Desecration and the Politics of 'Image Pollution':

Ambedkar Statues and the 'Sculptural Encounter' in India

Pramod K Nayar, Dept. of English, The University of Hyderabad, India

Indian newspapers periodically report the desecration of statues of Dr B.R. Ambedkar, the man who drafted the constitution of India. Ambedkar was responsible for the political rights being made available to the historically oppressed castes, the so-called 'untouchables' in post-Independence India. His statues now dot the Indian landscape, even as he serves as the icon of 'Dalit' (the term now used to describe the historically oppressed communities) consciousness, political campaigns and assertion. He is now, therefore, a significant constituent of the visual culture of India's new modernity (Freitag 2001). Within this visual culture, contemporary representations of Ambedkar depict him as a statesman, a *boddhisatva* (one who is ready to acquire nirvana), a figure of authority, and is now clearly in the pantheon of Indian leaders (Beltz 2015) even approximating to a 'mythicization' by the Dalits (Ganguly 2002).

The desecration of the Ambedkar statues is, this essay argues, a mode of once again rendering the Dalit, always outside the social and civil fold, if not of the political fold itself, outcast.

Sacralizing Ambedkar

Statues, especially of Gandhi, have dotted the Indian public spaces for decades now. Local leaders are also honoured in the form of busts and statues in parks, squares and such spaces. On the occasion of the personage's birthday and death anniversary, politicians and community leaders garland the statue. It is a standing joke in India that the rest of the year, the birds alone pay attention to these statues.

The statue is the material manifestation of a group identity in contemporary India, and a marker of the claim to recognition and rights. I concede, with Tony Bennett, that these memorials and markers of group identity should not be seen as agents of social change themselves but as rhetorical strategies representing specific social interests (1992, cited in Brook). The statues are a part of the *public* discourses around the theme of recognition claims.

Reading the rhetoric of Ambedkar statues, I suggest three observations may be made.

First, these statues are a part of tense 'honour systems'. Ambedkar is both a national and a community hero (adapting the work of Annie Coombes 2011). His nationally recognized iconic status is traceable to his role as the chief draftsman of the Constitution of India - the Ambedkar statues usually depict him with the book of the Constitution in one hand – as the Chairman of the Constituent Assembly. His status as a community hero is the result of his endless work on the part of the historically marginalized Dalits. Work done on his iconic – some would say talismanic status – among Dalits suggests that he embodies all the potential of this community (Beltz 2015).

Second, as embodiments of public history, the Ambedkar statues force us, as Coombes suggests, to engage with the past in different ways: for example, in India, this engagement would be the dramatic historical tensions between Gandhi and Ambedkar. That Ambedkar statues now equal or perhaps even outnumber Gandhi's suggests a swerve in public history in this process of monumentalization. Public history as embodied in statues – and there has been no dearth of controversy around monumentalization, especially in the case of Mayawati, the Dalit Chief Minister of the northern state of Uttar Pradesh – marks the stresses and strains of honour systems.

For a very long time, various public spaces and facilities – airports, roads, parks, buildings, bridges – have been named after Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi (three generations), and of course M.K. [Mahatma] Gandhi (no relation). Ambedkar's presence in this statue-pantheon represents the clash of honour systems, where the traditionally and historically marginalized acquires public space, public visibility and respect through this monumentalization. The national honour system for freedom fighters and the Gandhi family, as also, of course, the preeminent Mahatma, has had to contend with the subaltern honour systems, if one could term it that, in the form of Ambedkar as the hero of the Dalit populations across India.

Third, that the Ambedkar statue always, inevitably, carries a book is itself a whole new register of iconicity. Dalits have been historically denied access to education, and it is through affirmative action that they have managed to be a part of schools, colleges and educational institutions. Further, Ambedkar's statue honours the book in what is clearly an appropriation of a different symbolic code because reading and learning are, in the Hindu caste system, associated with the upper, Brahmin castes. Thus, the Ambedkar icon is itself iconoclastic, symbolically overturning the centuries-old upper-caste stranglehold and controlling prestige economy around learning.

It is in this context of different, often competing, honour systems that there has been a national-level appropriation, by various political parties, of Ambedkar. The desecration of Ambedkar statues need to be seen in this light, where the national appropriation of Ambedkar into the pantheon has been contested in the iconoclastic defacing of his statues by unidentified miscreants.

