as the master-slave paradigm recurs, the suggestion of the underdog (Ambedkar) will constantly hover over the cartoon’s field of signification, even perpetuating the caste stereotypes: Ambedkar, more educated is still a slave who must heed the crack of the whip while Nehru, the upper caste, can wield his standing authority.

In 1948, the cartoon was Shankar’s humorous take on the ponderous pace of the drafting of the constitution. The helplessness of Dr. Ambedkar and the frustration of Nehru are stroked into a spectacle of history with an amused crowd in the background. Even in 2006, the textbook committee selected the cartoon as a student-activity in critical thinking. However, that purpose and situation changed in 2012.

When the HRD minister rose in parliament to apologize on behalf of his government, he was, by that gesture, overruling the cartoonist's freedom of speech (manifested as humour) in order to uphold the Dalit's freedom of speech (manifested as anger). He did not want to be responsible for the cartoon's circulation for fear that his government would be culpable of complicity in the 'alleged' attempt to denigrate Ambedkar. He also feared the possible interpretation of caste discrimination receiving official recognition.

Just as the act of apologizing brings the cartoon right into the center of a historical controversy, the act of reading compelled by the cartoon is a way of bringing meaning to light; to register that meaning and, also, to perpetuate that meaning. The people in the background can be read as microcosmically representing the country. But with the outcry of the Dalit community one would also be persuaded to regard, in 2012, 'the people' of the cartoon as the oppressed castes. Shankar's suggestion of a united country in 1948 does not acknowledge the caste fissures which, the Dalit community felt, most definitely existed. By selecting the cartoon for the textbook, the government was belittling Ambedkar, which symbolically suggests an affront to the community.

A society that likes to see itself as traditional adopts a conservative approach to the past. Historical figures are treated with reverence. So, a cartoon in the classroom is read for what it explicitly states: a humorous comment on the birth pains of nation-builders. It is also read for what it implies: Nehru whipping the well-educated Ambedkar, thus putting to strain the cartoon's metaphorical expanse. It also exposes the metaphor's subversive potential by locating Nehru and Ambedkar on two different levels that bring into play competing claims as to who is the greater architect of the nation: its first Prime Minister or the Chairman of its Constitution Drafting Committee. The Dalit camp took exception to the subversive suggestion that in spite of his phenomenal educational accomplishments, which Shankar suggests by drawing Ambedkar in a three-piece suit, his location (sitting) on the snail reinforces the traditional stigma attached to the Dalits as subordinate to the upper castes. Shankar could not escape the accusation of insinuating an implicit hierarchy between Nehru and Ambedkar ("Indian Parliament row over Dalit icon Ambedkar cartoon", 11 May 2012). The fact that both protagonists look somber, lends credence to the supposition that Nehru is seriously intending to whip Ambedkar. The fact that Shankar is not a Dalit only fuels anger at his ridicule of a Dalit.

Yet another indictment, and a damning one at that, is the cartoon's judgment about a project steered by a Dalit as being as uninspiring as a snail; no amount of flogging by Nehru can redeem the situation. Such a reading is not completely far-fetched when one notices that there are two whips: the smaller one in the hand of Ambedkar to drive the snail and the bigger one in Nehru's hand, ostensibly, to drive both Ambedkar and the snail. In the final analysis, the man with the bigger whip stands as the taller helmsman of both the nation and its Constitution.

One way of redeeming the situation is by expanding the concept the way cartoonist Makarand Sathe does by redrawing the cartoon in three panels with Ambedkar and Nehru as colleagues in the enterprise of nation building. Had Shankar the inkling of a "violent reaction" (Ricoeur 1998: 33) he could have, as an alternative, drawn two Nehrus: one on either side of Ambedkar – the first one, as driver and the second one as collaborator. Shankar also did not see the reader or the people (in the cartoon) as detached onlookers.

