CARICATURE, COLONIALISM AND 19TH CENTURY BENGAL

To trace the origin of cartooning in Bengal, we must start with the native scroll painters or *Patuas*. The *patachitras* - the thriving tradition of hand-painted scrolls which unfold through sequence of illustrations had, by mid-19th century, started to embrace a contemporary idiom. For example, an overfed Vaishnava mendicant, fisticuffs among rustic womenfolk, in-laws tormenting a hapless young bride, roughing up of a pleasure-seeker by brothel inmates etc. were subjects drawn straight from the daily life of mid-19th century Calcutta, and can be considered as a home-bred variant of what eventually came to be known as illustrated caricature. The standardisation of the Bengali alphabet and Bengali font had by then mobilised the Bengali printing press, leading to the famous chapbooks or *Bat-tala* publications. These *Bat-tala* publications had focussed on the erotic and the socially transgressive as much as it started to gradually print hagiographies, almanacs, pamphlets, advertisements, rustic ballads, epics and sundries. Printed on wooden blocks, illustrations in these books, accompanying the text, could also be called a precursor to caricature in Bengal.
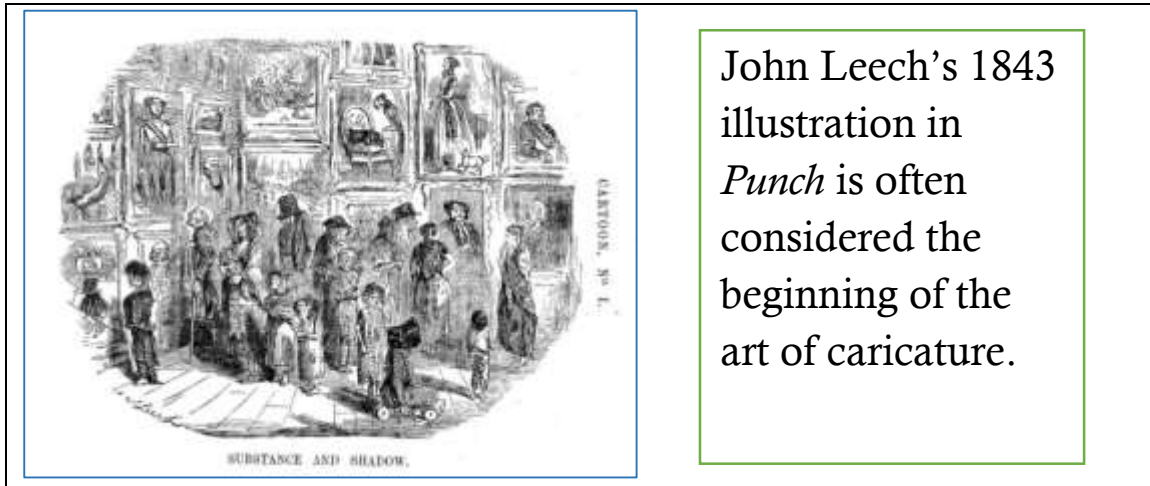

Priyogopal Das
Asit Pal, *Unish Sataker Bangla Kath Khodai : Priyogopal Das*

Priyogopal Das' Battala-style caricature in woodcut, late 19th century.

.

These indigenous sources apart, there was also the influence of British humour, most recognisably through the iconic 19th century magazine

Illustrated Humour in Bengal

Punch. A sketch by John Leech in the 105th issue of *Punch* (1843) is designated as the first 'cartoon'. And things at *Punch* and those which it aimed its barbs at, were never the same after.

SUBSTANCE AND SHADOW.

John Leech's 1843 illustration in *Punch* is often considered the beginning of the art of caricature.

But even if we know what caricature is, how do we define it?

Among the seminal contributions of art historian EH Gombrich is his historization of caricature as well. For Gombrich, caricature can be traced to the mid-17th century but it was only with the politically charged 19th that mock portraits came of age, gradually liberating itself from the age-old discomfort with the act of distorting someone's likeness. In this liberation resides its wide popular appeal. Caricature, Gombrich says, is "the conscious distortion of the features of a person with the aim of ridicule (that) exercised a new form of art." He traces it to early theorists like Balniducci, who called it *ritratti carrichi* or 'caricature'. For Gombrich then, caricature means those "portraits where likeness is in a certain sense distorted. The weakest features are exaggerated and this serves to unmask the victim. As a whole, the drawing is like the model though single features are deliberately changed. The result produces a comic sensation…but also it is a likeness more true than mere imitation could be. And caricature, showing more of the essential, is truer than reality itself.[i]"

This was par for the course at *Punch*, which, since its early success, made illustrated caricature its primary weapon to mock everything that

came under its view, and often those which did not, the colonial experience being the primary example of the latter. As Ritu Khanduri says[ii],

> 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. 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.

