

THE INDIAN CARTOON: AN OVERVIEW

E.P. Unny

Indian cartoons can fill Noah's Ark. You will find every cartoon species and subspecies here—from political and social cartoons to comics and the graphic novel, the relatively recent foray of the cartoon into literature. Some vigorous, some endangered, some coasting along. Our cartooning has a bio-diversity as good as Europe where this comic art evolved and the US where it gained commercial footing through syndication and merchandising. This spread extends beyond our English press to which the cartoon came first as part of the British legacy. Language papers took to this protest visual soon enough. Given our own folk and classical traditions of satire, it wasn't perhaps difficult to relate to a form that freezes mime and movement into a stinging visual.

After some 100 hospitable years our cartoon scene looks quite uneven. Worse, unchartered. We have no cartoon archives or museums unlike Japan, whose cartooning came of age about the same time as ours. The Japanese quickly got down to the task of putting talent and technology together, as is their wont, and organized the *manga* (the Japanese word for all things comic) into an industry of self-help books, comics and animation films. *Manga* is now a signature style, part of the global cartooning repertoire.

We just let the cartoon fend for itself. Why crib? The surviving strains must be doubly stern. The Indian cartoon found a natural habitat in the country's politics that was beginning to stir up in the early 20th century. To most Indians, except our very young being reared on animation clips on TV, the cartoon is what appears in the day's newspaper, almost always political.

Punch Clones

This medium of dissent found an early ally in the press that was beginning to question the foreign presence here. As early as 1906, Tamil poet Subramania Bharati front-paged cartoons in the *India* weekly he edited to rub in his fiercely nationalist views. He would often pose for his cartoonist to emphasise the gestural effects he wanted in the cartoon. Modelled on the *London Punch* and perhaps to placate and embarrass the ruling British over their back-home liberalism, periodicals titled *Hindi Punch* and *Oudh Punch* had already appeared in northern India. Such *Punch* clones spread sporadically. In one such humour magazine *Vidooshakan*, brought out from Kollam in Kerala, the first known Malayalam cartoon appeared in 1919. The editor P.S. Govinda Pillai called it "a humorous drawing" though in the work of the anonymous cartoonist on post World War I famine is too stark to raise a laugh. The next couple of decades saw more such

'humorous pictorial periodicals' in the region that went on to create a cartoon viewership that included a school-going kid called Shankar.

Shankar had the baptism by fire customary to cartoonists. In the classroom. He drew funny pictures of his headmaster and got into trouble, thus kicking off a lifelong romance with the wicked pencil. After graduating from Travancore University he went to the then Bombay where he found work in a shipping company and cartooned part-time. Pothan Joseph, who was editing the Delhi-based *Hindustan Times*, spotted him. Thus began in 1932 the first visible stint of professional cartooning by an Indian.

Cartoon Comes to the Capital

From the back of beyond the self-taught Shankar arrived in the national capital with skills that aren't easy to explain. Even his early drawings for *Hindustan Times* betray no signs of the fledgling amateur or the pious pleadings of our early cartoonists to save *Bharat Mata* from the evil Brits. His work was marked by well-rehearsed brush strokes, grand compositions, measured anatomical distortions and an ability to pack as many as twenty-five distinct caricatures into a frame. And above all a political mind that quick-fired. This part of the Shankar package is more predictable than his fine honed craft. Travancore, where he came from, was an enterprising princely state that invested in welfare measures like English education, yet was facing a political opposition that would settle for no less than total freedom from the local king and the British Crown in one go. The nationalists gave him his politics, and the state a language to think in and subvert.

Shankar happily landed in a newspaper that matched his political dispensation. *Hindustan Times* was owned by a friend of Gandhiji whose son edited the paper for a while and it had staff writers like Edatata Narayanan whose pungent prose would have made the non-violent Mahatma wince. In this eminent pool of editorial defiance, it was left to Shankar to catch the reader's eye the first thing in the morning. Displayed generously across five and six columns on the front page, his cartoon was the capital's wake-up call. He couldn't have asked for more from a newspaper and we couldn't have asked for more from a pioneer. Through 14 years in the paper with a mid-career sabbatical in London where he learned art professionally and interacted with the legendary David Low, Shankar mainstreamed the Indian cartoon.