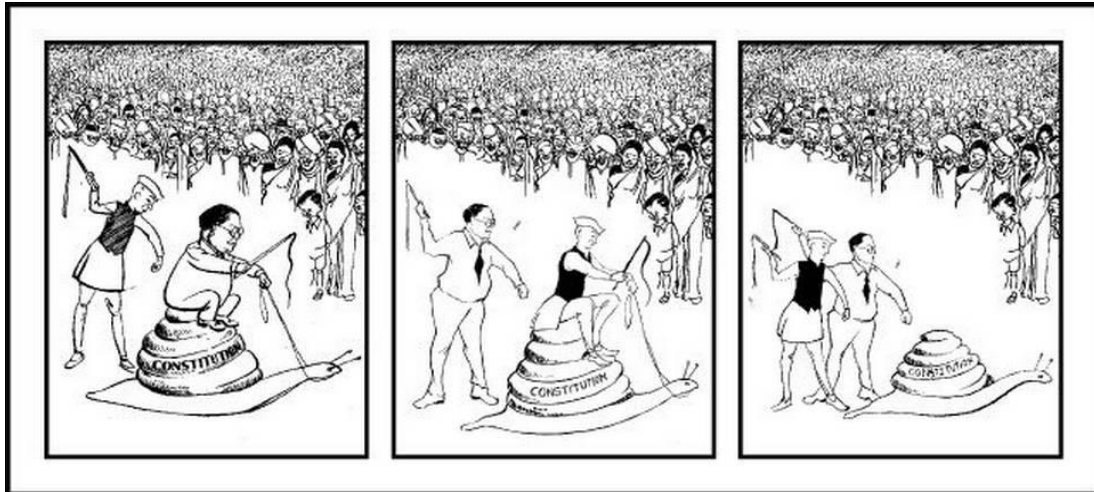


Figure 2. Cartoon by Makarand Sathe.

The reader of the cartoon is in an ambivalent position: of the onlooker-in-the-crowd within and of the viewer of the cartoon without its frame. The two positions also create two kinds of authorship if one treats the act of reading as vicarious authoring. In such a light, there are two reader-authorships that one can infer from the two periods (1948 and 2012). The reader of Shankar's portrayal in 1948 is as much a participant in the history of 1948 that he/she is in a synchronic relationship that amounts to a shared authorship and, hence, co-opted into the cartoon's 'people'. However, in 2012, the reader is a mere consumer of the history of 1948 and is in a diachronic relationship with the cartoonist which creates the detachment making him/her, understandably, more evaluative and judgmental. There is a shift in the reader-as-participant, situationally, from within the shared authorship in 1948 to what one may call an alternative authorship in 2012 (Sathe 03 Aug 2012). Hence the difference between being, sympathetically, one with the crowd and partaking in humour in 1948 and, through detachment, becoming critical in 2012 which manifests as anger.

The detachment of the reader from the homogenous 'people' in the cartoon also reflects the disaffection of the Dalits in 2012, thus, calling the lie of the 'smiling faces' of 1948. Revisited in 2012, Shankar is seen to overlook the fault lines and gloss over a reality shot through with discrimination (Penguin India Blog, 2014). Moreover, 2012, is 64 years post-independence. Electoral compulsions since 1950 have firmly cemented the policy of Reservation to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (SC's and ST's).<sup>2</sup> So, self-governance, rather than removing caste-barriers has actually created a well-meaning system of a reservation policy that has been sustained only by reinforcing caste-identities and not by erasing them. The perpetuation of the affirmative gestures also serves the cause of the SC's and ST's who consent to the continuity of governmental appeasement by alluding to past infarctions by the dominant castes which must be corrected through a retributive justice. Nehru whipping Ambedkar in the changed environment seems to be a symbolic proof of the recursion of such an iniquitous past that needs to be corrected.

<sup>2</sup> The SC's and ST's "are among the most disadvantaged socio-economic groups in India" (United Nations in India). The Constitution schedules such castes and tribes for their upliftment by providing certain privileges in education, government employment, and electorate.

#### 4. The representational axis

The representational aspect of the cartoon must begin with the fact that it deploys the “metaphor as an agent of subjectivism” (Lakoff 2003: 196); then, there are the visual cues that become the stock-in-trade for the signifying process; the inherent ambivalence in the language of cartoons; and, finally, the need for incongruity as sustaining the grammar of cartoons with humour as their normative end.

The only cue in the cartoon that signals funniness are the cheerful faces of the onlookers who are, obviously, enjoying the spectacle of a snail being flogged. Perhaps, the fact of Ambedkar caricatured as a huge head (in recognition of his erudition) delicately poised on a smaller body is an inadvertent “incongruity” (Morreall 1983: 15) that adds to the crowd’s amusement. The incongruity in a man of learning who deserves to be on a horse but must ride a snail is equally amusing (“*Don’t spare me Shankar*” 1983: 66). But the snail symbolizing the drafting process must point to the cartoonist’s dilemma of not being able to put more riders (the other distinguished members of the Drafting Committee) on its back. The cartoon’s preference for laconic strokes compels the cartoonist to deploy Ambedkar as a synecdoche of the Committee.

However, Shankar could never have anticipated the actual proportion Ambedkar would assume in 2012 (Srivatsan 2008). As a political icon and the helmsman of the constitution, he assumes a stature much larger than all the other members of the Committee. In the span of 60 years, he outgrows his identification as a member to become its very face, thereby, assuming the stature of the author of the Constitution as well as the credible symbol of the community.

The representational dynamics of humour is felt every time the predictability or consistency of associations is subverted (Morreall 1983: 86). For instance, it is certainly humorous, even quixotic, to whip a snail for any amount of flogging is not going to turn it into a horse. By that same argument, the queering of logical association amounts to disrespect when a man of great learning is seen with a whip while he only has a snail to prod. The situation is not very different when the slowness of the snail is attributable more to the weight of the rider than to the nature of the snail.

