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978-1-107-04332-9 - Caricaturing Culture in India: Cartoons and History in the Modern World

Ritu Gairola Khanduri

Excerpt

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Introduction: the empire of cartoons

In September 1993, a devastating earthquake rocked Latur, a district near Mumbai, India. To convey the unprecedented magnitude of this disaster, the mainstream newspaper the *Times of India* published editorials and photographs; in addition, their internationally famous staff cartoonist, R. K. Laxman, drew a cartoon depicting a human skull and a ravaged hut. A week later, the newspaper's "letters to the editor" column included an angry reader's note criticizing Laxman's insensitivity at caricaturing human misery. Almost a decade later, the Danish cartoon controversy took the world by surprise, as violent protests erupted in many places in reaction to cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad published in Copenhagen. As protests and debates began dotting the world map, the variability in people's sense of humor became a public litmus test used to draw a boundary dividing the secular from the religious, and freedom lovers from freedom haters. These moments that were not anticipated to provoke deliberation about what constituted "out-of-place"¹ cartoons and a sense of humor are at the heart of a question that has gripped me for the past fifteen years: why do cartoons matter in the modern world?

To answer this question, this book tracks nearly one hundred fifty years of cartooning in India. From the early nineteenth century on, cartoons proliferated in imperial Britain and in its colonies, proving to be persuasive representations that competed with photographs and films. The cultural traffic between the seat of empire and the colonies, and the circulation of images, had a lasting impact on India's print media, namely newspapers. Several cartoon albums from colonial times, available in various archival holdings, testify to the vibrant world of cartoons in India. Among these, Harishchandra Talcherkar's compilation of cartoons of the Viceroy Lord Curzon (1902) offers an early glimpse of caricatures and cartoons in colonial publications such as the *Hindi Punch*, *Bhimsen*, *Gadgadad*, *Bharat Mitra*, *Nagar Charcha*, *Bhut*, and *Gujarati Punch*. Closer to our own times, contemporary cartoonists have published editions of their own cartoons, yielding a number of booklets through which it is possible to sample the world of cartoons in India. Available in the popular

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Wheeler bookstalls on railways stations and in local bookshops, and, when published by a mainstream press, such as Penguin, marketed more widely and available in libraries, these editions summarize decades of cartooning through hand-picked selections.² Although cartoons have long circulated as albums and edited collections, newspapers are their primary source in India and politics their dominant theme. This makes newspaper cartoons a critical form of political journalism and a special category of news. The bundling of caricature, prose, topical content, and a dash of humor makes the cartoon a medium of news with a character all its own. Seeing the visual as an uncertain representation of sociopolitical reality and harboring suspicions of its hidden meanings are most pronounced in the context of newspaper cartoons. This brings new insight into the immediacy of cartoons and their ability to configure empathy that redraws the lines of belonging. The history of these processes introduces a world of circulation, feelings and meaning-making preceding television's "electronic empathy" (Hannerz 1996, p. 121).

A stunning daily circulation of 329,204,841 – the number of newspaper readers in India in 2010–11 – is perhaps the highest on the globe.³ This represents an 8.23 percent rise in circulation from the previous year, which also signals a growth in India's vernacular newspapers.⁴ For this growing readership, cartoons are a source of news that gives a view of the underside of politics. However, when further dissected, this statistic shows that as with the literate population in India, the newspaper readership is unevenly distributed by class, caste, and gender. Beginning in the 1850s, during India's colonial years, vernacular newspaper cartoons peeled back the layers of imperial duplicity, provoking humor and critique. With independence from British rule in 1947, India charted a democratic and secular path in which newspaper cartoons became critical modes of public communication and politics. Since then, cartoons have offered daily doses of humor by questioning India's developmental agenda, democratic governance, and secular credentials. Despite the popularity of such routine lampooning of grim realities, the anguished reader's letter in the *Times of India* after the 1993 earthquake suggested that certain topics, in uncertain times, were out of bounds for cartoons. Why? If cartoons satirized the asymmetries of power in colonial politics, then what role do – or should – they play in a democracy? If the play of caricature and witty captions can reveal what the prose of news might not dare, then must not cartoons always be celebrated by the disenfranchised? If satire, humor, and laughter have helped people cope with adversity, then how can cartoons hurt and whom do they hurt? What does it mean when those who refuse to laugh at some cartoons are dismissed as lacking a sense of humor and not being modern? When democracies prohibit the

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publication of certain cartoons, how does it make them different from colonial rulers? Why does a peripheral form such as the cartoon inform our knowledge of the world?

