

## Book Review

Sundar, Unnamati Syama. *No Laughing Matter: The Ambedkar Cartoons 1932-1956*. [2019] Navayana, 2020, pp. 405.

### **A Bitter Remembrance: Re-vision of Ambedkar's Political Cartoons in *No Laughing Matter***

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#### **ABSTRACT**

*No Laughing Matter: The Ambedkar Cartoons 1932-1956, by the Dalit scholar and cartoonist Unnamati Syama Sundar, activates concerns cutting across disciplines (humour and visual cultures) and genres (of political cartooning and political biography) that are relevant for Dalit and Ambedkar studies. The genre of political cartooning is argued to be a persuasive political tool and useful for history mapping, adding it to the already varied and growing field of Dalit studies. Political cartoons of Dr. Ambedkar are retrieved from the untended archives to remedy his absence in the field. The collection simultaneously exposes the derogatory visual imagery used by the savarna cartoonists of the "national" English language newspapers for criticism, informed by Dalit politics and sensibilities. This book, the reviewer argues, is concurrently an act of remembering Ambedkar, his struggles, and his courage, and revising history, humour, and visual language by laying bare the systemic biases these discourses use and reinforce.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Ambedkar, cartoons, humour, revision, biography, Dalit literature*

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Unnamati Syama Sundar in *No Laughing Matter: The Ambedkar Cartoons 1932-1956* presents an assortment of political cartoons on Dr. B. R. Ambedkar featured in the English language newspapers and periodicals. The cartoons, chronologically-arranged in seven sections, chart Ambedkar's work and struggles within the changing public offices and as an anti-caste leader, beginning from his invitation to the Round Table Conference of 1930-32 till his death in 1956. Each cartoon is supplemented with context and analysis, both deeply in tune with the Dalit politics and historiography. The commentary aids the contemporary reader in decoding the derisive visual language and tropes used in portraying the Dalit leader and the indispensable statesman of independent India.

Published in April 2019 by Navayana (reprinted in August 2020), the publishing house in the spirit of its name brings the "new vehicle" of the visual representation into the ambit of Dalit literature. After *Bhimayana*, the graphic biography of Ambedkar published in 2011, the Navayana team, with the scholar and cartoonist Sundar, turn to compile, contextualise, and study more than a hundred political cartoons on Ambedkar inked by prominent cartoonists like K. Shankar Pillai, Enver Ahmed, R. K. Laxman, and others. Inspired by the NCERT cartoon controversy of 2012, Sundar began researching through self-financed visits to the archives, libraries, and the English language press in the major cities of the country. *No Laughing Matter* is a product of Sundar's research journey that shows how political cartooning is an influential mode to contour public opinions and history, and can be used to oppress as well as to resist. The book demonstrates the ease with which our language, visual culture, and humour, all already steeped in sexism and casteism, can be misused against the Dalit cause and even against a powerful mass-leader like Ambedkar. The book is an act of *remembering* the incessant hostility, here focussed through the medium of cartoons, Ambedkar braved when alive. In the hands of Sundar and Navayana the same book also becomes an act of *resisting and revising* how Ambedkar, his politics, and his struggles have been recorded in political cartoons of his time. This book makes one reckon with the historical weaponization of humour to subjugate the already peripheral, and examine if the contemporary visual rendering of Dalit leaders and issues are any different.