The cartoon becomes capable of multiple readings because it employs suggestion effectively and keeps statements out. By the whip neither falling on the snail nor on its rider, Shankar holds the frame in suspended animation that introduces a liberal amount of polemical ambivalence which steers the act of reading towards debate, argumentation, and counter pointing. In 1948, the image of Ambedkar was that of a nation-builder who was revered as one among the great national leaders. However, the “rhetoricity of the image” (Barthes 1977: 49) alters radically in the 60 years when he grows into an idol of the Dalits, who deserved to be venerated. So, a reading of Ambedkar as one who might be whipped by Nehru amounts to blasphemy.

Ambivalences (Empson 2004: 223) serve public texts, cartoons included, in a substantial manner by, creatively, functioning as puns. For instance, the image of Ambedkar in 1948 was of the same importance as the one Nehru enjoyed as both were companions in a national cause. So, the act of whipping Ambedkar, suggested by the ambivalence of Nehru’s raised arm, was more of a friendly goad than an inappropriate lash. The witnesses to the ‘whipping’ are not gleeful as in a gladiatorial spectacle. They are amused that tall leaders like Nehru and Ambedkar must coax a snail (suggesting the sedate pace of drafting). With a bunch of remarkably accomplished men on the drafting committee, everyone expected the process to gallop at a horse’s pace.

By 2012, the humour that sprang out of the proximity with the historical event is strained by the political developments in the last 60 years. The fact was that the historical evaluation of Nehru, almost apprehended as a saint in the beginning, was turning trenchantly critical and

explicit in the denunciation of his political decisions (Sabhlok Preface 2009: XIV). Needless to say, one saw the fraying of the image of Nehru and a corresponding evaluation of Dr. Ambedkar as the true nation builder: on the one hand, the latter was a proof of the emancipation through education and, on the other, his identity as the architect of the Constitution, which by reasonable extrapolation is the nation, gave him a greater image of a more historically viable national leader.

Between 1948 and 2012, the equation between Nehru and Ambedkar alters in favour of the latter. This also meant that the suggestive power of the ambivalence and, hence of the pun, was grossly diminished and humour got tethered to the possibility that Nehru might be whipping the snail. With a reduced or weakened ambivalence, there was little humour in Nehru (much diminished since 1948) whipping Ambedkar (much taller and nationally acceptable in 2012).

Moreover, the immediacy of the drafting process as an essential blueprint for the emergent nation is all but non-existent in 2012. In the sixty-year period the snail as a metaphor for the tediousness in the drafting process turns into a simile for the process. The shift then, one may hypothesize, was from the yoking of the tenor and the vehicle in a more humorous spirit to the direct association of the snail with tardiness. Hence, the inclusion of the cartoon in the textbook in 2006 could have been on account of the event losing much of its event-ness to its becoming a mere fact (Vendler 1974: 122); with the children reading it as a factual description of the situation in 1948. What the curriculum designers did not expect was anger. Rather, they ought not to have expected humour too as the cartoon, in 2006–2012, had lost its poetic capacity to suggest a metaphorical reading.

## 5. The environment that makes virality possible

Language needs an environment to communicate. Roman Jakobson's model for communication designates language as "Code" (Jakobson 1988: 33) and the environment in which it moves as "Contact" (Jakobson 1988: 34). The environment of communication, then, is a field of contact between elements that contribute to the process of signification. The cartoon makes for the historical axis to make contact with the representational axis. One can see the verbal signs making contact with the visual. One can also see the cartoon as a metaphor where the tenor makes significant contact with the vehicle.

As a result of this, one can see a historical event making contact with a represented fact. There are lines and tropes that make contact with each other to become "assemblages". What one understands is that the environment where the contact happens allows for interaction and virality. It is a worthwhile objective, then, to theorize the elements that make contact in the environment.

In *Linguistics in Philosophy*, Zeno Vendler (1967) makes an important distinction between an Event and a Fact on the basis of their capacity as containers to carry nominals. The Event is a "narrow container" (Vendler 1974: 132) which carries only "perfect nominals" (Vendler 1974: 132) and "preserves information content" (Vendler 1974: 133). The Fact, on the other hand, is a "loose container" (Vendler 1974: 132) that admits the "imperfect nominals" (Vendler 1967: 132), thereby, lending itself to "a true paraphrase" (Vendler 1974: 132). An action (when nominalized) becomes a framed or frozen noun that cannot be further modified; it can merely be qualified by an adjective. An imperfect nominal is a gerund ('the whipping') or a participle or a that-clause which carries a trace of the verb and keeps the suggestion of action alive.

