

Centre for the Study of Developing Societies

From the Selected Works of Ananya Vajpeyi

Winter December 23, 2006

Rejecting Politics of Injury

Ananya Vajpeyi



Available at: https://works.bepress.com/ananya_vajpeyi/67/

Rejecting Politics of Injury

A critical question that needs to be posed in the current context of intolerance is: are we prepared to defend acts of violence perpetrated in the name of our identity, our beliefs and finally, our sentiments?

ANANYA VAJPEYI

The Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute (BORI) has been an important part of Poona's urban culture for almost a century and certainly a hub of national and international scholarly activity throughout the post-colonial history of India. To see, today, its ravaged book-stacks and decimated card-catalogues, its walls bare of portraits and the glass on its cupboards shattered, its ancient manuscripts in tatters and its elderly denizens in shock, is first and foremost to stare intolerance in its ugly face. In no civilised society in the world, in no time from the deep past to the 20th century, has a vandalised library ever boded well for a people. When centres of learning and repositories of knowledge become the sites of political violence, citizens must sit up, take note and take a stand. Some were prescient enough to know that this day was coming to us years ago, when Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* was banned. When the Babri masjid came down, the writing was on the wall. When the shooting of Deepa Mehta's proposed film on the widows of Benaras, 'Water', was forcibly stopped, alarm bells rang loud and clear. With the storming of BORI by hooligans, the monster of fascism no longer growls at the gate – it has crossed the threshold, into the house that Gandhi built.

The public in Pune, in Mumbai and in the rest of the country, knows it is witnessing a sign of some sort – an event that points to not one but several realities – but is utterly confused about which way to look, and what to look at. Where are we to turn our attention, as van loads of policemen occupy the premises of a decrepit old building that houses an irreplaceable archive of research material recently attacked by a mob? Is this about the protocols of academic writing? Is it about standards in publishing? Is it about the legalities of authorial rights and constraints? Is it about historical truth? Is it about community pride? Is it about the regional politics between brahmins,

marathas and other castes? Is it about Maharashtra's peculiar electoral arithmetic? Is it about India's national honour and western neo-orientalism? Is it about the delicate relationship between cultural sensitivity and scholarly practice? Is it about the freedom of speech? Is it about the responsibility of the state to maintain law and order, and to protect its citizens and their public as well as private property? Which of this welter of problems thrown up by the ravaging of the Bhandarkar Institute, are we forced to address first and foremost?

My suspicion is that the most critical question is in fact the one that, as Dilip Simeon points out again and again, almost no one seems to be raising. And this is – are we prepared to defend acts of violence perpetrated in the name of our identity, our beliefs and finally, our sentiments? The work on Shivaji by the American professor James Laine must be judged on the cogency of its arguments and the propriety of its methodology. Instead we are asked to judge it on the basis of the nationality of its author. Oxford University Press, (OUP) Laine's publisher, must be judged for the quality of the book it has put out, not for the feelings its publication may arouse in some individuals or communities. BORI must be judged for its ability to maintain, or conversely its tendency to mismanage, the precious texts old and new that are in its care, not for the caste of its fellows, administrators and employees, or for the colour of the skin of those who use its bibliographic holdings. A claim about Shivaji's parentage, made by anyone and

put into the public domain, should be judged for the degree to which it is or isn't grounded in empirically verifiable historical sources, not for its emotional effect on those who might cling to baseless myths about the great king's antecedents. The Sambhaji Brigade, as a political force, must be judged for the extent to which it respects or disregards democratic norms in building, mobilising and representing public opinion.

Let us say, for argument's sake, that Laine's scholarship is mediocre, or even downright irresponsible. Let us say OUP's editorial procedures, in this case, are not up to the mark; that BORI is a bastion of upper-caste and foreign scholars, and that any conceivable doubt about who sired Shivaji has long been settled in favour of his mother Jijabai's lawfully wedded husband, Shahji. Let us say marathas, like any group, have every right to choose their preferred symbol and assert its sanctity and centrality to them. But does any of this justify barging into the Bhandarkar Institute before it opens for the day, terrorising the skeletal staff on duty, breaking furniture, and tearing up fragile books and priceless manuscripts? In this country there are constitutional instruments equally available to all, should different actors in a dispute want to make claims and counter-claims about what is true and what is false in history. In recent memory, the blasting of the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan and the looting of the Baghdad Museum in Iraq ought to serve as reminders of where we do *not* want Indian cultural, social and political life to end up, right before our bewildered or blind eyes.

It is our prerogative as well as our responsibility, as citizens of democratic India, to reject the politics of injury and offence, which can lead to no other place – promises about the revival of golden pasts or the creation of utopian futures notwithstanding – but straight to national self-destruction. **EPW**

EPW Index

A comprehensive subject and author index to *EPW* for January-June 2003 and January-June and July-December 2002 is now available. Each half-yearly edition of the index is priced Rs 25 and may be ordered from Circulation Manager, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Hitkari House, 284 Shahid Bhagat Singh Road, Mumbai-400001.