

# INDIAN POPULAR CULTURE

## Lecture14

### Regional Space for Comics

We come to regional comics, regional cartoon spaces where two important people, one is Bireswar and the other one is Kutty. Out of respect, Khanduri when doing work on Bireswar calls Bireswarji. Very interesting to note that they both were very dear friends they had long-distance friendships and they both came from two different spaces. Interestingly, Kutty also worked for Bengali newspapers and people often used to get surprised as to why he came from Kerala, being a Malayali, fluent in Malayalam, how did he work for a Bengali newspaper?

He was also a follower of Shankar. Shankar was called as the Guru by Kutty. We have Bireswar who was born in Kashi and mostly influenced and learnt drawing in and around his place. He later moved to moved from the Hindi language to the English language.

But he comes from that rich tradition of the Hindi vernacular. Both of them used to talk about everyday political life. It was not about an event in the politics of India, but people's life in and around politics on an everyday basis. Kutty, his enduring importance, the impact was seen in the Bengali language. Most of his great works came in Bengali language.

His inspiration came from when he first saw a cartoon in the temple, which was on Panchatantra. The title was Cat Sanyasi and the Panchatantra became the inspiration for him. He had worked under Shankar as well for quite a long time. And both of them are extremely very famous for the kind of cartoons they drew, which we will discuss in a while, in regional spaces, these two people dominated.

Bideswar and Kutty were among the first cartoonists to establish political cartooning in India. In India's mainstream media we see that Tagore published it in volumes, in two volumes, where he put all his caricatures together. and then we see Shankar who came up with a weekly, Shankar's weekly, where he used

to draw. But it was these two people, Bireshwar and Kutty, who contributed to political cartooning in India through mainstream media.

Both artists left their mark on the Lucknow-based newspaper, The National Herald. Bireshwar rose to become the staff cartoonist, while Kutty's contribution began earlier in his career. They both in ways were very witty and their cartoons offered a critical and humorous lens on Indian politics and society. Vireshwar and Kutty maintained a long-distance friendship. Later on, Kutty moved to the US and he died there.

Exchanging his ideas and letters despite working in different Hindi and English publications though they were working in two different languages, we see they still had that kind of friendship they still looked out for each other and all influenced a lot both coming to their cartoon. First, we'll discuss Bireshwar. Bireshwar's topic is Without Malice and there are few people in that cartoon.

Two men are tied with rope maybe their wives have tied them to the rope it seems because their wives are standing in front of them and the bubble thinks they are saying something. There is another tree where a man is sitting with a book and the title of the book is Law and then there is another set of people; a man and a woman. The commentary goes on the first man who looks quite old.

When the woman is almost shouting at her, his cap just levitates on the air like in shock. Give me half a share of the property. It is about the Hindu Code Bill. Earlier in the Hindu Code Bill, women did not get a share. This lady is demanding perhaps to this old man who is the father.

Then there is another man, and this woman is shouting and saying, I will divorce you. Earlier, Hindu women also did not have the agency to fight against patriarchy and ask for divorce first and next, we have Another lady who is again shouting and saying, marry me without a dowry.

The subtitle says Delhi girls have demonstrated in favour of the Hindu code bill. This cartoon was made in and around the Hindu code bill by Bireshwar, then comes Kutty. Kutty has a new title for this particular cartoon and there is a residence and, on the gate, it is written Finance Minister's Residence and inside there is a tree and on the tree has a lot of fruits and a man is standing on a stool.

That man is Manmohan Singh. and outside there is Pranab Mukherjee who is smoking a cigar and moving he says I planted the seed he enjoys the tree. At one point while Indira Gandhi was the prime minister, Mr. Pranab Mukherjee was the finance minister and he was the one behind to pay back the IMF loan. Therefore, the tree is written IMF and World Bank and the fruits are being plugged by Manmohan Singh and he is eating. It is a commentary on what Pranab Mukherjee did as a finance minister. The benefits (new finance minister Manmohan Singh during the time of liberalization) are still reaped by him. We have another political cartoonist called R. K. Laxman. He was the younger brother of author R. K. Narayanan who wrote the book Guide. R K Laxman was initially rejected from the J. J. School of Arts where he spoke about being rejected when on a later date he was asked to come as a speaker. He got his first job at the Free Press Journal, Bombay, 1947, where Shankar had also worked.

Comparing the style of Shankar, Lakshman had a very different school of cartooning. But even then, there seems to be a comparison. Comparing the style of Shankar, Laxman had a different school of cartooning. Even then, they both were compared. His daily cartoon strip, You Said It, featuring the common man, ran for over five decades in the times of India.

He was basically known for his cartoon and the common man that appeared in this cartoon. This common man was a silent observer of the society. He's a middle-class individual wearing a checked coat. And he represents the voice of the common people. But we'll often see him not making any rt of commentary on the political, social, and cultural issues which gives us humorous insights.

With that, we see that the common man was labelled as the consumer and like every other common man in India, he shared the trait of silence. The common man did not have the agency to speak or make a comment on the politics that was going around, and he was also one of them. Laxman's cartoons don't rely on gods like Tagore or he did not make religious commentary or demons or folktales to explain politics.