In the context of the cartoon, Nehru's whipping of the snail on which Ambedkar is seated is Shankar's depiction of the Event of the drafting of the Constitution. The depiction – in

1948 – is Shankar’s ‘event-ing’ or nominalization of the slowness of drafting using the snail as a “narrow container” but also the ‘event-ing’ of Nehru prodding the committee with the ‘raised whip’ as the nominalization of the act. The Fact about Shankar’s depiction is not so spatiotemporally grounded as the Event. The Fact can be detached from the context; being a “loose container”, it can admit “imperfect nominals” like: ‘If Nehru should be whipping Ambedkar instead of the snail, then ...’, ‘That Nehru should miss the snail in the act of bringing the whip down . . .’. By retaining conditionals and that-clauses, the Fact allows traces of the verb to float suggestively, thus, admitting interpretations and reactions. The reaction to the cartoon in 2012 is a case of the Fact playing true to its nature as a “loose container”.

Vendler’s linguistic distinction between an Event and a Fact can be aligned with George Lakoff’s idea of conceptual metaphors. Vendler’s distinction between “narrow” and “loose” containers is consistent with the distinction Lakoff and Johnson make with respect to metaphor and metonymy. The metaphor which is deployed for “conceiving of one thing in terms of another” (Lakoff and Johnson 2003: 36) is primarily referential and, to the extent that it facilitates correspondence between the tenor and the vehicle, is a “narrow container” of “perfect nominals”. Correlated thus, the Event of 1948 is metaphorical with the spatial orientation of a standing Nehru suggesting his position as the “agent” (Lakoff and Johnson 2003: 70); the Prime Minister who must thrash out a written Constitution with the help of Ambedkar. The latter is in a seated position with a subordinate orientation as the other “agent” – the Chairman of the Drafting Committee.

In comparison with metaphor, metonymy is employed to make “one entity to stand for another” (Lakoff and Johnson 2003: 36). It is different from a metaphor to the extent that, besides being referential, it also pulls greater conceptual material into the correspondence like the Fact which is a “loose container” of “imperfect nominals”. When the cartoon is selected as a pedagogical tool for encouraging critical thinking among school children who are detached from the Event of 1948, it becomes, metonymically, a “loose container” that admits “imperfect nominals” in the form of critical, speculative, and subjective interpretations that are complementary in function. Disengaged from the Event, the cartoon, in 2012, becomes a frame of “experiential gestalt” (Lakoff and Johnson 2003: 70) from which individuals can deduce their own Facts about the Event. Seen in this light, Nehru as “the agent [who] has as a goal [the need to bring] some change of state in the patient,” (Lakoff and Johnson 2003: 70) and with the raised whip is intent on “touch[ing] the patient [orientationally, the seated Ambedkar] either with his body or an instrument” (Lakoff and Johnson 2003: 70) is causing the Fact of whipping Ambedkar to emerge from the “experiential gestalt” that will no doubt manifest in an environment of critical reasoning.

The original placement of the cartoon was in *The Hindustan Times* (1948); a newspaper whose interpretative life is not more than 30 minutes and whose interactive dynamics is more individual (Park 1923: 278). In the newspaper, the cartoon is more ephemeral on account of being a passing comment and, by such an evaluation, almost non-serious. However, its placement in the Political Science textbook in 2006 has, technically, a longer life (35–50 minutes), allowing for re-readings, brain storming, opinion formation, and discussion, thus rendering the cartoon capable of multiple interpretations as the interactive dynamics of the classroom expands into a space of collective discourse formation that can be anything from a comment to a value judgment or disparaging statements. Even if one argues that censorship, which has become more strident in recent times, affects a mass medium like the newspaper more, the relative lack of censorship in the classroom renders the latter open to freer, more creative, and even subversive readings which might be more disrespectful of Ambedkar than the mere suggestion of him being whipped.

The Event of 1948 that returns as a Fact in 2006 and as another Fact in 2012 signifies what Deleuze calls “becomings” (Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 10). And with the representation



of that Event as a political cartoon with its lines and tropes and orientations and “image alignment” (Teng 2009: 197) is an “assemblage” (Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 4). In that assemblage is embedded “a whole micropolitics of the social field” (Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 7): of the ruler and the ruled; the upper caste and the lower caste; the dominant and the subservient; the educated and the uneducated; the centre and the margin; the enfranchised and the disenfranchised. The environment of 2012, detached and different from that of 1948, is more metonymically vigorous for the “loose container” of the Fact to assemble a different thrust of social desire. Deleuze theorizes that “desire is always assembled; it is what the assemblage determines it to be” (Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 229). This implies that the very same cartoon must have a becoming as a new Fact, because, as an assemblage, it determines itself to be so.

When the event of 1948 returns as a new fact, it signals the assemblage of a new desire in history with an energy to enunciate itself socially. Gabriel Tarde, in the *Laws of Imitation* calls such waves of enunciation as “inventions or discoveries” (Tarde 1903: 2). Seen in the light of a Nietzschean return, the raised whip of Nehru that could fall on Ambedkar, and, metonymically, on the Dalit community, causes the invention of a social desire for repairing the master-slave paradigm. In order for the invention to gain social traction, it must generate adequate energy for a reaction that is also the way the community configures its desire. For the desire to flow from the invention, it requires waves of “imitation” (Tarde 1903: 2). Drawing from the animal sociology of M. Espinas, Tarde explains the phenomenon of imitation through the analogy of “the labour of ants” (Tarde 1903: 3) where an “individual initiative” – Tirumavalavan enunciating the hurt – “[is] followed by imitation” of the same by members of the community.

