

A Historical Overview on Political Cartooning in India with special reference to Assam

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to discuss the historical background of political cartooning in India in the pre-independence and post independence era. The paper also provides a special account on the evolution of political cartooning in the state of Assam. The paper by nature is a descriptive one. The study was based on available secondary literature. Interview of cartoonists and journalists was also conducted to collect information about cartooning in Assam. The available literature are searched, cross-checked and analysed to arrive at an overview of the origin and development of political cartooning in India with special reference to the state of Assam.

Keywords : *Assam, Cartoonist, History, Journalism, India, Political cartoon.*

1 Introduction

Political cartoon is a medium of framed visual satirical presentation which is a very common item in today's newspapers. It addresses contemporary public issues, personalities, events, political or social or economic or cultural trends with the perfect combination of wit, satire and punch. In this paper, a modest attempt has been made to chronicle the past of political cartooning in India with special reference to the state of Assam. By nature, the study is a historical narrative, and it relies mostly on secondary sources. However, most of the data related to political cartooning in Assam are collected through personal interviews and inputs provided by professionals due to the lack of available secondary materials. In order to ensure the authenticity and reliability of the secondary data, the data collected through different sources were compared and cross checked before incorporation.

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2 The Beginning of Political Cartooning

The modern political cartoon entered the Indian scenario during the British raj. Britain's illustrated comic-satiric periodicals like *Punch* (1841–1992), *Fun* (1861–1901), and the *Pall Mall Gazette* (1865–1921) greatly boosted the birth of the genre of cartooning and satire in India. Though political cartooning was a gift of western culture to India, over the years, it has developed its own independent style and become hugely popular among the readers of newspapers and magazines. Some of the first newspapers published in India contained political cartoons in their pages. 'English owned the *Bengal Hurkaru* and the *Indian Gazette* in the 1850s were the first periodicals in India to include political cartoons' (Lhost, 2011, p.405). As proclaimed by Kamal Sarkar (quoted in Venkatòacalapati, 2006), the *Delhi Sketch Book* (1850–1857) was the first journal of the comic-satiric genre in India. In this way, within decades, cartoons started to appear in the papers owned by Indians and the colonial administration became the legitimate target of the journalists. The first vernacular-language periodical which published cartoon was the *Amrit Bazar Partika* from Bengal in 1872 (Mitter, 1994).

According to Lhost (2011), the first cartoon to make a political impact was published in *Sulav Samachar* in 1870s. Cartoons appearing in the *Sulav Samachar* exposed and attacked the corrupt and racially abusive judiciary system which allowed Europeans to go scot-free for crimes against poor Indians with the support of illegal nexus between European medical and court personnel and European offenders (Mitter, 1997). *Sulav Samachar* puts the Indian case forcefully by highlighting the blatant injustice (Basu, 2009). In British India, there were numerous press control laws; however, political cartoons published in vernacular papers came up strongly against many injustices of the colonial rule and set up a new trend in illustrated journalism.

3 Political Cartooning during Colonial Rule

The London based comic-satiric periodical *Punch* (1841–1992) greatly inspired the scenario of political cartooning in India during the colonial period. Bombay's weekly Anglo-Gujarati *Hindi Punch* (1889–1931) and Lucknow's weekly Urdu-language *Avadh Punch* (1877–1936) were two of the "longest-running and most successful" illustrated comic-satiric publications in India (Lhost, 2011). The *Hindi Punch* had its personification 'Panchoba', an Indian counterpart of 'Mr. Punch' of the London based *Punch*. Other examples of such journals are the *Delhi Punch*, the *Punjabi Punch*, the *Urdu Punch*, the *Gujarati Punch*, and the *Puneath Punch* (in a remote Bengali town), all in the 1870s and 1880s, and the most renowned, *Basantak* (Calcutta, 1874–1876) (Lent, 2009). These journals voiced

opposition to many colonial tax policies, famine's continued presence across India, the ineffectiveness of the colonial government's anti-plague campaign in exaggerated and caricatured form. Cartoonist of *Basantak*, in style of Kalighatpatachitra, attacked high officials of British administration and their Bengali supporters (Mitter, 1997). According to Hasan (2012), the *Awadh Punch* was the most prominent journal that exposed 'the ruin and destruction caused by the colonial regime' through its cartoons. The main objectives of those cartoons were to bring the faults and ill policies of the British politicians to the knowledge of the Indian readers in a comical and humorous way.