Shankar School

When India became free in 1947, Shankar had already left *Hindustan Times*. He wanted to be on his own. Jawaharlal Nehru, his friend first and the country's PM next, inaugurated the *Shankar's Weekly* in 1948 with a gentlemanly plea "not to spare me". The next 16 years till Nehru died, Shankar obliged with tens of thousands of gentlemanly cartoons on Nehru. The sharper barbs were reserved for the cast around the PM. Meanwhile the weekly had acquired a nation-wide identity as the country's premier cartoon magazine with a readership that far exceeded its circulation. It had a high institutional subscription that ranged from trade union offices to university libraries and exclusive clubs. Also, Shankar left many pages and occasionally the front cover for understudies, who happily went beyond the unstated brief of being altogether gentlemanly about the young democracy's leaders, who on their part were quickly turning banal.

The impish Kutty, Shankar's prime disciple, quietly moved away from the mentor's grand architecture to less-peopled frames that focused more economically on the day's news. Clearly, the Indian cartoonist's role model was changing from David Low to Vicky. From the reflective to the visceral. Kutty's stylistic shift was also in keeping with the nature of news that was picking up pace. Through the 1950s and '60s national politics got less Nehruvian and even less Congress-centric. Nehru's party was being effectively challenged by the Akalis in Punjab, Communists in Kerala and West Bengal and the Dravidians in Tamil Nadu. Politics was losing its centre stage and was beginning to look like a carnival with many sideshows, all of which Kutty captured for the now defunct *Hindustan Standard*. His career eventually took a remarkable turn. With a largely visual idiom peppered with terse captions that were easy to translate, he cut across as few cartoonists have. At the *Ananda Bazar Patrika* he was a hit in a language he never knew—Bengali.

Shankar's Weekly never aspired to a house style. A broader talent band couldn't have emerged from a single *gurukula*. While Kutty tiptoed out of the Shankar mould, his younger colleagues at the weekly stormed out. Samuel went to *The Times of India* and created the country's first pocket cartoon "This is Delhi" in 1953. It found a post-partition readership across the border. Pakistani papers freely ran it as "This is Lahore". Later renamed "Babuji", Samuel took this hugely popular cartoon to *The Indian Express*.

Ranga, another Shankar acolyte, became a spot caricaturist with a trademark slapdash style. After a brief stint at the *Shankar's Weekly* Abu Abraham migrated to London where his bare elegant drawing became a cult. Abu came back in the late 1960s to chronicle Indira Gandhi's eventful India for the multi-edition *Indian Express*, bringing to its nation-wide readership an addictive serial experience. Day after day, two minimally drawn Congressmen carried on a political dialogue like today's talking heads on TV.

O.V. Vijayan departed from anything seen here. He junked anatomy altogether and reduced his figures to geometrical forms which he spread around in a space that held like today's computer graphic. The background was left under-detailed or was blotted out by a black patch inked in with a coarse cloth. He seemed to be preparing the cartoon for darker days. An accomplished writer, Vijayan wrote captions rich in allusions and was masterly with word play. The cartoon's look and feel grew steadily sombre and the cartoonist's vision increasingly cheerless by the mid 1970s. The national mood was no better. With a war won, peace lost, election won, economy lost, a nuclear implosion to show off and the jobless young ready to explode, Mrs. Gandhi's fortunes were getting too mixed for comfort.