Tarde’s theory also accounts for how individual enunciations develop the energy to circulate hurt with the same virulence like a germ that causes the break out of an epidemic. When one individual’s influential reading of the cartoon gains the momentum for collective social action it is as infectious as an “epidemic” and through “repetitions [of the Fact of Nehru disgracing Ambedkar] are also multiplications or self-spreading contagion” (Tarde 1903: 17). While in social life it is always the imitative suggestions that pass from one person to another, it is the epidemiological virulence of social desire that vectors out of an assemblage that determines how virally those suggestions would spread. Where the imitations are weak or without desire, the ideas spread in an arithmetic, communicative manner from one person to another. Where the imitations are strong and laden with desires born out of historical wounds that have been nursed for long periods as in identity politics, “the spread of ideas in a regular geometric progression is more marked” (Tarde 1903: 18).

The authors use two terms each from the physics of heat transfer and sound propagation in order to explain the virality that imitations are prone to. The terms are used to explain the difference between a weak desire as opposed to a strong one with respect to patterns of spreading. The weak desire spreads imitations ‘thermologically’ where the “vibrations are linked together being both isochronous and contiguous” (Tarde 1903: 18). It happens where the environment lacks network-density. The communication of desire in these conditions is tardy and one-to-one. The strong desire is called a ‘rhythmological’ imitation where a greater social energy sustains identity politics. While a thermological imitation results in a person-to-person imitation (the way heat is conducted), a rhythmological communication operates like the propagation of sound waves; they happen in geometric patterns of one-to-many that take advantage of a dense network of channels. In the context of the present media ecology one would see that imitations are more rhythmological where every social member is led to believe by the technologies of digital communication like the TV, the internet, mobile apps, that there are more and more people like themselves in the social matrix.

The present network ecology which never switches off or disconnects the channels of communication is capable of running time seamlessly, thus, keeping the social man in the state of a perpetual listener as if mesmerized. Though he was writing more than a hundred years ago, Tarde prophetically and accurately describes “the social man as a veritable somnambulist” (Tarde 1903: 76) who is possessed by the illusion that their ideas, all of which have been suggested to them, are spontaneous” (Tarde 1903: 77). Tarde argues that when the social man performs an action, caught as he/she is in a rhythmological wave of imitations, their state is no different from the “hypnotic state” (Tarde 1903: 77) where one exists as if in a dream, though “a dream of command and a dream of action” (Tarde 1903: 77).

McLuhan echoes Tarde’s idea of the social man existing in a “hypnotic state” when he draws attention to the “media as [essentially] environmental” (McLuhan and Fiore 1996: 26). It implies that while the social man thinks he acts, in reality, he is acted upon by epidemics of desire that generate action at a distance. The social matrix is radically transformed in the sixty years with the arrival of the internet as a “prosthetic impulse” (Thrift 2008: 239) for the social man to either nurse or propagate his desires with magical speed. The media environment in which the cartoon first appeared was dominated by the radio, the telephone, and the newspaper. It was a rarer analog medium with communication arithmetically propagated. However, 2006 and 2012 are digital media environments in which a textbook exists along with 24x7 television beaming infotainment via satellite; the newspaper has to contend with its own electronic version; then there is the internet with a more virulent “media ecology” (Fuller 2005: 2) of versatile digital applications that geometrically and algorithmically propagate data.

The cartoon has had an eventful history from 1948–2012. What was accepted as Shankar’s artistic freedom in 1948 was the same reason for the curriculum framers to include the cartoon in the textbook in 2006. The tone of the cartoon was perceived to be humorous then. The anger of the Dalit community on account of marginalization was still subliminal and went unnoticed. No one could ignore that hurt and the community’s desire for a restoration of dignity by repairing any damage – historical or representational – caused to their identity. The desire that drove Tirumavalavan’s reaction in 2012 sprang from such a simmering sense of marginalization which the cartoon seemed to reinforce with the positioning of Ambedkar. To him, and to the members of the community, it was a questionable representation which needed to be challenged from the floor of the parliament whose proceedings were beamed into the network ecology through LSTV and RSTV (the dedicated channels that broadcast from both the houses of parliament). It was also a historically opportune moment for the “social invention of desire” (Tarde 1903: 197). The community had enough of the “imitative encounters” (Tarde 1903: 344) with the cartoon that was yielding “capricious and accidental” (Tarde 1903: 344) associations like: the whipping of the snail by the PM; the whipping of a well-educated colleague; the erudite PM choosing to whip at all; that the learned Ambedkar is crouched while Nehru towers over him; the Pandit must stand while the Dalit icon must hold the reins of the snail.