Fourth, the Ambedkar statues are at once the *symbol* and *body* of the now-dead famous man. It moves Ambedkar beyond the temporality of mortals (Katharine Verdrey 1999). Verdrey writes:

> Statues are dead people cast in bronze or carved in stone. They symbolize
> a specific famous person while in a sense also *being* the body of
> that person. By arresting the process of that person's bodily decay, a
> statue alters the temporality associated with the person, bringing him
> into the realm of the timeless or the sacred, like an icon. For this reason,
> desecrating a statue partakes of the larger history of iconoclasm. (5, emphasis in
> original)

Ambedkar, in this reading, is an atemporal presence in the form of his statues. The iconicity of an Ambedkar is precisely due to this atemporality. His continued relevance and centrality to Dalit and subaltern consciousness means that the atemporality of his work and teaching – for 'all time', so to speak – is embodied in the timelessness of the statues. The sacralization of Ambedkar is to do with the iterative nature of his statues, his quotes and the Constitution of India. Statues, we are told, the 'bronzed human beings who both stabilize the landscape and temporally freeze particular values in it' (Verdrey 6). It is not then enough to see these statues as bronze embodiments of a *dead person*, but rather as a brand whose value circulates independent of its origin accounts or mortality.

The Ambedkar statue is held in place by the politics of appropriation – ruling parties wishing to claim his legacy – and the politics of emancipation and resistance by the historically oppressed. The statue represents a new, radical onto-theology of national identity in India, one defined not by the Gandhi family or M.K Gandhi, but by a subaltern. I further propose that the dead Ambedkar reanimates contemporary politics, enlivens it. Note, for instance, the attempts of the present government to claim Ambedkar's radical legacy for itself.   In many ways, then, Ambedkar, as presence and as statue, resacralizes the Indian political order itself with and by his legacy: that demands paying attention to a class of human persons who were never regarded as persons in the Indian caste and social hierarchy.

The Ambedkar statues scattered across India are, of course, immobile and still. Yet, their 'ceaseless stillness' (Gesty) performs a 'passive resistance'. David Gesty proposes a 'sculptural encounter' between active viewers and passive, immobile statues. Gesty argues:

> Our encounter with statues is always an encounter with other bodies that share our space, wait for us, and defiantly remain unresponsive. Consequently, a different way of characterizing the discourse of the statue is to see it as a history of its acts of passive resistance to the motile viewer or artist's attempts to assert control. (8)

I suggest that the Ambedkar statue's passive resistance, and immobility, becomes symbolic of a subaltern's resistance to the appropriative moves made by various political parties in contemporary India. Gesty writes: 'the refusal to move or to respond can be a powerful act that exposes the dispensation of power and the ethics of those who wield it' (11). It is this sculptural encounter with the critical passivity and stillness that, I suggest, provokes the desacralizing moves.

Desecration and its Profane Aesthetics

A parody of honouring is often enacted here – garlanding is a marker of honour, welcome – with a garland of footwear placed around the statue. In other cases, paint is thrown on the statue, or sections chipped off.

Desecration here can be read as an instance of 'profane semiotics' (Koskela 2014). Here profane semiotics is one that does not follow, as Koskela says, an orthodox methodology. It moves beyond the immediate text into other forms of communication as well. However, I take the meaning of the term to also mean the semiotics of profanation in this case. The profane semiotics of statue desecration takes the process of honouring, by garlanding, and refigures it as a sign of humiliation. Read in conjunction with the violence against Dalits across India, the desecrated statue is at once akin to and distinct from the broken and humiliated human bodies of the Dalits.

Desecration is the response to the irrevocable, immobile resistance of the Dalits to continuing exploitation and caste-based discrimination. The Ambedkar statue, as noted, represents the living body of Ambedkarite ideology and thought. The rootedness of the statue, and the ideology, in the contemporary socio-political scenario, invites, unfortunately, this vandalism precisely because it does not participate in the mobility regime of political exigencies. The history of the sculptural encounter, Gesty notes, is marked by the history of such reactions to the stillness. In what follows I outline a series of frames within which the profane aesthetics of this desecration may be read.

Desecration and its Symbolic Economy

Desecration, argues Eric Rasmusen, may be evaluated in terms of its symbolic economy: 'Just as a car is produced from steel, labor, and energy, a symbol is created from the time and emotional commitment of the venerators. Just as fewer cars will be produced if a tax is imposed on car companies, so fewer symbols will be produced if desecration is allowed' (1998: 254). In contemporary India, as more and more vocal campaigns about the need to erase caste differences arise, the lack of action against the perpetrators of such acts, who are largely unidentified, of such acts, are ways of ensuring that more statues of the community hero are *not* set up. In other words, desecration might be read as an attempt to foreclose the chances of greater public histories, of an entirely different nature, being built around Ambedkar.

Rasmusen notes that more important than symbol creation is symbol maintenance. That is, 'If costs must be incurred beyond the cost of creating the symbol to maintain its effectiveness, then in the long run the legality of desecration will lead to the elimination of the symbol's power as it gradually depreciates' (). Symbols are produced *goods*, he suggests, and so we can read the statues as goods produced at the intersection of various economies: the prestige economy now being instituted where the Dalits in India assert their Dalit identity with considerable pride; the cultural economy where contemporary discourses and visual fields have expanded to include subaltern figures like Ambedkar (thereby moving beyond Gandhi); the financial economy of the price of statues, the purchase of land around it, etc. (The Indian government recently effected the purchase of the house Ambedkar lived in when in London).