Organized in three parts, the book will take readers to colonial times, national times, and global times. Newspaper cartoons show how time intersects with places, so that the colonial, national, and global provide the conditions for their materialization. The reader will notice that as voices from archival texts, published interviews, and memoirs are interwoven with interviews and correspondence I conducted, the clustering of various vantage points also constructs a history. Single interviews are dated. Where my interactions included a series of conversations and correspondences, I have not included dates.

Affective registers of empire

Folios from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British newspaper cartoons quickly yield a rich archive on representations of India. The deep roots in history should not be surprising. Beginning as a trading company in the seventeenth century, the British East India Company's gradual metamorphosis into a political power by the mid eighteenth century signaled an emerging colonial relationship that was formalized in 1877 with Queen Victoria's coronation as the Empress of India. This colonial arrangement lasted until 1947, when the subcontinent gained freedom and was simultaneously partitioned into India and Pakistan. These political transitions from trade to politics, resulting in India's growing prominence in imperial matters, were transmitted to the British public through a variety of images shaped by emerging visual technologies. Political cartoons remained a consistent medium for representing these overseas politics, even as painting, engraving, photography, and filming gained ground and promised the public new visual experiences. Thomas Rowlandson (1756–1827), James Gilray (1756–1815), and James Moffat (1775–1815) were among artist-cartoonists whose turgid engravings exposed the inelegance and ugliness of the imperial endeavor. Through color engraving and drooping speech bubbles, these cartoonists inverted claims of the empire's civilizational mission. These are not orientalist images; quite the contrary, they are views of the empire's violence, greed, lust, and bigotry. The art historian Ernst H. Gombrich famously noted the core technique of caricature: "the cartoonist can mythologize the world of politics by physiognomizing it" (Gombrich 1963, p. 291). Emotion and feelings were central to this physiognomy. If art strived to represent the essence of the subject, then the cartoonist was similar to the artist: "The caricaturist has a corresponding aim. He does not seek the

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perfect form but the perfect deformity, thus penetrating through the mere outward appearance to the inner being in all its littleness or ugliness” (Gombrich and Kris 1938).⁵

It would not be a stretch to observe this process and technique at work in the cartoons of Rowlandson, Gilray, and Moffat, who delighted in emphasizing deformity to articulate the unethical politics central to empire. Such inglorious cartoons drew a stark contrast to *Punch*’s gentler cartoons that began publication in 1841. Indeed, critics have noted this distinction as a refinement in the art of British cartooning. The shift in the form of caricature from the grotesque to a palatable likeness and various visual tropes made cartoons increasingly lean toward the category of “art.” John Doyle (1797–1868), or HB as he was popularly known, was a painter and cartoonist who deftly embodied this new cartooning aesthetic. Doyle built an enviable reputation as an artist, and his son Richard Doyle gave *Punch* its signature cover and was a celebrated cartoonist.⁶

Colonial cartoons weave a fascinating tale about a critique of colonial politics, shifting aesthetics, and the ways in which colonial impressions configured British cartoonists’ visual vocabulary. *Punch* regularly pictured imperial politics and, in particular, caricatured colonial India.⁷ The lion, tiger, sepoys, and Colonia offer visual tropes signaling how cartoons employ gender, animals, and objects to formulate the human experience of colonial politics. This is not simply a process of anthropomorphizing. Instead, through caricature, the *Punch* cartoons categorize human experience and produce colonial affect. It is possible to approximate some of this affective production when attending to readings of *Punch* cartoons. This is particularly true in the case of John Tenniel’s famous Cawnpore cartoons (and his introduction of “animal types”). During the embattled months of the 1857 Sepoy Mutiny, also termed the first battle of Indian independence, Tenniel drew several cartoons that represented the unrest. These often-reproduced *Punch* cartoons from 1857 and their critical assessment exemplify some of the contours of this critique. In a column titled “Punch on India,” the British newspaper the *Free Press* noted on September 16, 1857:

