



Condemn politically motivated Attack on Freedom of Expression: 15 May 2012, New Delhi: NTUI strongly condemns the politically motivated attack on well known scholar Professor Suhas Palshikar, a member of the advisory group of the National Council of Education Research and Training (NCERT) for political science textbooks, on 11 May 2012, in which some members of the Republican Panther of India vandalised his office in the University of Pune.

Prof. Palshikar, is the head of the Political Science Department at the University of Pune. His scholarship is widely recognised as having advanced the ideas of Ambedkar and on the prevalence of caste discrimination, most of all, of dalits, and its persistence within the political system. It is ironic that Prof. Palshikar should be attacked, allegedly for defiling Ambedkar and his assertions for dalit identity as a member of NCERT's advisory group that published the 'objectionable' cartoon of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. No political party has come out against this act of wanton violence and attempt to intimidate and the Government of Maharashtra is silent on the event apart from providing security to Prof. Pakshikar.

The attack on Prof. Palshikar preceded the row over the Ambedkar cartoon raised by Mr. Thol Thirumavalavan, leader of the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi in Tamil Nadu, in the Lok Sabha with some political parties demanding a 'timeframe for action' from the government. Following a short, emotionally charged and a poorly informed debate, the Union Minister for Human Resources Development agreed that the text books would be immediately withdrawn and the cartoon would be removed. The minister also went on to 'assure' the house that the Ministry would look into all such material which denigrates 'sentiments' and also 'apologised to the nation'.

At a time when the party of government has led celebrations to commemorate sixty years of Parliament at which it has reaffirmed faith in democratic institutions, the executive has set a very poor precedent. Government could have communicated the sense of the house to the NCERT. The episode shows that the party of Government lacks political will and is willing to set aside procedure under pressure and be opportunist itself.

NCERT is an autonomous organisation created by government wherein "*Government may ...review the work and progress of the Council and to hold enquiries into the affairs thereof and ...and upon receipt of any such report, the Government ...may take such action and issue such directions as it may consider necessary ...*". The class XI textbook, "The Indian Constitution at Work" carrying this 'objectionable' cartoon was published in 2006 and has been in classrooms across the country for six years now. The text books put together by the NCERT have been recognised widely as being 'imaginative' and 'making the process of learning interesting'. Furthermore, the NCERT as an autonomous body has in place an elaborate interactive and iterative process of drawing up syllabi, writing text books and on a continuing basis reviewing and monitoring syllabi, effectiveness of text books and teaching methods. The Government has unfortunately overridden the very founding covenant that it has kept in place since it created the NCERT, as an institution autonomous of government, in 1961.

Furthermore, this particular cartoon has been in the public domain for sixty-plus years and nobody, Dr Ambedkar included, objected to it. Artistic and literary license includes humour and satire and cartoons are a part of the culture of a democratic society. In fact, this book has several cartoons of Ambedkar, Gandhi and Nehru. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was the Chair of the Drafting Committee of the Constitution and what he brought to the table, as it were, is not in dispute. Dr. Ambedkar was himself a vehement supporter of freedom of speech and expression. He most of all advanced the importance of the fundamental right to expression and thought (Article 19).

Government's inability to protect freedom of speech and expression and displaying that it is willing to act under pressure in complete contravention of laid out process augers poorly for a democratic society. Under these circumstances the NTUI calls upon:

1. The Government of Maharashtra to act rapidly against the vandals who attacked Prof. Suhas Palshikar and
2. The Government of India to ensure an open debate and a review of the NCERT Class IX textbook, "The Indian Constitution at Work" that involves NCERT and scholars and teachers who authored the text-book writing and were part of monitoring its results.

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