Hamilton and Ashton writing about memory cultures in Australia argue that 'they [memorials] reveal much about the changing nature of memorial practices in contemporary society in that they bear witness to the power of identity politics; to the claims of recognition by and for groups on the basis of ethnicity and race' (cited in Brook 2006). Desecration, in such a context, denies the demand for community-, ethnicity- and caste-based recognition when the memorial – the Ambedkar statue – is defaced. Even as Ambedkar statues embody an alternate memorial culture around the community hero, the desecration instantiates the attempt to deny such a memorializing.

Desecration as Counter-spectacle and Political Culture Jamming

Desecration may be seen as an attempt at a counter-spectacle, as Cormac McCarthy terms it in *The Road* (2006), of trying to wind things *down*. I extend the term counter-spectacle to suggest also the coming into being of a different *order* of the shadow archive. Allan Sekula refers to the historical reservoir of images that enables us to make sense of any, even a contemporary, image. He refers to this historical reservoir of images as a 'shadow archive'. In India, the shadow archive has traditionally belonged to the Mahatma Gandhi statues, the Nehru-Indira Gandhi names and such. Ambedkar's statues constitute a major aberration in the visual economy because we now read the Ambedkar statues to the background of the upper-caste shadow archive. That is, the dominance of the shadow archive is severely affected by the increasing numbers of Ambedkar statues, and desecration may then be seen as an attempt to stem this multiplication in order to retain the singularity and dominance of the shadow archive.

This attempt at a counter-spectacle is an instance of culture jamming, but driven, I suggest, by political aspirations at thwarting radical movements. Culture jamming is usually associated with attempts at rebranding and advocating noncommercial cultures and products. It is aimed at drawing attention to contradictions and enabling the reassigning of values to the brand/object. But defacement and desecration, as is done to statues, is a form of political culture jamming. These efforts seek to *reduce* Ambedkar's stature and statue to a comic and grotesque figure, albeit in bronze or metal. Desecration in this particular case galvanizes a cognitive dissonance between how Ambedkar is traditionally depicted – always in a suit and carrying a copy of the Constitution – and the present with the humiliating garland of footwear around his neck. Political culture jamming here is an attempt to reinscribe the community and national hero and, by extension, the ideology he represents even today, into a grotesque figure of fun, ridicule and mockery. The attempted reassignation of value in the symbolic realm consigns the suave, impeccably dressed public *figure* – and I use the term to refer to both the statue and the man the statue embodies – of Ambedkar to the shabby, dirty carnivalesque figure in the town square.

The alteration through addition of footwear and such inappropriate objects alters form and content of the statue. The viewer is forced to reinterpret the statue's meaning: shifted from

hero to caricature. The desecration, then, is an act of mass communication in a context where the parties seeking to politically restore *status quo* to the Dalits at the bottom of the socio-political spectrum cannot do so directly and therefore take recourse to symbolic forms such as culture jamming. As a form of mass communication it lacks the subtlety of culture jamming because desecration is a part of the democratic forms of protest in India (all political parties do this). Further, the desecration adds things and details that are well-known symbols of humiliation – footwear hurling at politicians is a common phenomenon in India – so that the viewers do not experience any confusion: the Dalit hero has been humiliated. Using the celebratory and honorific symbol of the garland, but modifying it by making it a garland of footwear – leather, in the Hindu caste system, was worked by so-called 'lower castes', so the choice of footwear itself implies the suited Ambedkar remains a leather-worker of the lower castes – the vandals do not leave scope for any ambiguity. Also, a common connotation – footwear as impure, dirty – is appropriated into the statue's narrative and converted in order to transgress or add meanings – a hallmark of street art, Phillips (2015), the Constitution, the suit, the formal and dignified appearance of Ambedkar and the garland of footwear – generates the dehumanized, desacralized Ambedkar.

Political culture jamming here which does not have access to Dalit 'texts' directly here targets their best-known brand-icon: the Ambedkar statue. (It may be useful to ponder over the question whether the defacement and desecration marks a movement from iconography – describing images and gives meanings to the objects and scenes represented in a photograph/work of art – to iconology, an intuitive interpretation of the *intrinsic meaning* based on comparing different pictures, in Erwin Panofsky's famous distinction.)

Image Pollution, Revanchism and the Affrontier

Characteristic of the desecration of Ambedkar statues is not its ruination but its defacement. There is no attempt to destroy the statue or its iconic features (the Constitution in the hand, the raised finger exhorting Dalits to 'educate, organize, agitate', the suit, etc). The point is, the vandals do not wish to render the statue unrecognizable, for that would defeat the purpose. Retaining the most recognizable features yet de-forming them – this is the requirement.