Though the cartoons published in those journals were mainly based on the political theme, they also paid great impetus to social justice, inequality and other complexities of Indian societies. Hindu society's caste-system was a popular theme of lampoon among the cartoonists of the early 20th century. 'Gaganendranath Tagore, nephew of the literary giant Rabindranath Tagore, raised the art of cartooning to a high level during that period with sharp social and political satires' (Lent, 2009). Through caricature he portrayed the 'grossly obese Brahmins who were gorging themselves on carnal luxuries' (Lhost, 2011). The Indian national movement was also one of the important themes of the 20th century cartoon and pictorial journalism. Indian cartoonists glorified the Congress and demonized the colonial administration through their works and revived Indian nationalism among the masses.

The 20th century was also significant in another way, as that period witnessed a growth of professionalism in Indian political cartooning. Many prominent cartoonists were seen to have established their names and careers during that century. Gaganendranath Tagore of Calcutta used the style of caricature similar to Kalighat style which existed a century before (Parimoo, 2015). *Nationalist Weekly India* (Madras, 1906-1908; Pondicherry, 1908-1910) edited by famous Tamil poet C. Subramania Bharati, was the first to introduce cartoons in South India (Venkatòacalapati, 2006). Full page cartoons on the front pages of his weekly was a common sight. He also planned to run a bilingual monthly newspaper in Tamil and English named *Chitravali* solely devoted to political cartoons. *The Hindu* published its first political cartoon in 1925. K. R. Sharma was one of the famous names of early South Indian cartoonists who published his works in the pages of *Tamil Nadu* in the 1920's. The short-lived *Viswadeepam* (1939) in Kozhikode, *Rasi* (in Alappuzha), *Sarasam* (in Changanacherry), and *Narmada* (in Kottayam) were some of the early cartoon magazines which were published from Kerala. In Bengal, Jatin Sen, who worked with monthlies like *Manasio Marnabani* and *Bharat Barsha*, and Chandi Lahiri, who pioneered the pocket cartoon with his "Third Eye View" for Calcutta's *Ananda Bazar Patrika*

group were the other prominent names in this field.

In the following decades K. Shankara Pillay (1902-1989), better known as Shankar who started cartooning in 1939, was one of the prominent cartoonists from the southern India. He is considered the father of political cartooning in India (Meena, 1991). Shankar's cartoons were initially published in *The Free Press Journal* and the *Bombay Chronicle*. Later in 1932, he joined as a staff cartoonist to the *Hindustan Times* and continued till 1946. He also went to London to learn advanced cartooning techniques. After spending more than a year in London he came back to India and wished to start an independent venture. In 1948, he founded *Shankar's Weekly* which was considered equivalent to the famous *Punch* magazine of Britain. *Shankar's Weekly* became a breeding ground for eminent cartoonists like Abu Abraham, Ranga, Kutty, Lachke and Vijayan etc. He was an influential cartoonist. He influenced and inspired the next generation cartoonists of the later period, among whom Abu Abraham and R. K. Laxman were the greatest. In the words of Laxman, Shankar elevated the editorial cartoon in newspapers to the status of editorial commentator and political analyst in India.

4 Political Cartooning in Post-Independent Period :

Cartoon and caricature continued its effectiveness in social and political media in post-independence India. The theme of cartoons remained the same; just their target of attack had changed to Indian politicians, film stars, and other celebrities. Most of the political cartoonists of post-independent drew their cartoons mostly to uphold democratic values, to raise developmental issues, and stir socio-political morality including all other issues pertaining to the common people of the society.