The yellow cover of the book features a blue-skinned Ambedkar —his lower lip jutted out, with his sleeves rolled up, and his hands curled up in fists— ready to take on all that his politics, beliefs, and goals for the Dalits and other minorities in India bring his way. Adapted from a 1948 Shankar cartoon titled “Rustic Revolt,” Sundar’s aim of reclaiming and re-visioning of the thoughtless caricaturing of Ambedkar in the English language print media is palpable from the book-cover itself. Suraj Yengde, scholar, academician, and one of the prominent voices in contemporary Dalit discourse, pens the “Foreword,” and stresses on the dual echoes of *No Laughing Matter* ringing through every leaf of the book beginning from the book’s cover. He labels it as a “museum of the perversities of the elites” (18) but, also, as “an attestation of Ambedkarite courage” (17). In retrieving and engaging with cartoons of Ambedkar, ranging from the callous to the derogatory, Sundar’s work definitely brings to attention the opposition and spite Ambedkar encountered but, equally importantly, it becomes a record of his steadfast beliefs and indomitable spirit. The severe and thorough annotations, from the pen of a Dalit scholar, rupture the facade of political cartooning and humour of the “nationalist” newspapers, and are further proof of the sharpness and fecundity of the Ambedkarite spirit and teachings. Yengde also lauds the politically loaded and germane contribution in the field of political cartooning and Dalit discourse Sundar has initiated, and hopes more researchers will follow suit undeterred by disciplinary boundaries.

In the “Introduction,” Sundar charts out his trajectory of finding and reading Ambedkar and how it led to his creating *No Laughing Matter* with Navayana. The debate in 2012 about the cartoon’s offensive imagery and demands of removal, Sundar notes in the “Introduction,” was the stimulus that led to his archival research of cartoons on Ambedkar. Before that, he admits, his own knowledge and interest in Ambedkar had been fleeting. Owing to the deliberate selective amnesia about Ambedkar’s firebrand ideas, debates, and contributions, Sundar, like most in India, grew up with the nationally palatable image of Ambedkar as just the head of the Constitution’s drafting committee and the first Law Minister of the independent India. Sundar had initially meant for his research, notes, and archival material for the Thorat Committee set up to review NCERT textbooks. The

Committee was set up as a consequence of the stir caused by a cartoon on Ambedkar, a reprint of Shankar's 1949 out of touch comment on the "slow" process of constitution drafting, in the 2006-issued class XI social science textbook. During his research Sundar found out that "Bapuji" and "Chacha" Nehru, like in every other aspect of political narrative and iconization, have overshadowed Ambedkar's legacy in political cartooning and its preservation as well. Before the NCERT controversy, Sundar notes, Ambedkar in cartoons "remained an untouchable subject" (29). Not only is the absence of any collection of cartoons on Ambedkar when such works exist on Gandhi (*Gandhi in Cartoons* 1970) and Nehru (*Don't Spare Me, Shankar* 1983) quite telling but also, the derelict and untended archives that Sundar had to sift through to prepare *No Laughing Matter* is indicative of the neglect that Ambedkar and his ideas experienced in life and "national" history. This neglect explains the low-quality scans of some of the images in the book, despite being sourced from the archives and the libraries of English language newspapers and periodicals located in the metropolitan cities of Hyderabad, Madras, Delhi, Bombay, Pune, and Calcutta. Sundar also cautions against the temporal range of the book, beginning from the 1930s till his death in 1956, to be mistaken for Ambedkar's actual politically active years. He dedicates a section in the "Introduction" to delineate Ambedkar's political trajectory, which he claims began in 1919 with his written and oral testimony to the Southborough Committee on electoral reforms. The "nationalist" media platforms, however, began giving space to Ambedkar and his work, though often in an offensive light, only after his invitation to the Round Table Conferences. Sundar on his research journey learnt of the omissions, delays, and poor treatment when it came to Ambedkar and his initial interest became a "political imperative" (30). He refers to political cartoons as an "important genre of recording modern history" (28) and cognizant of the limits of his research and resources, he offers cartoons purely because they feature Ambedkar (40) to invite contemporary readers for a collective "posthumous witnessing" (47) of the "banality of injustice" (17) meted out to him under the garb of political satire. Yengde rightly notes that this book can pass as a political biography of Ambedkar but 'with a subtitle, "As Seen from the Other Side of the Fence"' (16). This book is an occasion to reflect on the political nature of the humour and images we consume

and circulate, and how these became insidious yet potent tools of a multifaceted political-social opposition Ambedkar experienced.