A political cartoonist triggers humour when he/she succeeds in breaching the cognitive conditioning of the reader. However, the cartoonist cannot afford a bigger repertoire of visual metaphors as their counterparts who communicate with words. The obvious reason is that the visual cartoon serves a more demotic function than the verbal article; in that regard, it is truly plebeian. The need to communicate instantly and in order to get the reader to connect with the topical context pushes cartoonists to effect unexpected associations that appear creatively ‘accidental’ and not deliberate. One such accidental association by Shankar is the unpredictability in making Nehru and Ambedkar, who belonged to the camp of the moderate nationalists, to wield whips. While the snail as a metaphor is predictable, the seating of Ambedkar on the snail unsettles cognitive conditioning; it even comically spoofs Ganesha, the Elephant-headed God of the Hindus who rides on a tiny mouse.

The change from 1948 to 2012 may be reinterpreted in terms of individual agency. The individual reader, in 2012, is verily the “somnambulist” as Tarde characterized the social man who must be seen to possess far less agentic authority to decide or choose in the light of a technology-saturated network society. The cognitive interaction, in 2012, renders the individual in a “hypnotic state” to become the medium that conducts the imitative ray as a desire-event. Each individual buys into the ‘hurt’ of the community and sets about finding like-minded members to whom the imitations can be transmitted (Kreisler 2003). In the changed scenario of great “networkability of the desire event” (Kroker and Kroker 2013: 132), the individual remains non-intrusive although capable of interaction with other individuals. He/she merely looks for the desirable valency or like-mindedness in other members so that they can be virally co-opted into the rhythmic process of generation of desire. As in molecular chemistry where particles are bound by mutual attraction, the ‘fact-ified’ reading of 2012 in a network ecology provides a vector of imitative rays that generate the desire to lessen the collective hurt of the Dalit community.

The reaction of the leader, Tirumavalavan, in parliament symbolizes the representation of the hurt of the community at large. So, the objection raised by the initiator is, logically, the production of a desire-event that has the potential to become viral. But in order for the desire to spread it needs to transform itself into waves of imitation in order to gather the energy to draw more and more members sharing and experiencing the hurt. The image of the leader rising in protest and the HRD Minister rising to apologize along with the plea not to politicize the issue are two convincing gestures that emphasize the power of television in a networked environment to set off waves and rhythms of imitation which become “action-at-a-distance” (Tarde 1903: 199). Both of them are aware of the viral potential of digital images which draw their power from what Sampson calls the “assemblage of relationality” (2012: 29). The desire energetically binds individuals who may even be located far away from the event and from each other because the environment of 2012, unlike 1948, is dominated by technologies that can relay imitations instantly and seamlessly. Their remoteness notwithstanding, individuals find themselves co-opted by the infinitely imperceptible imitative currents whose rhythm becomes capable of “action-at-a-distance” (Tarde 1903: 199).

The Tardean model of how invention of a social desire becomes imitation that drives “action-at-a-distance” is theorized by Elias Canetti in *Crowds and Power*, where a more plausible explanation is posited for the propagation of the excitable social assemblages. Canetti calls them “communal excitement [of the] . . . rhythmic or throbbing crowd” (1962: 31). According to him, individuals who form these social assemblages desire an increase in their size as they, themselves, become part of a desire event. This phenomenon of the individuals constituting “communal excitement” becomes a social invention which is then capable of drawing more members to set into motion the “cascade of mesmerizations” (qtd. in Toews 2013: 86). The Dalit revisionist reading is an appropriated desire where, by opposing the representation of Ambedkar, the desire to re-present him in terms of the ‘standing’ Nehru is foregrounded. Tirumavalavan’s resistance to the cartoon’s inclusion signals the formation of a new set of socio-cultural imitative rays. However, for these rays to engage the larger social consciousness, they must penetrate the subliminal levels of society to facilitate the building of emotional engagements which are capable of self-spreading as social inventions laden with “magnetism” (Canetti 1962: 441) as Canetti calls them or “mesmerizations” (qtd. in Toews 2013: 86) as Eric Alliez calls them.

So, what kind of biological desire can one configure when a politically empowered constituency is agitated some 60 years after the publication of the cartoon when there is greater density of networking? The biological desire on FB or WhatsApp manifests itself as the basic urge to seek friends, seek approval, seek the propagation of a position with pre-determined justification. In the specific case of the cartoon, the leverage offered by

networkability widens the circle of perception of hurt sentiments that can emotionally stitch together isotopes of social ostracism and marginalization that serve to close the gaps in the historical narrative so that it presents itself as a continuity of the perception of collective hurt rather than appearing as a sudden eruption in the socio-cultural sphere. This intention is more epidemiologically radiant and imbued with the impressionability necessary for “action-at-a-distance” (Tarde 1903: 199).