Instead, he used everyday life as inspiration to talk about or bring it in a humorous way in his cartoons. He follows the standard artistic rule but adds a control twist to it. capturing and caricaturing people, simple people. His style is

very subtle and his cartoons are never exaggerated while discussing Lakshman, we see his craftsmanship shine.

He skillfully enhances the simple elegance of his cartoons and intricate details. Two cartoons of his that we are about to discuss. One is The Dawn of the New Era, 2005 and Buried Decades Ago, 2005 both these are very important and interesting at the same time. we see there is a picture here.

The dawn satirizes the economic mood of the nation which is called the dawn of the millennial or the new millennial. The common man gazes at the budget painting being drawn. the minister is standing and he's painting the budget and it looks very shiny. And there is a bubble, thought bubble where it says, there you are, the budget. dawn of the new era and on the backside of that painting there are these common people poor people who are peeping out it seems as if the bubble and also legs are coming out from there the rising sun is written as budget and there are houses and greenery everything other than the real issues regarding the major population the poor population of India and the second one, buried decades ago, is about the yesterdays or yesteryears, the problems of the society, especially the problems of sati, dowry, untouchability, caste and everything, the evils of the society in a way. the picture is the common man there and another person is standing and the common man is looking in amazement. There is a burial site or a tombstone and it is open, and people there look like ghosts. Ghosts are coming out from there and these are the ghosts of sati, ghosts of the dowry system, the untouchability. Because in the tombstone it is written, and buried decades ago and sati, dowry system, untouchability, child marriage, caste system. They never left the society the country believed or how it was shown to the larger population that these things are very conservative and have been buried and moved out of the city decades ago but that's not the case and that is why The common man is looking in amazement. The next cartoon of Shankar is about Gandhi.

He says that there is a place, it looks like an old town or a village. the houses are made of straw and tile and it looks like a small village. But there is Gandhi who is walking and interestingly it is written Mahatma Gandhi Road. It is a commentary on what liberalization did to India.

Gandhi was promoting Swadeshi and Gandhi was fighting for the nation's independence. But Gandhi is amazed to see that the name itself is Mahatma Gandhi Road and all the foreign brands are there. On the walls of the house, the ad is of Pepsi. There is a bullock cart which is filled with Coca-Cola.

On the side of the bullock cart, it is written, enjoy Coca-Cola and there is a hut where it is written Kellogg's Corn Flakes. There is 'Eat at McDonald's', Gucci, Sony. All these brands in a way, talk about the liberalization, how it is coinciding, and how Gandhi would have imagined India like this.

Or did he ever imagine India to be somewhat like this? we have Abu Ibrahim, another very significant cartoonist. He drew emergency days. he was the only popular voice who brought out the turmoils of emergency days.

He was the one who was bringing out the evils of the reign of Indira Gandhi he was a renowned voice, Abu Ibrahim, and a prominent Indian cartoonist known for his sharp wit and social commentary. He has called that period the dark period during which the emergency of India 1975 to 77, a time of strict censorship. we saw two people, Kutty and al Shankar who drew their cartoons and it ended before the emergency because of censorship and there is Abraham emerged as a defiant voice his works can be used as an archive for popular voices during the emergency days his satire on the face of oppression. Abraham continued to introduce, to produce cartoons that subtly satirized the government and its policies. He was a very good friend of Rajiv Gandhi and he knew Indira Gandhi personally. Even then, he dared to bring out the discourse around emergency, and how it is seen as an evil in politics and the nation altogether.

Two very important cartoons of him. One is Indira Gandhi holding a shaft and written revolution and she's pulling a donkey and the donkey is tied by the neck and there's a rope that she's pulling. It was during the emergency period that she promised to bring revolution. But she made the cabinet pathetic. Their mental status and plight are represented in this particular cartoon, where it seems that the cabinet is unable to speak.

It could also mean that Mrs Gandhi is choking them and just dragging them along with that. They are unable to resist. and the other important political cartoon on Indira Gandhi, there's a wall painting or picture of Indira Gandhi and the leaders or followers of Gandhi are standing in front with folded hands and it is written

Madam on the wall fairest of the wall which reminds us of Snow White where the mother stepmother used to ask the mirror mirror mirror on the wall who is fairest of them all in the similar way they are already declared her to be the fairest now

He has been able to navigate through the censorship, through the cartoons that he brought in., and he employed clever metaphors and imagery to convey the meanings. these two cartoons of Abu Abraham tell us how it was interesting and opposing in the same way that he could bring these discourses of emergency in and around his cartoons. The Chronicle of Resistance, he served as a historical record of emergency.

We can say that it is also in a way an archive, capturing the anxieties and struggle of the period of emergency. His most famous cartoon, scheduled to be released, three days after the emergency, was censored. he is the third person whose cartoon was censored during the emergency and before the emergency as well. We have O.V. Vijayan and O.V. Vijayan is also among one of the cartoonists who drew political figures.