Cartoonist Meets Censor

In June 1975 national emergency was declared with full-scale press censorship. The media catering to the world's largest democracy got its first kick in the face that sent the cartoonist reeling most of all. While the writing journalist had the option to bend, crawl, defy and go to jail or get suitably vague, there was no way the cartoonist could have produced cartoon after censor-proof cartoon. Even before the Emergency, editors had stopped Rajinder Puri's prescient cartoons. Vijayan dropped out. Abu, by then a nominated Member of Parliament, was censored too but he soldiered on and even managed to sneak in a cartoon where he said it all. National shame has rarely been condensed into a newspaper visual more tellingly: the Indian President was shown signing away ordinances from a bathtub. R.K. Laxman was summoned by the then Information Minister and rudely reminded that he wasn't above the law that, incidentally, had been amended so often that an Emergency-eve cartoon showed the country's Constitution as a periodical. Laxman took a holiday from which he was in no hurry to return.

The one irreversible institutional casualty of the emergency was the *Shankar's Weekly*. After the first few months of censorship, it folded up. In his farewell note, Shankar cited as reasons for closure his own advancing age and the difficulty of running a magazine on a shoestring. He was being gracious to his friend's daughter, who was running the country quite unlike the father. Despite the magazine boom that followed the eventual lifting of the emergency, and a good thirty years later, we have nearly every kind of journal except the satirical.

A lot of cartooning happened outside the Shankar diaspora. Ahmed, who succeeded Shankar in *Hindustan Times* did his share of edit cartoons and gave the capital its first popular social comic—*Chandu*. In 1959 the paper's editor S. Mulgaokar decided that the

capital's politicians could do with a daily dose of acid. Fresh from a stint at *The Glasgow Herald* and *The Guardian* in London, the 25-year-old Rajinder Puri was instantly noticed for his scalding political statements as well as a drawing that nearly burnt newsprint. A masterly caricaturist, he took on the unwieldy ethnic variety of political personalities who began to drive politics post-Nehru. Besides editorial cartoons and an occasional pocket cartoon he ran the country's oldest political strip *Newshound*. His distinct style stayed through a range of art material he experimented with—the brush and screen tints, the dip & draw coquille and now a felt pin & a fine nib for graded pointillist tones. Lately this veteran has graduated to graphic software and uses the mouse more inventively than most youngsters*.

*The book containing this article came out in 2006. Rajinder Puri (1953-2015) has passed away since.

The Cartoon Comes to the Big City

While cartoons were getting pressure cooked on Parliament Street, everyman's *pav bhaji* had arrived in Chowpatty. R.K. Laxman gave us our first metropolitan cartoon. From *The Times of India's* front page, for 60 years this migrant from the southern town of Mysore has been mind reading millions of fellow-expats who constitute Mumbai. The Mumbaikar gets the daily cartoon he almost anticipated. Since this metropolis has a demographic mix that is truly Indian, Laxman easily reached out as the paper opened editions. This prolific professional and the Common Man he created quickly became national icons. He tropicalised the pocket cartoon with wordy captions because "that's the way Indians speak". With brush strokes adapted from David Low he draws in great detail to create situational humour. Even his editorial cartoons are more lifelike than stylised, more ironic than provocative. This works well with an urbanising middleclass that likes to connect with and complain about the ruling elite but from a safe distance. The Laxman cartoon rarely makes you mad but keeps you sane enough to be perennially distrustful of authority.

American cartoon historian Judith O'Sullivan links the growth of the multi-panel strip cartoon to the influx of migrants that built up the American metropolis in late 19th century. A half-century later in Mumbai, Laxman did precisely this by holding a mirror to the aspiring seekers of jobs, fortunes and a cosmopolitan identity. With just a single column, single panel pocket cartoon. Of all the cartoon genres this little rectangle has been the greatest survivor in India. Pioneered by Samuel to track free India's bureaucratic Delhi, the Indian pocket cartoon has since been quite a happening place. Sudhir Dar used this form to chronicle the duplex Delhi of the 1970s and '80s that was behaving somewhat socially like a city and somewhat politically like the national capital. His successor in *Hindustan Times*, Sudhir Tailang, brings into it more politics and figures that suggest Rajasthani folk forms. Mario Miranda and Salam focus on the corporate workplace in their pocket cartoons in *The Economic Times*. Mario seems to have

a comic chromosome. Even when he merely sketches—often in colour with tone, texture and every little detail in place—there is a crescendo of comedy.