The last number of *Punch* presents us with a wonderful cartoon. Justice, in a Greek peplum, accompanied by British soldiers, mangling Hindu bodies, and with the features of revenge. In the distance there is a row of guns with Sepoys about to be blown from them. In the rear, disconsolate women and children of Hindus. The title of it is Justice. Leaving to the imagination of the reader to fill in the words “of English CHRISTIANS IN THE YEAR 1857.” Was the drawing designed to horrify Britons with the sight of themselves, or to brand upon them their new demon.⁸

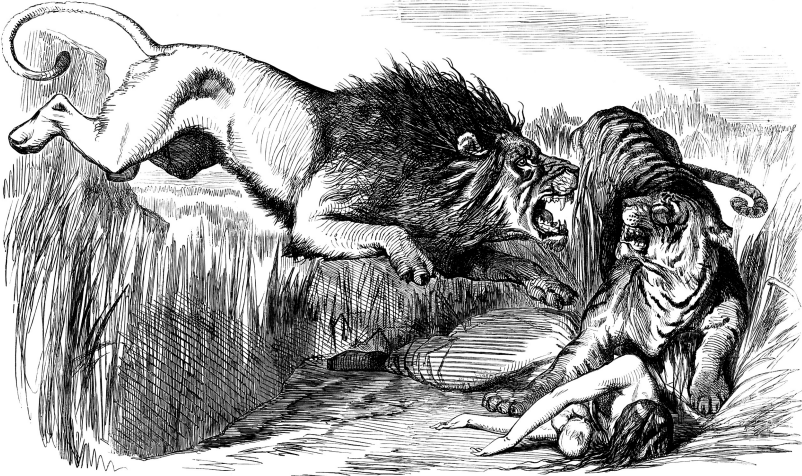
The *New York Daily Times*, too, published an assessment of Tenniel’s famous cartoon, “The British Lion’s Vengeance on the Bengal Tiger” (see Figure I.1), explaining:

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THE BRITISH LION'S VENGEANCE ON THE BENGAL TIGER.

I.1 John Tenniel, "The British Lion's Vengeance on the Bengal Tiger." *Punch*. August 22, 1857. London. Courtesy of the Punch Archive.

Tenniel's India cartoons in general "suddenly brought about an increase in circulation that year" (Layard 1907, p. 156). This success assured *Punch* proprietors of the demand for colonial content.

A recent number of *Punch* has a large picture, in which the state of feeling in England towards India is forcibly represented by a fierce lion springing upon a Bengal tiger, which is crouching upon a woman and her infant child. The lion is England, the tiger is rebel India, and the woman and child the Anglo-Indian subjects who have been sacrificed by the cruel sepoys. The temper of the British nation has been thoroughly aroused, and sooner or later a terrible retribution will be visited upon the heads of the rebel Indians who have shown a disposition to glut their revenge for a century of oppression and misgovernment . . . The roar of the British lion will soon strike terror into the heart of the Bengal tiger. (September 9, 1857)

The significance and attention Tenniel's Cawnpore cartoons garnered cannot be overstated. The cartoons were featured in Spielmann's illustrated *History of the Punch* (1895), which aimed to narrate almost half a century of *Punch* years:

Once this fine drawing is seen, of the royal beast springing on its snarling foe, whose victims lie mangled under its paw, it can never be forgotten. It is a double spread cartoon splendidly wrought by the artist at the suggestion of Shirley Brooks; and while it responded and gave expression to the feelings of revenge which agitated England at the awful events that had passed at the time of the Indian Mutiny, and served as a banner when they had raised a cry of vengeance, it alarmed

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the authorities, who feared that they would thereby be forced on the road which policy and the gentler dictates of civilisation forbade. (Spielmann 1895)

These readings of *Punch* cartoons persuasively suggest that cartoons evoked sense and sentiment: terror, horror, and fear constitute the vocabulary for translating a visual form. Thus, how cartoons were read offers insightful cues to the affective register of the imperial experience.