Defacement is 'image pollution' (Schölzel, cited in Axel Philipps, 2015), it tarnishes, deforms but does not destroy. This descriptor is apposite for the desecratory processes because it recalls the taboos around caste system. Lower castes were deemed pollutants and contagions. To even have the shadow of a Dalit fall upon one was to be polluted.

Given this dimension of the caste system, the desecration via image pollution of Ambedkar's statues invites several interpretations.

Michael Taussig has argued that defacement embodies the social power of sacrilege. It unmasks the sacred, and exposes the falseness of a thing. In the process, it re-enchants the space of representation through the power of negation. I suggest that, in the case of Ambedkar, the defacement-as-desecration has an additional dimension. In the otherwise exclusionary pantheon of faces in public discourses – Nehru, Indira Gandhi, Mahatma Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi – Ambedkar is a *new* face. Scott Brook, working via Taussig, argues that

> Defacement, like recognition, is a theory that attempts to think the circulation of symbolic violence as generative of sociality yet, unlike recognition, it does this for a sociality that has no normative conclusions and in which power lies in knowing how to 'work' the public secret, rather than morally justified positions in discourse. (143)

I propose that the placement of Ambedkar's face within the pantheon - and we now see government offices in India carrying at least one photograph of Ambedkar, alongside the regulars – is a defacement of a hegemonic visual narrative, one that showcased only a handful of people. Thus, in instituting him as a face within this pantheon, public culture in India, both official and vernacular, has effected a defacement: revealing the one-sided nature of historical representation in its valorisation of the select few *before* Ambedkar. In effect, then, Ambedkar's iconography defaces the hegemonic visual field.

The image pollution by vandals, then, may be read as an attempt to deface the very icon that was responsible for defacing hierarchic visual fields. That is, Ambedkar as a pollutant – and the caste-based rhetoric of pollution is being called into play quite intentionally here – of the caste-based visual field is defaced – polluted – as a counterattack in an effort to preserve the hegemony. The image that defaces, is defaced.

To desecrate or profane the Ambedkar statue is to question the pure/impure distinction as well, founded on sectional interests. As Robbie Duschinsky (2010), following Durkheim and Bourdieu, argues: 'the pure may appear to symbolise the order and benevolence of society, and the impure its anguish and disequilibrium' (). Thus, in the case of India, the impure lower-caste are seen as pollutants, and now their resurgence under Ambedkar constitute, as commentators have noted, a clear reconfiguration of Indian political spaces.

Ambedkar symbolizes a sustained interrogation of the caste-identities founded on this very premise of purity (the upper-castes as 'pure'), and his statue is a reminder of this historical interrogation of artificial constructions of the pure/impure binary. To profane the statue of the man who questioned the foundations of the sacred/profane binary, as these acts suggest, may then be read as an instance of social revanchism and attempted reversal of public histories.

Profane semiotics in the form of the garland of footwear approximates to what Mark McKinney's terms the 'affrontier'. The affrontier is a 'faultline across and through which national and trans-national identities are constantly being reconstituted' (quoted in Mehta and Mukherji 2015: 11). The buried pun in the term further ignites the semiotics of humiliation and desecration. When the vandals step on to the pedestal, rostrum, frame of the Ambedkar statue, they cross the border – the frontier – between distant veneration and

trespassing, especially since, as noted, the statue is perceived and treated as both a statue and a person. This is an affront to Ambedkar, and the Dalit community at large. The vandals reconstitute themselves as viewers through this affrontier. The affrontier is a faultline because it separates the marginalized Dalit community from the upper-castes. The statue is an attempt to incorporate the Dalit icon into a national pantheon of heroes, to move Ambedkar from community hero to national hero. This movement, itself treated as an affront to India's caste hierarchy, is what is violated in the affrontier. Ambedkar is not approached as a hero, but as an object to be vandalized. The affront offered by the vandals, in a space that is marked out as a space of community worship, veneration and respect, as a local memorial, is therefore an attempt to push Ambedkar back behind the frontier, relegate him to the ghetto as a Dalit icon, and not a national one.

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The sculptural encounter, as I have examined, is one where an attempt is being made to relegate the Dalit icon into a ghetto, to thwart symbolically the motility of the statue into the pantheon of national gods, and the motility of the Dalits into the ranks of the social hierarchies. Desecrating the celebrity here, once read through the profane semiotics with its counter-spectacle, image pollution and the affrontier, is therefore more than just a vandalising act in contemporary India. It is a heinous act of mass communication that targets the subaltern's and the dispossessed's claim to recognition and dignity.

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