Sundar's political imperative, however, goes far beyond addressing Ambedkar's absence from the history of political cartooning and witnessing his unjust portrayals by the elites as proof of his courage. The bulk of the book is an active revising of history and facts surrounding the cartoons and Ambedkar, and decoding of the visual language and the source of attempted humour by the cartoonists. The two kinds of commentary, by Sundar and the publishing team, immediately following each cartoon is the vital site of Dalit resistance and revision in the book. The first kind paints the political-social context and usefully recounts the specific incidents that inspired them. It goes a step further than the reports and editorials featured in the newspapers and gives space to information and interpretations from many other sources. Often block quotations from Ambedkar's speeches, writings, and press releases feature. Dhananjay Keer's biography on Ambedkar, *Dr Ambedkar: Life and Mission*, and Vijay Mankar's diary of events in the public life of Ambedkar, *Dr B. R. Ambedkar: A Chronology*, are two sources from the seven-page list of references whose debt and influence Sundar repeatedly acknowledges. The second kind of commentary is placed under the heading "Scratching the Surface" and presents Sundar's voice and rage at its clearest. The tone ranges from satirical and mocking to rightfully angry and ruthless, but remains unmatched to the cold bitterness with which Ambedkar was frequently inked. The import of this section is to talk back to the inkers of the national newspapers whose insults were as staining and insensitive as the occasional grudging praise of Ambedkar—he is often shown as a Brahmin to compliment his erudition and expertise. Like the cartoonists, Sundar gives up all pretence of neutrality but in service of reclaiming visual depictions of Ambedkar's politics and person from the *savarna* hostility. At times he pointedly exposes the derogatory significations of the cartoons, poor visuals, and the clashing metaphors and at other times he uses sarcasm and irony to counter the attempts of humour of the cartoonist, giving them, even if years later, the deserved response. Also revealed is the unimaginative and scanty repository of sexist and casteist images and allusions that the cartoonists relied on regardless of their religious backgrounds and the

variety of newspapers they were working for. Halfway through the book the reader will be well versed with the recurring limited visual motifs—Ambedkar is drawn the shortest of all, often without footwear, he is portrayed as a woman with multiple partners to mock his political alliances, and drawn as an unsatisfied crying baby when his demands of self-determination and respect for the minorities are continuously denied, to name a few— used to insult Ambedkar. In addition to being revisionist, incisive, and an exercise in Dalit politics, this section is able to train readers to read images and alerts them to the prejudices of the shared code that the cartoonists' attempts at humour relies on. Despite the vehemence, "Scratching the Surface" remains an entry point in the practice of Dalit criticism, leaving much for the readers to take from the images on their own.

*No Laughing Matter* brings a unique set of considerations of politics of humour and visual language with respect to political cartooning and Ambedkar. It facilitates knowing about Ambedkar and his works through the genre of political cartoons hereto not explored in Dalit literature and Ambedkar studies. Political cartoons and humour, this book affirms, draw from the makers' and the consumers' shared codes and biases. "Getting the humour" or laughing along with the crowd then are not innocent, disinterested activities. Political cartooning is not free from the interests of the cartoonist; it is amenable to conservative as well as revolutionary causes. Interestingly, the book retains the adversarial view to pose relevant questions about the implicit biases of our regular and idiomatic language, visual culture, and humour, and how these are validated and circulated via political cartooning, here, of Ambedkar. The revisionist impulse of the book, however, sits adjacent to the routinely spiteful depictions to offer history, readings, and critical responses unapologetically guided by Dalit historiography and politics. It is the lens of the Dalit politics that enables one to simultaneously witness the crass humour and offensive visuals of the nationalist newspapers of Ambedkar's time, and his fierce will through it all and more. Beyond retrieving a slice of history through the medium of cartoons and being a powerful example of Dalit criticism and revision, *No Laughing Matters* remains an invitation, to academia and beyond, to examine the underpinnings of all that tickles us. *No Laughing Matters* educates by demonstrating that it is not "just a joke," and that being intentional about the humour we consume and circulate can be a step towards dismantling inherited systemic prejudices.