

As the Curtain was Drawn

[A Tribute to the Legendary Cartoonist R. K. Laxman]

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ABSTRACT

R. K. Laxman, the pioneer Indian cartoonist whose cartoons have enlivened the pages of the Times of India for decades, comments on the political phantasmagoria of the country through his legendary Common Man, who is seen hanging around in the background of almost all the significant happenings as a representative of the mute millions of our country. The creator of the illustrious Common Man breathed his last on Jan. 26, 2015, having suffered a multi-organ failure. He was accorded a state funeral at Vaikunth Crematorium in Pune. The Chief Minister of Maharashtra, Devendra Fadnavis, announced a memorial to honour the renowned cartoonist. With his demise, the curtain is drawn on an era of cartooning representing a great deal of ethics and balance. The present article is a tribute to the legendary artist whose birth centenary passed unnoticed in 2021.

Keywords: R. K. Laxman, Cartoonist, Common Man, Cartooning and Caricature, Controlled Distortion, 'Political Cartoons' etc.

With the demise of the legendary cartoonist R. K. Laxman on Jan. 26, 2015, the curtain was drawn down on an era of cartooning representing a great deal of ethics and balance. Laxman enriched the genesis of political cartooning for decades through his brilliant contribution to the columns of the Times of India.

Laxman, the youngest son of Venkatarama Krishnaswamy Iyer, was born on Oct. 24, 1921, in Mysore. His father was a very strict headmaster of Maharaja's High School in Mysore. Rasipuram Krishnaswamy Laxman, who later became a national icon, could not seek admission to the famous J.J. School of Arts. The Dean returned his cartoons with the remark:

"I see no talent whatsoever. Please continue with your studies." (Tunnel, 60)

It was the time when Laxman was already contributing to the local magazine Koravanji. He was also occupied with drawing illustrations for R.K. Narayan's stories in The Hindu. The

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rejection of the application, however, didn't discourage Laxman. He was born to be an icon in the world of cartooning. Laxman carried on with his inherent skill though he couldn't avail the opportunity of getting formal training for the art of cartooning. Later, when he had attained success and repute as a cartoonist, he was invited to the J.J. School of Arts to motivate their students with his gracious presence in the annual exhibition of painting and prize distribution ceremony.

Laxman contributed to several journals and magazines like Swarajya, Blitz, The Hindu, Swatantra and Kannada humour magazine, Koravanji. In 1947, he began contributing as a political cartoonist to Bombay's Free Press Journal. Six months later, he started his career as a political cartoonist with the esteemed newspaper the Times of India; a journey that lasted longer than fifty years. The Times' readers had been very fond of his political cartoons. It is a feature that used to appear on the front page for years. Laxman gained recognition for his exclusive graphics in several books by his elder brother R.K. Narayan. Among these, his illustrations for Malgudi stories are matchless. Shankar Nag directed a serial on these stories. His wonderful creation of the mascot, Gattu, for the Asian Paints group has endeared him to many. There are several films, like Hindi film Mr. and Mrs. 55 and the Tamil film Kamaraj, whose cartoons have drawn people's attention. Laxman also wrote a few short stories and travel articles published in the collection, Idle Hours. He has also produced two novels: Hotel Riviera and The Messenger. Penguin has published a series of his cartoons entitled The Best of Laxman and Laugh with Laxman. In June 1998, the Times of India published a collection of his famous cartoons entitled Fifty Years of Independence through the Eyes of Laxman. For his outstanding creations, Laxman was awarded the Ramon Magsaysay Award (1984), the most significant award for journalism in Asia; in 2005, the Government of India honoured him with the prestigious Padma Vibhushan award. The University of Marathwada conferred on him an honorary degree of the Doctor of Literature. Through his graphic representation of contemporary reality, Laxman has emerged as one of the most penetrating satirists of the day. His cartoons are hilarious and thought-provoking.

Initially, art critics and historians deplored the art of cartooning and caricature as 'a low art'. However, with the passage of time, it gained the status of 'the ideal type of deformity' or the grotesque. Leonardo da Vinci used this kind of deformity to comprehend the concept of ideal beauty. In the sixteenth century, the Italian caricaturist Annibale Carracci wrote:

Is not the caricaturist's task exactly the same as the classical artist's? Both see the lasting truth beneath the surface of mere outward appearance... A good caricature, like every work of art, is more true to life than reality itself. (Navasky, 28)

Thus, a caricaturist aims at perfection even in deformity. For the renowned Indian cartoonist R. K. Laxman, "The art of ideal caricature is to bring out the essence of a personality through credible exaggeration." (Tunnel, 133)

The word caricature is a derivative of the Italian word 'caricare' which means 'to load' as in 'a vessel or a weapon.' A caricaturist invests his image with lots of meaning. Steve Platt, the editor of the New Statesman, writes that the nature of caricature is 'to take a distinctive feature and exaggerate it literally to overload it.' (Navasky, 37) The caricature is a sudden impressionistic sketch that overstates major physical features to produce humour. It reveals the subject's inner self for physiognomic satire. Though caricature is the earliest mode of graphic humour and satire, it could not gain currency as a form and expression of artistic excellence for ages.