The other side of these readings of colonial representations is the British cartoonists' incorporation and imagination of colonial tropes that had an enduring impact in the empire and colony. About 1832, John Doyle published a cartoon called "Serpent Charmers" that caricatured domestic politics related to the British constitution by drawing upon the image of snake charmers blowing a pipe and controlling the entranced cobra as it emerges from its round covered box (McLean n.d.). This image became an enduring trope to represent not only colonial Indian politics but also politics at home, in Britain, and was repeatedly used by popular British cartoonists David Low, Emmwood (John Musgrave-Wood), and Nicholas Garland, among others.⁹ In the decades thereafter, the bed of nails became another trope that was a quick reference to India and was also included in the cartoonists' toolbox.¹⁰ These two tropes – the snake charmer and bed of nails – continue to be evoked in current cartoons, testifying to their enduring presence in the Western imagination.

For many years, *Punch* charmed the world of cartoons, and in this world the representation of imperial culture was shaped by racial discourses of the time; these representations were also considered important for influencing the business of humor among potential "native" subscribers in the colony, especially India.¹¹

British cartoons found their way into India and most colonies through readers and library subscriptions, and they were copied and appropriated by colonial cartoonists. In this regard, the *Punch* archives have proved to be a rich source for the reconstruction of imperial discourses. Appropriations of *Punch* cartoons in colonial and vernacular newspapers (Mahood 1973 and Mitter 1994) and the multiple indigenous versions of *Punch* that thrived in several colonies have offered considerable scope for debating the impact of British cultural forms and print media (Harder and Mittler 2013). The history of newspaper cartoons in India, then, offers a remarkable vantage point for observing the multi-directional flow of images, imagination, and people. Adopting this vantage point makes it possible to get away from a Eurocentric narrative of modern cultural forms that analyzes the colony as solely a point of reception of modern forms. This tenuous link between empire and colony and our understanding of how images are produced, perceived, and circulated, transcending the borders

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of time and place, is nicely evoked when opening an authoritative contemporary dictionary of modern British cartoonists (see Mark Bryant 1991). Here it might surprise readers to see that the history of modern British cartoonists, listed in alphabetical order, begins with the Indian cartoonist Abu (Abu Abraham), who I discuss in Chapter 7.

The lateral history and collateral anthropology of the present study keeps in mind Bernard Cohn's cautionary note that the goal of historical anthropology is not merely to fill a gap (1996, p. 21). For even as they fill a gap, cartoons provide moments to know the world and to see India. For example, in a parallel experience of seeing and knowing, I urge readers to take a few steps back in time to the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss's visit to India, when he got his first glimpse of an English university ambience at the University of Dacca, then in East Bengal. From those postwar years and that sighting, Lévi-Strauss continued to perceive Oxford as part of India (Lévi-Strauss 1961, p. 36). Such perceptions form the "sensory keyboard" that seem to fuse places and times, imparting knowledge and belief that last a lifetime. Cartoons and caricatures reinforce this aspect of the visual sense; through the play of exaggeration and likeness, they simulate places and times and stimulate people's political knowledge.

This book turns away from an evaluation of primarily iconographic elements to their reception, situating discussions around cartoons, showing that a deeper understanding of cartoons involves a form of knowing, so that they become a source of knowledge. In doing so, this book claims new terms of engagement with visual texts as history and ethnography; it also becomes part of a tradition in which to claim cartoons as knowledge is a ploy. Taking a cue from Peter van der Veer's observations that far from being inert and replete with answers to all our questions, a historical archive is alive and needs to be located (2002, p. 176), the research for this book constructs an archive that includes a variety of cultural texts and interviews. In so doing, the book shows that a peripheral visual, the newspaper cartoon, is generative of public debates that demand exacting answers about modern politics. The debates that cartoons generated in colonial and postcolonial times become vital sources for illuminating the interconnections among discourses of liberalism, representation, development, citizenship, and religion. The various versions of *Punch* and discussions of their cartoons exemplify the enduring impact of a format that entwined politics, caricature, and humor; examining these advances insight into cartoons as a cultural text that historically offered a space for deliberation, for opposition, and for returning the empire's gaze. To give another example: When cartoon-based newspapers commenced publication in nineteenth-century India, speculation arose about the effect on

