

Laughter, Truth, and Universality

Doctors don't like their ilk to be portrayed in a bad light in fiction or film, at least in India. The same goes for our nurse, teachers, policemen and any number of professionals. And let us not forget lawyers who would readily hold the entire law courts to ransom at the sign of slightest of slights, imagined or real. If one member of any profession is shown corrupt, it is seen as reflecting on the entire lot; a case of jumping from single particular case to a generality, something logic would rationality form our collective consciousness. One might say it shows the development of sensitivity as a corollary. Not quite, for this sensitivity is, in fact, a reflection of a sense of insecurity in the foundations of our ideas and beliefs, indeed in ourselves. We have lost the healthy ability to laugh at things, be irreverent, to mock at ourselves and at the shibboleths we have created. We take ourselves too seriously, even self-righteously. And it is this that comes out strongly in the spats between upholders of creative expression and defenders of religious beliefs that are occurring only too frequently these days.

Creative expression, say all the 'balanced' thinkers, must perforce bow down to the restraints on free expression that any and every democracy imposes. To an extent, one may go along with this. But it is also a fact that only when creative thought dares to soar high, ready to break shackles of all kind that new ideas are born, fresh insights into our existence made. The greatest advances and discoveries in the realms of philosophy and science have come about because the human mind broke free of chains of convention, and questioned what existed. And at every such step, religious representatives have put up obstacles to free thought and expression. This again, is not to say that the cartoons appearing in Danish newspapers and then across Europe were in the process of achieving some philosophical breakthrough. They could certainly be criticized for being in bad taste to say the least. But there is something about creativity that does not always think about the consequences; the creative mind just creates. Some would say, unfortunately so.

There is another aspect to consider. Serious inquiries into the validity of certain ideas and beliefs are one thing, lampooning and mockery, another. A joke often causes more pain than a serious comment on a subject or a person; the latter more often than not leads to discussion and debate, even if heated ones. But poking fun at something one holds dear or what one venerates makes one see red or get deeply hurt. Why, one may wonder. It could be because satire has always been considered a potent weapon against something that cannot be taken on physically –remember the adage of the pen being mightier than the sword? Lampoons and cartoons serve to reduce their object to a lower level of importance,

belittling its worth. One might say if the object is all that great in the first place, surely laughter is not going to take away its value or importance. Knowledge of this fact is what keeps most world leaders quiet in the face of the sharpest of sharpest of sharp barbs in the form humor. Is it any different in the case of gods and goddesses and their representative on earth? Rationally speaking, no. but, unfortunately, uncontrolled emotion takes over matters of religion. And there are unscrupulous 'leaders' waiting to exploit that emotion and instigate mobs to go on the rampage.

Yet another aspect of this whole controversy is the existence of double standards in perceiving what is worthy of making fun of. So Hindu gods and goddesses are used in fun advertising to sell liquor and other goods, and the Prophet of Islam is shown with a bomb on his head. Will the same newspapers expounding the cause of freedom of expression make a lampoon of the Virgin Mary or Jesus? If reports are to be believed, the same Danish newspaper that published the Prophet cartoons had earlier refused cartoons on Jesus. One cannot but wonder at this obvious dichotomy in approach. It is pointed out by many that there have been books questioning aspects of Jesus' life – witness books such as 'the Last Temptation', 'The Passion of Christ', and 'The Da Vinci Code' to name the most famous of them all. But these are serious works and they are the outcomes of the questioning spirit of human mind. On a similar level, the works of M.F. Hussain showing a nude Sarawati or Bharat Mata are to be treated as artistic works manifesting the creative spirit, not meant to denigrate the subjects. Great satire, too has an incontrovertible element of truth at its core; it is for the biting exposure of that truth that satire is admired. Laughter, in fact is meant to moderate the bitterness of the truth exposed. Cartoons and lampoons are also expected to be based on that element of truth. "Holding up the mirror to society" is an adage that governs most satire, a feature that also indicates another feature of this genre, namely, its focus on the general and not on single individuals. Did the cartoons published by the Danish paper and later by many other papers on the European continent serve the purpose of truth? Is it to be believed that the Prophet of Islam is actually the instigator of the bomb cult or terrorism? It is here that the motives of the paper are suspect.

On quite another level is the argument put forward by some that every religion is after all an attack on another. True to the extent that each religion and its followers claim superiority over the others, and have no compunction in giving derisive labels to those outside their group. One may even agree that this gives a right to one and all to insult the followers of faiths other than one's own. Or even laugh at the gods and goddesses and leaders of religious sects. But if the laughter has to be corrective, if it is to be shared by a majority of people, the joke have a core of truth, and it must take more than just one or two specific religions as its object. Laugh at all. Or not at all.