The caricature is an important component in the creation of political cartoons, along with allusions. Caricature lampoons the individual and the allusion constructs the context in which the individual is set for the purpose of raising humour or satire. In his widely illustrated work *The Art of Controversy: Political Cartoons and Their Enduring Power*, Victor S. Navasky focuses on the emotional power of cartoons and caricatures as well as their capacity "to enrage, upset, and discombobulate otherwise rational people and groups and drive them to disproportionate- to- the- occasion, sometimes violent, emotionally charged behavior." (Navasky, xxi)

A political cartoon is the outcome of the existing political circumstances. According to Jonathan Burack:

Political cartoons are vivid primary sources that offer intriguing and entertaining insights into the public mood, the underlying cultural assumption of an age, and attitude towards key events or trends of the times. (Burack)

The apparent simplicity of political cartoons is deceptive; the simpler the drawing and the visual image, the more complex the thought behind it. A political cartoon plays an important role in influencing contemporary political reality.

The awesome power of political cartoons has often caused worldwide uproar resulting in censoring, threatening, incarceration and even murder of the cartoonist and caricaturist. Doug

Marlette's cartoon, What Would Mohammad Drive (2009) Barry Blitt's sketch, The Politics of Fear (2008), Danish newspaper Jyllands – Posten's cartoons depicting Prophet Muhammad, and in India, Harish Yadav's cartoon of Narandra Singh Modi, the Chief Minister of Gujarat at that time, are among several instances of caricatures and political cartoons that have aroused protest among people. R.K. Laxman also faced a threat of being banned. Politics provided sufficient fodder for his art. The decision of Morar Ji Desai's government to prohibit drinking didn't please the cartoonist, Laxman, who was a great lover of drinking. Hence he drew a cartoon for which he had to face the displeasure of the great leader. Desai Ji argued that cartoonists shouldn't be allowed to ridicule government, politicians, etc. Bhandari writes:

Thankfully, it did not work: Desai was gently reminded that our constitution protected freedom of speech and expression, and better sense prevailed. (Bhandari 12-13)

Like any other art form, cartoons are meant to be studied and interpreted. Although other forms of art can also be misinterpreted, cartoons' vulnerability to misinterpretation is greater than that of any other form because of cartoons' use of image- language instead of words. An "artist's intention is one thing and the message transmitted by a cartoon, which once released functions as a totem beyond control, is another." (Navasky, 37)

R. K. Laxman exercised 'controlled distortion' to appeal to a class of readers having 'sophisticated taste' (Ibid). The caricaturist in Laxman distorts a person's face without losing the essence of humour in it. He exaggerates and exploits the physical features of great personalities like Morar Ji Desai, Nehru, and Indira Gandhi. Rajeev Gandhi had an impressive personality. Hence, it was a challenge to distort or lampoon a loveable exterior. Yet Laxman could find some aspects for distortion, as he admits:

'I made him look a little more rotund than he really was, I shortened his nose and tilted it slightly upward. I thickened his eyebrows and reduced the hair on his pate, making him nearly bald. Thus having remodelled him to suit my purpose, I began to produce this image day after day for the Times. Shortly, people started to remark that Rajiv had begun to resemble my cartoon version of him, losing his original God- given good looks! (Tunnel, 194)

As Laxman exercises 'controlled distortion,' his caricatures and political cartoons are less vulnerable to misinterpretation and controversy. This disciplined response is rooted in the vibrant comic tradition that India has nurtured for ages. Unfortunately, Indian comic tradition is not widely known and noticed. Even R.K. Laxman, in the introduction to the collections of his cartoons acknowledges that the "art of cartooning came to India from England and struck roots." (Village, vii)

Laxman further concedes that humour and satire existed in India in folklore and popular poetry and also in the ‘funny antics and humourous articles of the court jester.’ (Ibid) In India, there is rich tapestry of court jesters like Birbal, Tenali Rama and Gopal Bhar. The tradition is continued by Nehru’s friend Shankar, in modern India. The laughter-provoking tales of the celebrated court jesters like Tenali Rama, Gopal Bhar and Birbal have been handed down to generations of Indians through oral tradition. These stories have been told and retold in the form of comic strips and storybooks.