Both the giants, Abraham and Laxman, started their careers at the time of India's independence. During his long career spanning 40 years, Abu Abraham (1924–2002) worked for various national and international newspapers including the *Bombay Chronicle*, *Shankar's Weekly*, London's *The Observer* (1956–66), *The Guardian* (1966–69), and *The Indian Express* (1969–81). As mentioned by British journalist McNay, Abraham's drawing style was "astonishing and singular" (McNay, 2002). Merciless attack on the corruption in politics is the hallmark of Abu Abraham's cartoons. His cartoons were an assortment of simple lines that stood out for their directness of expression augmented by arresting punch lines that never missed the mark. He also served as a Member of Parliament during which he argued against the repressive Emergency Period (1975-1977) government.

R.K. Laxman (1924-2015) is an iconic figure in political cartooning in

India. He began his career as a political cartoonist for *The Free Press Journal* in Mumbai. In 1947, R. K. Laxman began creating political cartoons for *The Times of India* and worked there for more than fifty years. R. K. Laxman is best known for his iconic creation the *Common Man*, for his daily front page political cartoons, 'You Said It' in *The Times of India* in 1951. His creation, the *Common Man*, was considered to be full of wit and sarcastic without venom, and his outlook was said to represent that of countless average Indians (Britannica.com, 2016). In the words of Mena Menon (2015), "His (Laxman's) 'Common Man' cartoons are in many ways a better chronicle of some aspects of India's independent history than the "first draft of history" that newspaper front pages are said to be. Political upheavals, space research, price rise, joblessness, life on the footpath, slum-dwellers, changing cities, water scarcity - those were just a few amongst thousands of subjects he covered. But the travails of the everyday citizen were those he returned to quite often".

Laxman won the prestigious Ramon Magsaysay Award in 1984 for his accomplishments. He was also awarded the Padma Vibhushan, which is India's second highest civilian honour.

Other famous social and political cartoonists of the post-independence era were Harishchandra Lachke, C. J. Yasudavan, Mario Miranda, Sudhir Dhar, P. K. S. Kutty, O. V. Vijayan, Rajindar Puri, G. Aravindan and P. K. Manthri, B. V. Ramamurthy, Bal Thackeray, Kaak and Maya Kamath among others.

Harishchandra Lachke (1919-2007) was a cartoonist who drew over one thousand cartoons for various publications from 1934 to 2000, becoming one of the most popular cartoonists in Marathi. Lachke was the first Indian cartoonist to have his works featured prominently on the front page of *The Times of India* during the British rule in India. C. J. Yasudass, popularly known as Yasudasan was the creator of the first Malayalam pocket cartoon 'Kittumman'. He was a disciple of cartoonist Shankar. He started popular satirical magazines- *Asadh*, *Cut-Cut*, *Tuk-Tuk* and *Sadhu* in the line of *Shankar's Weekly*. Political cartoonist P. K. S. Kutty Nair (1921 -2011) popularly known as *Kutty* started his career in Malayalam humour magazine *Viswarupam*. He was later trained by cartoonist Shankar and was associated with several New Delhi based newspapers like the *National Herald*, *Hindustan Times*, *The Indian Express* and Kolkata based newspapers - *Amrit Bazar Patrika* (Bengali) and *Hindustan Standard* together with the famous Bengali literary weekly *Desh* ("Remembering cartoonist Kutty" 2012, October 29). Mario Miranda (1926-2011) had been a regular political cartoonist with the *Times of India* and other newspapers in Mumbai, including *The Economic Times*, although he received much popularity with the works that he had published in *The Illustrated Weekly of India*. He was awarded Padma Vibhushan in 2012. Miranda's cartoons were

featured in the *Lilliput*, *Mad* (once) and *Punch* (twice) magazines. This supplemented his finances, and enabled him to travel around Europe, interacting with other cartoonists, thus gaining considerable knowledge and exposure. He was known for his distinctive bold lines and cartoons set in an office and featuring office secretary character, 'Miss Fonseca'.