A resistant reading may, actually, begin as a micro-level interpretation for propagation when it seeks to gather “likes”, “comments”, “subscribe to”. Such interpretations are mediumized as audio and video files where images of a celebrity/wronged protagonist like Ambedkar’s are snipped and appropriated using video-cutters that manipulate and crop and reconstitute them. Comments become conversation-threads that, through approval or dissent, expand the frame into larger and more imitative emotional rays that tend towards new socio-cultural desire events. This phenomenon, the potential for instant virality, which is characteristic of the social networking sites like FB, was anticipated by Tarde, who, in the second edition of the *Laws of Imitation* (1903), pointed to “a geometrical progress of imitations” (Tarde 1903: 20). The Thorat Committee, in removing the cartoon, sends out the implication that virality that can happen during a reappropriation is bound to be, in a climate of epidemiological density, more an engagement with emotions that are deeply seated though excitable (“A Report of the Committee Constituted for Reviewing the Textbooks of Social Sciences/Political Sciences for Classes IX–XII”, 14 May 2012).

The imitative rays that set the engines of virality into motion do not operate like the “meme” of Richard Dawkins; though we might be tempted to see the construction of new social desires as memetic. However, the “action-at-a-distance”, which drives the construction is more complex as it involves “imitation of ancient inventions” (Tarde 1903: 341) that bind individuals into a socio-political constituency, say, the Dalits, together on the basis of a persecution complex; a perceived threat of being ostracized; the fear of being politically ignored, which is more serious than being neglected; the corroborative perception about cultural representations like the cartoon as perpetuating a continuing saga of upper caste scorn and derision. The “cascade of successive mesmerizations” (qtd. in Toews 2003: 86) are less overtly memetic but more of a covert socio-political desire formation.

The question one can ask under the circumstances is whether the reaction was initiated and controlled by human agency? The sixty-year period between the two diametrically opposed readings only strengthens the argument that there is an unpredictable combustibility in a historical event which, through advertent and inadvertent representations, becomes contesting and contestable facts (Lockyer and Pickering 2005: 3). During these events individual agency does not collect itself by an organic social will (in a Durkheimian sense) but through a micro-social relationality as suggested by a Tardean ontology. When one examines the blitheness with which the HRD minister, Sibal apologized to the aggrieved section, he was anticipating an imminent social revolt, emotional in character and force, with the power to alienate the Congress sympathizers among the Dalits. The eagerness to allay possible eruptions of protest strengthens the belief that the minister was aware of how mediatized hypnosis becomes a shaper of public opinion as well as a credible means to effect “biopolitical control as an action-at-a-distance” (Tarde 1903: 199). The minister’s plea to the members to desist from politicizing the issue is symptomatic of his fear of what Jonathan Crary would call the “fathomless vagaries of the aimless unconscious” (Crary 1999: 57). His quick apology confirms the fact that the Ambedkar cartoon did possess greater emotional traction for the Dalits to feed their “neurological unconscious” (Lakoff 2008: 43).

The microphysics of hurt sentiments becoming viral can be explained in terms of “the reproductive act of capture” (Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 10) implied in the “wasp-orchid” (Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 238) assemblage of Deleuze and Guattari. The act of capture

happens as a concatenation of coding (territorialization), decoding (de-territorialization) and recoding or overcoding (re-territorialization). However, the act of capture is enabled only in an environment of “mutual solidarity” (Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 45).

The coding by Shankar in 1948 territorialized the cartoon in humour as the protagonists who had a greater control over public opinion allowed the decoding or deterritorialization by the becoming-tyrant of a democrat, Nehru; the becoming snail of a [work]horse, Ambedkar; the becoming amusement of the people at the recognizable charade taking place within the biopolitical space described within the humorous boundaries of the cartoon. The mutualism in each of the parties suspending their actual identities to wear identities assigned by the cartoonist enabled the reterritorialization or recoding in exactly the same manner in which it was decoded.

However, 60 years later, the inherent ambivalence or polyvalence of the cartoon entered a new viral environment, sensitive to a transformed neurological unconscious that was not going to accept the reterritorialization of 1948. The eruption of the Dalit community was driven by the desire to set in motion an act of retribution that enabled, equally, valid mutualisms like the overcoding/re-territorialization in terms of the becoming-Ambedkar of Nehru and vice-versa; or the becoming-horse of the snail to suit the messiah of the marginalized like Ambedkar and also to justify the act of whipping. As for the onlookers, the mutualism operates in terms of the becoming-Dalits of the crowd who would be satisfied when Ambedkar, after 60 years, is reinstated in his seat of eminence. By the same logic, the becoming-crowd of the Dalit would then be pleased at the interpretative mutualism that enables the aggregation of desire.