In his momentous and amusing analysis of the Indian comic tradition entitled *Laughing Matters: Comic Tradition in India*, Lie Siegel brings to light the essence of Indian comic tradition through a profound survey of the unexplored realms of Indian classical literature. Traditional Indian laughter has been categorized as “laughing at others and laughing at oneself.” (Siegel, xiii) These two categories bear some resemblance to the western tradition of humour and satire. Comic laughter is caused when people try to pose as different from their actual selves, while satire rises from the pretentiousness and hypocrisy itself.

Whereas the humourist laughs at his own cost, the satirist attacks the follies and vices of others. “But reform is merely an occasional by-product of satirical laughter, the excuse for it, not its goal.” (Siegel, 63) R.K. Laxman once said, “I have been working away at these cartoons for over a quarter of a century now, and I do not think that I can show a single instance of changing the mind of a politician from taking a mad course.” (You Said It, vol.5, intro)

It is the motif of the satirist to make the world laugh with him at the existing rot and the consequent speculation is only accidental. Satire and humour are two sides of the same coin; satire makes one laugh at the incongruities of life with a spirit to mend them while humour makes one laugh at the inherent and natural absurdities.

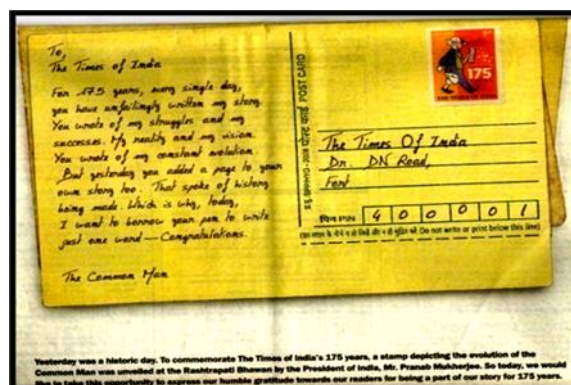
When a cartoonist comments on or ridicules the existing reality, he aims to redeem the world of the existing evil. Laxman’s cartoons and caricatures characterized by humour and satire are meant to perform the licensed court- jester function, unveiling to the administration and government authorities the other side of development and prosperity. His drawings are full of penetrating satire and humour that appears to overshadow the enveloping gloom. His cartooning art primarily focuses on the political wrangling and political byplays that have been staged in India’s politics. His passion for political cartooning has made him draw every significant happening in India’s politics so minutely and painstakingly that ‘A Cartoonist’s

History of India’ could be drawn from his cartoons that appeared regularly in the pages of the Times of India for more than fifty years.

His *Common Man* is a fabulous creation that remained constant despite waves of changes in the country. The Times of India celebrated 175 years of its odyssey as the leading newspaper in India with this ‘ONE CONSTANT’ (TOI, Nov.14, 2013) striding on the front page. This unique creation of Laxman can be seen hanging around a cabinet room, a slum area, a public place, a busy street, a housewife’s kitchen and the like. Through him, Laxman intends to appeal to the common Indian who has mutely accepted the humdrum around him. He is his creator’s instrument to comment on socio-economic and socio-political aspects of Indian life. This legendary creation became synonymous with the Times of India for years. To memorialize 175 years of the Times of India, the Honourable President of India, Pranab Mukherjee, released a stamp portraying the evolution of Laxman’s historic creation, the Common Man:



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(TOI, Nov 14, 2013, 7)

With the help of his Common Man, Laxman attempted to “bring down from their lofty heights, the national, international and local events and render them accessible to the common people.” (Tunnel, 145) His graphic images illustrate a point effectively and convey it instantly to the onlooker without any lanes and lanes of verbal discussion. Visual images are often seriously misinterpreted and arouse immediate uproar, but Laxman’s ‘controlled distortion’ has carefully avoided these potholes. His visual satire and attack on the political paraphernalia of the country have largely functioned without raising any controversies. His ironic detachment restrains him from taking sides. Like his brother R. K. Narayan, Laxman is a minute observer of the

incongruities of life and avoids condemnation or rejection. He only projects the situation with a light humorous vein and holds an ironic smile at the absurdities of society. As a cartoonist of a promising career Laxman cast a keen, observant glance at every social and political occurrence of the time and drew a response whose impact was difficult, rather impossible to avoid as “The quicksand of graphic protest is difficult to anticipate and impossible to escape.” (Devadawson, 1)

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