O. V. Vijayan (1930-2005) was a satirical cartoonist, novelist, and short story writer. He was also an important figure in the modern Malayalam language literature. He initially joined *Shankar's Weekly* as cartoonist and later served *The Patriot* (Vijayan, 2002). B. V. Ramamurthy popularly known as 'Murthy' worked with *Deccan Herald* and many Karnataka based newspapers like *Prajavani*, *Mayura*, and *Sudha*. He became well known for his creation - 'Mr. Citizen', a character clad in dhoti and *Myore Peta*, a kind of turban (Chaterjee, 2014, July 18). In 1958 Mr. Citizen started to feature in daily pocket cartoon 'As You Like It' of the *Deccan Herald*. Murthy was 'extremely successful in subtly bringing out the many problems that a common man faces in his daily life', through 'Mr. Citizen' (Mudde, 2011). Bal Thackeray (2026-12) was a fulltime right-wing politician who founded *Marmik*, a cartoon weekly in 1960 and the Shiv Sena, a political party. He began his career as cartoonist in Mumbai based *The Free Press Journal* before starting his own venture. Rajinder Puri (1934-2015) is another veteran political cartoonist and columnist of the post-independent Indian journalism. He drew political cartoons for *The Statesman* during 1956-57. He later went to London, where he drew cartoons briefly for *The Manchester Guardian* and *The Glasgow Herald* (1958-59). He returned to India to join as the cartoonist for *Hindustan Times* from 1959 to 1967. From 1972 to 1977, he was the editor and proprietor of the *Stir Weekly*. Though he was directly associated with party politics, "he reduced the epistemological distance between the fields of the political activist and the comic artist with the raw power of his drawing and his savage satire" (Raj, 2016).

P. K. Manthri (1933 -1984) was one of the most popular cartoonists from Kerala. His works appeared in *Deshabhimani*, *Mathrubhumi*, *Janyugam* and many other Malayalam periodicals (Sadasivan, 2000). Sudhir Dhar (born in 1934), was active mainly from the 1960s to the 1980s. He started his work in *The Statesman* in 1960, and later joined as the staff cartoonist of *Hindustan Times*, one of the largest-selling newspapers in north India, for over two decades. After retiring from *Hindustan Times* he worked independently for many newspapers and magazines.

G. Aravindan (1935-1991) was a famous Malayalam cartoonist and filmmaker known for his cartoon series *Cheriyā Manushyarum Valiya Lokavum* in Malayalam weekly, *Mathurubhumi*. Through the characters of *Ramu* and *Guruji*,

he successfully depicted the socio-political and cultural issues of Kerala in those series. Harish Chandra Shukla (born 1940) is an Indian cartoonist popularly known by his pen name 'Kaak' which literally means 'crow'. He had a career spanning several decades. He is one of the prominent Hindi cartoonists, having worked with leading newspapers such as *Jansatta*, *Navbharat Times*, *Dainik Jagran*, *Rajasthan Patrika*, and a few others. Since 2004, Kaak has been publishing a cartoon-oriented fortnightly tabloid *Kaaktoons*. According to Indian Institute of Cartoonists, Harish Chandra Shukla was regarded as the 'RK Laxman of the Hindi cartoon world'. He also created Kaak's *Everyman*. However, what makes it different from Laxman's *Common Man* is that Kaak's *Everyman* is not a silent spectator to the happenings in the society like its former counterpart. One of the peculiarities of his cartoons is that his female characters are too strong, which is not commonly seen in the Indian cartoon scenario.

Political cartooning in India is mostly dominated by men, and women cartoonists are quite rare. However, one of the very few women cartoonists, Maya Kamath (1951-2001) had a successful cartooning career, beginning in 1985 with *The Evening Herald*, a publication of the Deccan Herald group. Later she contributed to *The Indian Express*, *The Asian Age* and *The Times of India* as well (*source*: Indian Institute of Cartoonists).