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those who were unschooled in the appreciation of caricature. The concern found its way into the pages of *Chitravalis* – slim “caricature albums” with assorted cartoons. Baijnath Kedia’s *Vyang Chitravali* (“satirical album”) from Calcutta, Sukhdeva Roy’s *Vyang Chitravali* from Allahabad, and Shiva Narayan Mishra’s *Svang Chitravali* (“mimicry album”) from Kanpur circulated in various parts of India in the 1930s.¹² The caricatures of Indian society and politics rendered reality in a new form (see Figures I.2 and I.3). They evoked alternative ways of thinking about social reformation through topics such as untouchability, education, religious practices, attitudes toward women, and hygiene. Unlike Talcherkar’s large album of cartoons that gave a view of various cartoon-based publications in India (1902), these small albums contained signed Hindi cartoons of T. K. Mitra, D. N. Bannerjee, D. N. Verma, H. Bagchi, and Binoy, giving a glimpse of a generation of cartoonists who were occupied in various artistic activities such as painting and advertising. These artists also contributed to the vernacular *Punch* newspapers, and mentored India’s upcoming professional newspaper cartoonists such as Bireshwar (Bireshwar Prasad), whose life story I narrate in Chapter 4. The notion of cartoonist-as-artist is significant in India and, as I show in Chapter 7, a source of debate about technique and practice. This brings cartoons to the realm of art, thus situating it uniquely on the border between news and art.

Although much has been written about new media technologies and political imagination, less is known about the history and growing influence of older media forms such as newspaper cartoons. By taking cartoons in India seriously, by tracing the professionalization of cartooning, by looking through the eyes of readers, cartoonists, and activists who are busy interpreting the world of cartoons, this book offers a route to understanding the social life of images. It explores the things we say about deeply held political convictions when we see the newspaper cartoon. It was precisely through such engagement as a newspaper reader that I became interested in cartoon talk: things people say or record when they see a cartoon.

We are not dinosaurs!

I find it difficult to pinpoint when and how anthropology and history intertwined as research for this book began; each time I settle on a defining moment, another leaps to take precedence. Because cartoons have occupied me for nearly two decades, readers will see more than one point of intersection; one of these intersections is my meeting with cartoonist *Singh, in New Delhi, in the winter of 2003.¹³ “Oh, so are we dinosaurs now?” said an astonished Mr. Singh, a prominent cartoonist in Delhi,

