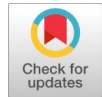


Revisiting a Controversial Cartoon: Aseem Trivedi's 'Wolf Capital'



Lakshmi Prabha P

Abstract: *This article is a close reading of a controversial political cartoon drawn by cartoonist Aseem Trivedi. It examines how the cartoon texts construct a discourse of resistance and also connect to other optical metaphors within the repertoire of Indian political and cultural sign systems. This critical reading reveals that cartoons are not only a communicative event but also a vehicle of collective memory.*

Keywords: *Cartoons, Collective Memory, Cartoon Controversy, Satire*

I. INTRODUCTION

There is an enduring connection between art, culture, politics and power. The Jyllands-Posten cartoon controversy and the Charlie Hebdo incident demonstrated this connection, showing that cartoons can also generate political and cultural conflicts, some of which overspill into transnational phenomena. This essay builds on the cartoon controversy surrounding the cartoon parody of India's national symbol by Aseem Trivedi. The controversial cartoon was one of fifty or more cartoons drawn by the cartoonist on the theme of corruption. Still, it gained prominence in the group as the cartoonist came to be booked under Section 124A of the Indian Penal Code for sedition, allegedly for depicting India's state emblem in a wrongful manner. Inlaid in this text is a certain performativity that politicises it and makes it a response to political conditions. The representation came to my study as part of my ongoing research in editorial cartooning. The goal of this essay is to consider the cartoons as an artefact that provides a visual articulation of resistance and the routes taken by such resistance through affiliated practices.

II. THE PARODY OF THE SARNATH LIONS

Discourses of resistance emerge in various spheres through diverse genres. Most of these genres have been considered devices that mobilised collective memory.

The genre of political cartooning is only beginning to receive serious attention as a polemical text [1] and is maturing to become a researchable object [2]. Aseem Trivedi's controversial cartoon gained popularity in 2011, when, as part of the India Against Corruption Movement organised by Anna Hazare, the cartoon was displayed as a poster at the MMRDA ground in Mumbai. It makes it difficult to turn away from the preponderance of this social movement, owing to the subsequent iterations it has taken, its repeated references to Gandhi's Civil Disobedience [3], its emphasis on changing the social culture of the masses through mass struggle [4], and its politics of performance and graphic protest. C.R. Devadawson, who studied the cartoons by cartoonists Jayanto Banerjee, Shreyas Navare and Viswajyoti Ghosh, has written how the pictorial protest through cartoons has managed to personify a quest for participatory democracy in the 'Hazare Persona' [5].

Pictorial protest can offer layers of meaning. The cartoon by Aseem Trivedi is a popular retelling of the Lion Capital, which is the National Emblem of India. S.K. Parker, writing in the context of the art forms of Sarnath, has suggested that older art forms become reified entities that represent alternate cosmologies of modernity [6]. Historically, national symbols have often been depicted by caricaturists as visual rhetorical devices that represent moments of empowerment, power imbalances, and counterdiscourses [7]. The Lion Capital has been socially constructed to become a national identity element through elite consensus. There is little doubt that the Lion Capital denotes a symbolic continuation of ancient times, which it brings forth with every articulation of the symbol. This dominant idea of the emblem was upended in Trivedi's cartoon. Rather than sustaining the rhetoric of nationalism, Aseem Trivedi's cartoon gives an oppositional and competing imagery. In the cartoon (Fig. 1), the cartoonist replaces the lions of the Sarnath Capital with four venomous wolves (Cartoonist Against Corruption, n.d.). The inscription on the emblem read "Bhrashtamev Jayate" (Long Live Corruption) instead of "Satyamev Jayate". A text accompanies the drawing that reads, 'National Emblem, Wolves with the sign of danger'. The gesture of the wolves and the paratexts of the cartoon evoke tropes of greed and corruption. Henceforth, the cartoon shall be called 'The Wolf Capital for this essay.

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[Fig.1: Cartoon by Aseem Trivedi. [1]

<https://cartoonsagainstcorruption.blogspot.com/>

Noted visual anthropologist Christopher Pinney has written that national symbols provide a complex and remarkable reading of political ideologies and political struggles in India [8]. This was not a representation that conveyed an affirmative topophilia, but rather one that established it as part of the narrative of resistance to the larger social movement. The cartoon problematizes the nation's emblem, rendering the nation itself no longer naturalizable. What emerges from this problematisation is a mode of representation that critiques the power of the national symbol to serve as a model for representing the nation. Through a process of visual replacement, the cartoon becomes emblematic of corruption, working like a palimpsest that layers multiple meanings. Deviating from the representational strategy of personification in the cartoons discussed by C.R. Dewadason [9], Trivedi's cartoon challenges one official iconic representation of nationhood. It reimagines it, an act that contests elite agency in imaging the nation and makes it dispersed [10]. J. Sharpe, writing in the context of anticolonial representations, has talked about 'native disruptions and the restructuring of discourses'[11]. Such a construction appears to work in 'The Wolf Capital' as well, where the bodies of the wolves become the site of disruption that works to destabilise the discourse of nationalism usually attributed to the Lion Capital.