Among the group of contemporary political cartoonists, Shudhir, Praksah, Ajit Ninan, Keshav, Ravi Shankar, Surendra are the popular names. Shudhir Tailang (1960-2016), popularly known as Sudhir, started his career with *The Illustrated Weekly of India* in Mumbai, in 1982 and after a year had joined the *Navbharat Times* in New Delhi. Later he was associated with several English newspapers including *Hindustan Times*, *The Times of India* and *The Indian Express*. At the time of death he was working with *The Asian Age* (Tailang, 2008). Cartoonist Praksah Shetty (born 1960) started his cartooning career in the Kannada periodicals. Later he shifted his career to English dailies – *The Times of Deccan* and *Mugaru Times* and he finally served *The Week* as staff cartoonist (Shetty, 2012). Ajit Ninan (born 1955) is well-known for *Centre stage* series of cartoons in *India Today* and *Ninan's World* in *The Times of India* (Orissa Barta, 2014). Among the others Keshav Venkataraghavan is associated with *The Hindu*, Ravi Shankar is associated with the *India Today*, and Surendra is working for *The Hindu*. Besides publishing their works in newspapers and magazines, present-day political cartoonists have started to utilise internet based platforms like websites, online exhibitions, blogs, social networks etc. to respond to the call of changing media preferences of the readers and reach out extensively to its readers and audiences.

5 Political Cartooning in Assam

The history of satirical drawing in Assam can be traced back to the days of the great Assamese *Vaishnavite* saint Srimanta Sankardeva (1449–1568). He drew various satirical drawings on the barks of Agarwood trees (*'Sash'* in Assamese) to depict different mythological stories. However, unlike the modern cartoons these drawings did not contain any criticism against anyone or anything. Those drawings were successful in bringing out the humour of the corresponding stories for the readers or audience. He very effectively used these drawings in his mission to propagate his religious views among the people who were basically illiterate.

The modern Assamese pictorial journalism emerged in the pages of the monthly magazine *'Banhi'* (1909), edited by Sahityarathi Lakshminath Bezbarua. It was published from Kolkata and it holds a significant position in the history of Assamese literature. *'Kripabar Baruah'*, *'Hokaaru Dhomva Khoma'*, *'Amar Sangsar'*, *'Biman Bihar'*, *'Dheki Kobi'*, *'Bhojan Bilax'* and *'Xajjya-xayan'* were among the important series of Bezbarua's cartoons. He was known for his sharp satirical and humorous writings and drawings. The Assamese society was the target of his satirical attacks. He wrote and drew against the *'kania'* (lazy) character of Assamese people. He targeted the newly emerged 'Assamese middle class' because of its blind imitation of western culture. Politico-economic issues like the erroneous colonial 'jamindari' system of collecting land revenue by the British government were also his targets. His cartoons could be considered as the 'voice of the voiceless', specially the backward classes of the Assamese society.

Some society-conscious but non-famous cartoonists drew important cartoons in the satirical magazine *'Bibalangi'*, published in 1949 from Nagaon and edited by Madhab Dev Goswami and in *'Saumarjyoti'*, published from Tinsukia. However periodicals like the *'Janambhumi'* and the *'Asom Bani'* took Assamese political cartooning to new heights. Cartoons started to appear as regular items in the newspapers with the publication of the weekly magazines *'Nabajyug'* in 1960, edited by Birendra Kumar Bhattacharjya (Rajbongshi, 2010). Assam's cartoonist Pulak Gogoi became famous by publishing his works in this newspaper. Kanchan, S.T., Indu Talukdar were cartoonists who regularly contributed to *'Nabajyug'*. Pulak Gogoi was considered as the first political cartoonist from Assam (Rajbonshi, 2010). Also, he was influenced by the works of the great Indian cartoonist R. K. Laxman. He set up a trend which was followed by the next generation of Assamese cartoonists. In 1969, Gogoi published the first Assamese cartoon magazine, *'Cartoon'*. Despite a lot of financial constraints, he published this magazine from Calcutta which today holds a special position in