Cartoon Goes Hi-Tech

Salam, Irfan Husain, Neelabh, Jayanto and more recently Prasad, Shekhar Gurera, Manjul, Bonny Thomas and Jayachandran represent a new cartooning band that joined the profession through the design/graphic route, not the editorial. With them has come the techno-savvy era in cartooning. The multi-tasking cartoon artist who pioneered this school is Ajit Ninan in *India Today*. Now with *The Times of India*, Ajit does stand-alone cartoons on politics to sports, supports news stories and editorial features with cartoon illustrations or graphics and packs a handful of caricatures into a graphic tile for the business page. The prodigious output makes you wonder whether he draws with both hands and the computer-aided stylus to boot. But it isn't all techno. There is a basic hand-done drawing, which he layers with graphic software effects. Ironically there are two technically trained cartoonists—Ponnappa, an architect and Ravi Kanth, an engineer—who work brilliantly without getting mouse-bitten. The credit for the extreme use of hi-tech must however go to the cartoonist who needs extreme passion to function—Ravi Shankar. His *India Today* cartoon is wholly computer-generated yet looks as free-styled as a cartoon ought to. In the lower-tech 1980s in *The Indian Express* edited by Arun Shourie, he got national attention with adversarial cartoons that went for Rajiv Gandhi's jugular. Such advocacy cartooning is a rarity here, though one did see collective outrage when the Babri Masjid was demolished in December 1992. Cartoonists raged against the BJP and the RSS for several months so that *The Economic Times* summed up 1993 as the year "when the line overtook the word". More recently during the Gujarat riots in 2002 the cartooning fangs were out.

Can a profession sustain itself merely on the fire in the belly? Between adrenalin-driven phases, newspapers deploy cartoons somewhat indifferently. At a time when our politics is expanding to address business and global concerns and an irreverent electorate is kicking out government after incumbent government, one thought the news cartoon would grow in scope and firepower. Instead it is shrinking, literally. Barring *The Hindu* where Keshav and Surendra alternate to produce well-displayed cartoons, and language papers like *Malayala Manorama* that gives in-house artists enough cartooning space, the big cartoon is seen less and less. Meticulous craftsmen like Paras Nath are best viewed on the Internet where you can mouse-click and enlarge the cartoon for a good look at the artwork. Often, the editorial cartoon appears in newspapers as a bonsai. Such stamp sizing occurred in the 1990s in the West, which has since put the political cartoon back in place thanks to merciless practitioners like Steve Bell.

We have had our share of misfortunes. Irfan Husain and Maya Kamath died in their prime. Manjula Padmanabhan opted out after running two fine comic strips—*Double Think* and *Suki*. The young bewildered Suki, our first “common woman” in the cartoon, should have been around to chronicle that asymmetric human habitation called the Indian city. In 2005, Saranath Banerjee’s *Corridor* gave a book length account of Delhi in an altogether different cartooning genre that has arrived in the west—the graphic novel. Interestingly, way back in 1961, G. Aravindan, Kerala’s cartoonist who went on to become a celebrated filmmaker, nearly anticipated this sequential art form. Before Gary Trudeau’s *Doonesbury* was thought of, Aravindan’s characters in *The Mathrubhumi Weekly* aged, lost their innocence and grew into a novel-like canvas.

Barring such random talent bursts that the media puts to use, our cartooning carries on without institutional support. The market has lately begun to respond though. Cinema and advertising are sourcing animation and claymation. India is positioning itself to be a major animation hub and if we must keep custom we need high value creators more than cheap box operators. Such a talent pool will accrue only from a more professional use of the cartoon by print and TV. If you keep the cartoonist idle, he will look elsewhere. The outcome is quite unpredictable. A major cartoonist in the 1950s and ‘60s, Tanu (who shot into fame with a cartoon reproduced by *The Times* in London) quit and founded a successful educational institution, *Brilliant Tutorials*. And we all know what happened when Cartoonist Thackeray sought a second career!

#