He, as it has been talked about, and only one of the contemporary cartoonists says this for O.V. Vijayan. He junked anatomy altogether and reduced his figures to geometrical forms which he spread around in a space that held like today's computer graphics. The background was left under detail or was bottled out by the black patch inked in with a coarse cloth. He seemed to be preparing the cartoons for darker days. he has talked about the darker days of politics. Again, bringing back in context Indira Gandhi, he drew a lot of cartoons in and around Indira Gandhi. Vijayan was a skilled writer, a multi-talented person. Other than being a cartoonist, he was also a writer and his cartoons became more serious as his outlook grew gloomier, especially by the mid of the 1970. see, we are again in that era of emergency. and he again tried to bring in that outlook by the cartoons that he made. He already blackpashed it because he was preparing himself for the darker days, as mentioned by Unni. It could be due to the national mood of the war.

Initially, they won the war, the Bangladesh war. Peace was lost. Election won. Economy lost. A nuclear implosion to show off.

He's targeting the smiling Buddha. nuclear show that is mentioned and the jobless young ready to explode. Mrs Gandhi's fortunes were getting too mixed for

comfort. he's giving a picture of what was happening during the 70s. It was a mixed period but mostly he felt gloomier which was also coming out in his pictures, in his cartoons.

With the inclusion of female cartoons. We see that India lacked great female cartoonists in terms of number, but we still have a handful who can be seen as the inspiration for the coming generation of female cartoonists. this India Book House first comics publisher with an educational approach towards comics brought in a large number of middle-class women educators who in turn hired more in return they hired more women illustrators and this is how they brought in the cartoonists, the women cartoonists in India.

Maya Kamath is one of the most recognized cartoonists and Kamath's inspiration was the Canadian cartoonist Lynn Johnston. Lynn Johnston was the inspiration for Maya Kamath and the populist strip on the life of the family for better or for worse and this seems to have brought her to cartooning. we see that her career as a professional cartoonist began in 1985 in a comic strip in the Evening Herald.

Another important person amongst women cartoonists was Manjula and she was also considered among the few acclaimed women cartoonists of this genre. Like before Kamath, she had used cartoon strips and called it suki but it was not political in nature and therefore if we are talking about political cartooning which was later published as a book had been not political in nature. Other cartoonists belonged to the realm of women political cartoonists. Meeta Roy, Samita Rathore, and Nalini Reddy are other women cartoonists whose names surface occasionally other than Kamath and Manjula.

We further see that what might be the reason for Kamath's, absence of female political cartoonist and Khanduri, Rita Khanduri gives, Ritu Khanduri gives us the reason. and one of the reasons she states is for the scant references Could be that Kamath had died early. due to Kamath's early demise, we don't see many female cartoonists, or female political cartoonists in India. Another Manjula who became internationally famous later on drew political strips, not daily political cartoons. These two might be the reason. and she says that we don't know, don't know why the other people, other cartoonists like Mita and Reddy, did not make it as great as Kamath and Manjula did. Two very famous cartoons by these female cartoonists. One is made by Manjula and the other one is made by Maya

Kamath. the cartoon made by Manjula, there is a stage and she names it the Miss Satellite Contest. and there are various different news channels and anchors, especially the female anchors on the stage. and it is in a way very disgraceful how people understood Doordarshan. there is Miss CNN who is in a beautiful nightgown.

Then there is Miss Star in a dress. Then we have Miss Sun. It was a Tamil-based channel, news channel. She's wearing a floral sari and a nice bun. and then there is Miss Doordarshan, who's shown as a fat lady with round glasses, which is unlike these three. and therefore, it speaks out loud how people used to consider Doordarshan and al did not go back to Doordarshan to watch the news because the news readers, according to them, were not beautiful enough. Then we have Maya Kamath and there is the Parliament building in the background and five women standing with a placard and it's about a woman's place in the house. It is very witty what's written on that placard. "A woman's place is in the house" basically she is talking about the Parliament House and not the house where they are asked to be domestic. there is a long list of contemporary cartoonists beginning with Ajit Ninan. We have Unni, Gokul Gopalakrishnan, Keshava, Manjul, Ravi Shankar Etthe, and Krutika Susarla, which we already discussed in comics. Then we have Sandeep Adhwaryu. Satish Acharya and Uday Deb. Rachita was discussed in sanitary panels. These are the contemporary cartoonists. We will discuss two of them. One is Unni and the other one is Uday Deb. Unni's a very recent cartoon that came up in Indian Express, on 13th May 2024 freeze frame. It says about the recent Election Commission of India. There are a lot of papers in there, a stack full of files and papers. And the Election Commission chairman is sitting there is a reference Mr. Seshan, who was in office as chief election commissioner, between 1990 to 1996. Mr. Seshan was a very dynamic figure. He fought for the Bahujans and he was assassinated. He was murdered. It makes a dig at the election commission of today.

Next we have Uday Deb. Uday Deb has made a sketch kind of a face where the man is saluting. He is wearing round glasses, and looks like a chubby man or a boy the mouth is stitched and in each stitch one word is written and that word completes as freedom. In a way, our mouths are stitched, and we are unable to speak, which is one of our fundamental rights, the right to speech, which is being taken away.