the history of political cartooning in Assam. Gogoi also published his works in the newspapers and magazines like *Dainik Asom*, *Asom Bani*, the *Abikol*, etc. Baphatali as Keshab was a Gujarati gentlemen who worked for the *Asom Bani* and '*The Assam Tribune*'. Trailokya Dutta was another famous cartoonist who drew cartoons for *The Assam Tribune*. Dutta started his career in 1952 in Guwahati and later he joined *Tribune* group in the year 1964. His box political cartoon *Kabundi* in the *Dainik Asom*, an Assamese daily from the *Tribune* group, enjoyed immense popularity among the readers. Even after retirement, he has been contributing cartoons to many newspapers.

Technological developments in the printing and communication technology can be attributed to the growth of newspapers in Assam especially after the 1980's. This phenomenon helped the growth and development of political cartooning in Assam. Champak Borbora of the *Tribune* group, Pulak Nath of the *Asomiya Pratidin*, the highest circulated Assamese daily and Utpal Talukdar are some renowned contemporary political cartoonists of Assam. In the late 1990's, '*Abikal*' emerged as a prominent Assamese magazine devoted to cartoons which included political and other non-serious joke-based cartoons. The magazine was edited by Satish Bhattacharjya. '*Abikal*' provided a platform for some new breed of talented young cartoonists who later become famous in their own ways. *Chichingfank*, a satirical monthly magazine published by the *Agradoot* group was also popular in the first decade of the new millennium. It carried a lot of political cartoons in every issue besides other text based satirical items. It provided a good platform for the budding cartoonists of that time. Tarak Sarma, Munu, Nituparna Rajbongshi, Ranjib Gogoi were among the famous cartoonists of that lot, who had established a trend of in-depth and thought provoking political cartooning. These cartoonists successfully stood against the injustice and discrimination prevailing in the Assamese society.

6 Conclusion

Political cartoon is a common item in most of the local newspapers available in the newsstands of Assam in present times. These newspapers usually carry the political cartoons in the bottom half of the front page, almost in its every issue. The size of these cartoons is single column in width, and 2-3 inch in height. Sometimes, some newspapers carry special cartoons in the editorial page which are larger in size compared to those front page cartoons. A unique feature of these cartoons is that every newspaper puts a humorous name/title to its political cartoons. '*Jokoserious*' of the *Assam Tribune*, '*Cherekir Paak*' of the *Asomiya Pratidin*, '*Chenga Tel*' of the *Dainik Agradoot*, '*Bimba-Pratibimba*' of the

Niyamiya Baarta, 'Nalagaa Jeng' of the *Asomiya Khabar*, 'Haate-baate' of the *Dainik Janambhumi*, 'Bitchakhu' of the *Amar Asom*, 'Chakerabehu' of the *Adinor Sambad*, 'Kabudi' of the *Dainik Asom*, 'Jokar Mukhat Chun' of the *Janasadharan*, etc., are the popular political cartoons in the local dailies of Assam.

Though the phenomenon of political cartooning started in India with the beginning of the British rule, over the years cartooning in India had developed its own style and became a popular part of the print journalism. In the present times, every region in India has its own cartoonists who have become cult figures among their readers. Though newspaper political cartooning started late in Assam as compared to the other parts of India, at present a good number of Assamese local newspapers publish political cartoons regularly. With the help of illustrations along with elements like wit, satire and humour, political cartoons are critical and also highlight various serious issues such as corruption, faulty governance, faulty policy implementation, politics, social injustice, under development, unemployment, poverty, price rise including all the issues associated with day-to-day life which might not be possible to communicate through other forms of print media.

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