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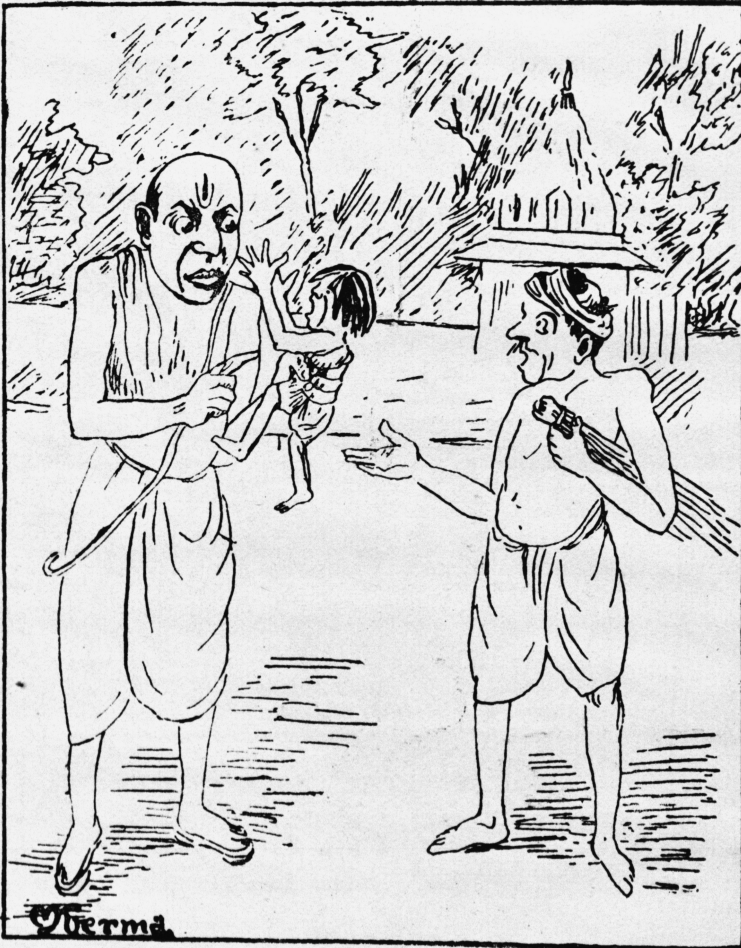
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Uncle Tom-Touchy & untouchable child.



छूत देव और अछूत बालक

छूत देव—“चांडाल की परछाहीं भी अपवित्र कर देती है। अगर फिर कभी मन्दिर की सिङ्दी हुई तो तुझे कच्चा का डालूँगा। नीच, भंगी, चांडाल कहीं का”

I.2 M. Verma, “Uncle Tom-Touchy and Untouchable Child.” *Svang Chitravali: Caricature Album*. n.d. (c. 1929). Kanpur.

after I introduced myself as an anthropologist. Mr. Singh’s astonishment, rather than mine, reversed the order of surprise that ethnography tends to register as part of fieldwork. Embarrassed, I struggled to rephrase my research project: “No, Mr. Singh, that would be archaeology, which is another sub-discipline of anthropology; but I am a cultural anthropologist writing ethnography, a book. I study Indian culture.” “Absolutely inadequate and unconvincing,” I quietly berated myself.

Although I had experienced this confusion of sub-disciplines several times in the United States, I was not prepared for the new way this question would resonate during my fieldwork; here I expected no confusion. But the dinosaur perfectly conveyed the perceived difference – a cultural gap anthropology has long created, only to triumphantly bridge it ethnographically and empathetically for a Western audience. As a disciplined study that strives to produce a cultural relativist perspective, anthropology operates with a notion of time that is quite different from the historian’s. Anthropologists evoke the “ethnographic present” – a signal for readers that ethnographic narratives are rooted in the recent past. Such movement between the unfamiliar and familiar, and between time zones through long-term observation, description, and analysis has long generated many dinosaurs and cultures.¹⁴

But audiences for anthropological writing have since broadened to include scholars, the mythical “general educated reader,” and in the case of this book, the cartoonists themselves. This readership, then, provides one condition for ethnographic writing. Another comes with the conduct of fieldwork. The history and life stories cartoonists were aware of offered “new conditions of ethnographic production” (Clifford 1986, p. 117). When conducting fieldwork, even though I did not see any cartoonist open a version of the “Raponda-Walker compendium” that James Clifford offered as an example of the circuit of data – text to text, rather than oral to text – that intervenes in contemporary interviews, and thereby in ethnographic writing, it is apparent in my own field experience. When I

Caption for I.2 (cont.)

Uncle Tom-Touchy: “A sorcerer’s shadow too is polluting. If you ever again touch the temple’s steps, I will eat you raw. Lowly, sweeper, sorcerer . . .”

Cartoons on the practice of untouchability highlighted the inhumanity in its logic. By showing the priest’s reprimand of a mere child and “touching” him by holding him aloft, the cartoonist points to the incredulity of Hindu social thinking. The man with the broom, perhaps the child’s father, gapes in disbelief at the priest who touches and reprimands in the name of untouchability.