In the 60 years, the tabloid, the television and the internet media have been interrogating the icons of nation-building. Nehru has not fared as well as he should have against Ambedkar in terms of popular charisma and image; his halo is considerably dimmed and his pan-national image is seriously dented. In the same environment, the Dalits have been more vocal; more rights have been secured and state patronage like reservation policy has been perpetuated (Illaiah 2009: 76). More statues of Ambedkar have come up; universities have been named after him and the Bahujan Samaj Party<sup>3</sup> came into existence on 14<sup>th</sup> April 1984 (“About The Bahujan Samaj Party”) and rose to power in 1995, 2003, and 2007 defeating the Congress<sup>4</sup> in Uttar Pradesh as if delivering the death knell to Nehru’s Congress (Pai, 22 Jan 2016).

So, when one looks at how the cartoon captured the imagination of the Dalits, it becomes clear that the recoding or overcoding (re-territorialization) can be seen to have taken a greater control over de-territorialization. The implication being that the architect of the constitution, Dr. Ambedkar, could never be imagined as riding a snail. By approving the presence of the cartoon in the textbook, it was tantamount to blasphemy for the Dalits and the Congress party did not want to be implicated in a scandal that was threatening to get out of control and become any more viral than it got.

## **6. Conclusion**

The cartoon by Shankar is a humorous depiction of the situation of 1948 when, post-independence, there was an urgency to thrash out a Constitution for the fledgling nation. The artistic space of the cartoon was also the point of intersection between the historical event of drafting of the Constitution and the artistic freedom of Shankar to depict the protagonists,

<sup>3</sup> Bahujan Samaj Party is a National Political Party founded by Kanshi Ram in 1984. At present the Party’s President is Ms Mayawati. It represents the SC’s, ST’s, Other Backward Classes and other religious minorities.

<sup>4</sup> Indian National Congress was established in 1885 by A.O. Hume to address the grievances of Indians under the colonial rule. The party later spearheaded the freedom movement against the British Raj. In the post-independent era it has headed the Union government for five decades.

Nehru and Ambedkar as wielding whips and the latter travelling on a snail. The creativity of the cartoonist to capture a piece of history was the reason to include it in the Political Science textbook in 2006 to promote critical and creative thinking among school children. Six years hence, in 2012, that cartoon became controversial with the Dalits taking exception to the depiction of Dr. Ambedkar.

Ironically, the cartoon triggered critical thinking among the Dalits, led by their leader, Tirumavalavan, who felt the entrenched attitude of upper caste domination is quite visible and, by including it in the textbook, the government was perpetrating caste discrimination as well as the master-slave paradigm that returns into public imagination. The paper addresses the curious phenomenon of apparently well-meaning interpretations of historical events becoming contentious with the lapse of time.

How does the same material lend itself to diametrically opposed readings? How do we account for the ambivalences, as in the case of the cartoon, that creep in after 60 years? How does the rhetoricity of an image contain both the elements of humour as well as of anger?

The paper answers these questions by pointing to the “environment” of communication and draws from Gabriel Tarde’s theory of imitation in order to explain the change in perception. It is in the environment that the cartoon which purports to present a historical event, by a humorous mediation, is converted into the ‘unexpected’ fact of denigrating Ambedkar which hurt the sentiments of the Dalits. It is in the environment that the cartoon which is, essentially, a visual interpretation where conceptual metaphors come into play. While the cartoonist chooses a vehicle to convey a given tenor (meaning), the fact that conceptual metaphors suggest tenors that are beyond the cartoonist’s control tend to make the representation controversial.

The paper theorizes the reaction of the Dalit leader as the Tardean invention of desire by the community to erase the tropes of marginalization. While Ambedkar was a powerful symbol of emancipation, his depiction as seated on a snail subliminally pointed to the belittling of the Dalit champion. By initiating the reaction, Tirumavalavan was also setting into motion rhythmic waves of imitation in the viral environment that meant to become the Tardean “action-at-a-distance.” In a Deleuzian sense, this is a social “assemblage” of desire which spreads with the energy provided by the technologies of mass communication like the electronic and digital media, the internet and devices that form a networked matrix. The individual in the network ecology is in a hypnotic state (McLuhan) and whom Tarde calls a somnambulist. The implication is that one need not consciously propagate a message or desire for the environment is capable of mass propagation that carries messages on an exponential scale.

The cartoon, by being a capture of a historical event of 1948, is not representationally flexible to account for the becomings post-1948. Historically, the stature of Ambedkar has steadily risen in comparison with Nehru’s even as the latter’s has steadily diminished. So, to leave the bigger whip in Nehru’s hand and, ambivalently, let it fall on the seated Ambedkar was reprehensible to the Dalits. Hence, the gesture of resistance to the cartoon in the political science textbook by the Dalit leader was to draw attention to the insult to an icon and the architect of the Constitution in what George Lakoff would call the “unconscious political mind of public opinion” (2008: 269) where history meets its representation.

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