III. CARTOON AS A COMMUNICATIVE EVENT

Discussions on the 'physiognomical' characteristics of the cartoon can only be one part of the aesthetic experience. To borrow from the works of Ranciere [12], the aesthetic dimensions of political experiences continuously break off what is natural or consensual, creating new perceptions or senses of what is political. This brings my discussion to the point where I should analyse the site of the cartoon beyond its formal features and interpret its associations with other cultural and political sites. Approaching phenomenologically, there are two things that I would like to focus on: one, the cartoon as a collective memory and two, the cartoon as a communicative event.

J. Assmann and J. Czaplicka, in their studies of collective memory, have suggested that marginalised groups can often create counter memories that resist dominant narratives as part of everyday communication [13]. Since its inception in the Indian subcontinent as a hybrid form of satire, cartoons have existed as a carrier of competing ideologies. The Wolf

Capital does the work of translating the compositions of corruption that were part of the movement into an objectified cultural formation. This translation extended the spatial-temporal dimension of the movement's leading ideas in the cartoon text and expanded them into a formal account. Protests and movements are ceremonial communications [14], and the crystallised material compositions of their culture can transform from *mémoire* to *histoire*.

In the case of 'The Wolf Capital', it is relevant to discuss, along with the objectification of culture, the circulation of culture, which is enlightened by the idea of Stuart Hall [15] that 'cultures are moving'. The circulation of the cartoon had various routes. Firstly The 'Wolf Capital' cartoon surfaced in two instances: firstly it was transposed as an 'intermodal phenomenon' when the cartoon was used as posters to accompany the Hunger Strike of Anna Hazare in Mumbai; secondly, it became a discursive material expression of a social movement that was distributed over space and time and thirdly it became a part of the 'copy, paste and share aesthetic flows' of the digital culture when the image of the cartoon became widely circulated through Twitter (now X). The intervention of the cartoon in popular culture carried a political force. It established an 'itinerary of expression' that entered into a cultural politics of its own, as evidenced in the case of sedition against the cartoonist and the banning of the Cartoonist Against Corruption website. After the Supreme Court lifted the ban, the website was reinstated, and the cartoon was archived, along with other anti-corruption cartoons, entering the circuit of archival power. This moment of archiving is an essential strategy as it represents the power of autonomous activist archives to collectivise knowledge and point to possibilities of democratic politics.

After the cartoon was published and the subsequent arrest of Aseem Trivedi in 2011, the cartoonist-activist found himself called a 'desadrohi' [16]. In a complete reversal of this labelling, in 2012, he was awarded the Courage in Editorial Cartooning Award by the US-based Cartoonist Rights Network, an award that he shared with Syrian cartoonist Ali Ferzat. The material conditions of artist/activist production are very much influential in the meaning potential of the art. With the award, the cartoon and the movement became a part of the translational cultural and communication flows, acquiring a flexible accumulation of meaning as part of the transnational public sphere.

IV. CONCLUSION

Upon closer examination of the episode, it becomes clear that the situation involved a conflict between a subaltern model of resistance and a nationalist imagery of modernity. The cartoon is not merely an explanation of the discursive erasure of the lion, but a moment that helps to explain the cultural formation of the Cartoonist Against Corruption and the broader oppositional movement to which it belonged. A.S. Becker provides a helpful starting point for thinking about art and culture as not merely an individualistic process, but as a collective process involving networks, resources, strategic action, and social cooperation. When we use the same conceptual framework, 'The Wolf Capital' and the



Cartoonist Against Corruption campaign are specific moments of 'countercultural emergence' that happened in the discursive and material repertoire of the India Against Corruption movement.

Instances of cartoon controversies are much more than passing events. Through sociological observation, it is possible to reveal that the cartoon can receive scholarly attention that extends beyond the level of sensation, providing knowledge about social structures and their interrelations.

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After aggregating input from all authors, I must verify the accuracy of the following information as the article's author.

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