Certainly *Punch* was neither the only one doing these caricatures. Colonialism featured ever more centrally in Europe's public debate in the second half of the 19th century. Richard Scully and Andrekos Varnava, in their recent anthology, begins with *Punch*'s iconic 1892 cartoon by Linley Sambourne on Cecil Rhodes. Then they write:[iii]

> Appearing on a weekly basis in magazines like *Punch*, and its chief rivals of the period – including *Fun*, *Judy*, and *Moonshine* – cartoons were a key means by which British readers encountered and engaged with issues of empire and imperialism. Across the Channel, the immense power of French satirical art also sustained a particular focus on matters imperial (via *Le Charivari* and its imitators); and in Germany, the cartoonists of *Kladderadatsch*, *Die Fliegende Blätter*, and *Simplicissimus* intervened regularly in the debates over overseas expansion that characterised the period of the 'New Imperialism'. Indeed, in Thomas Theodor Heine's 'Kolonialmächte [Colonial Powers]' from

Simplicissimus's special 1904 number on 'the colonies' one finds perhaps the only rival to Sambourne's comment on European imperialism in terms of visibility and enduring influence.

Left: Linley Sambourne, 'The Rhodes Colossus', *Punch*, 1892, Right. Thomas Theodor Heine, 'Kolonialmächte', *Simplicissimus*, 1904.
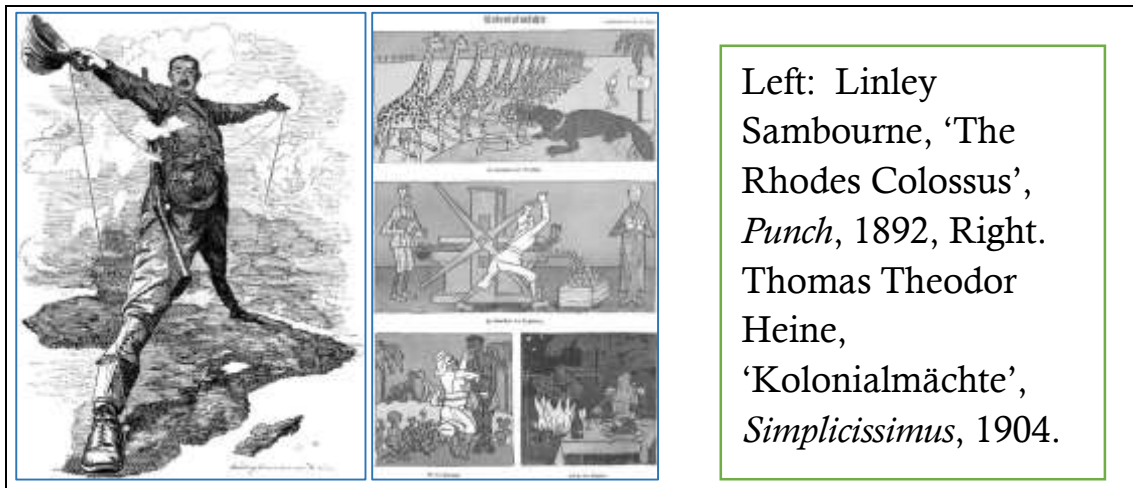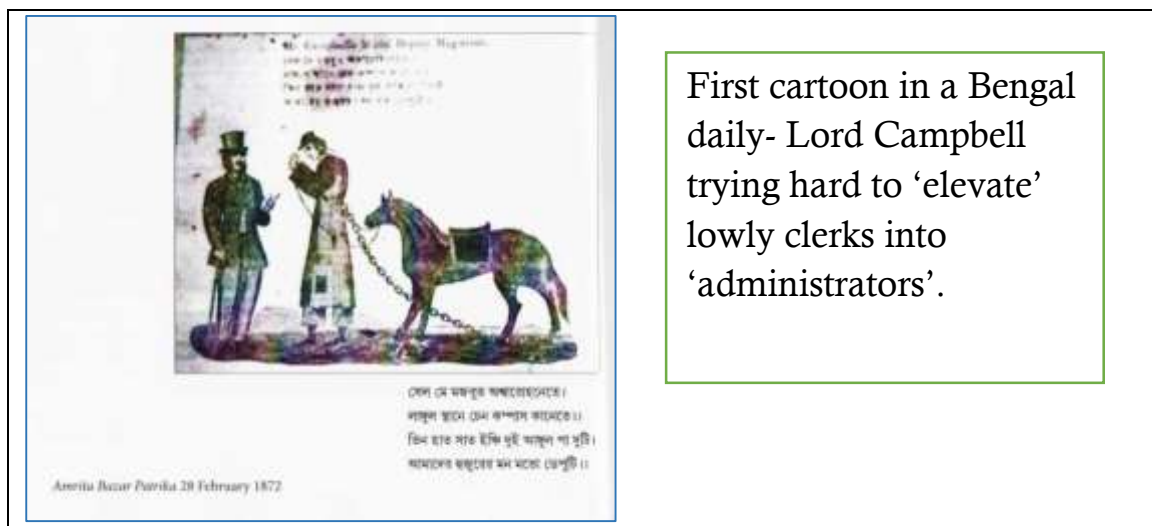
In India, however, colonial caricature was not a one-way critique of imperial lust. Rather it was a complex habitation. By 1850s, keepers of colonial wisdom started to use cartoons more often, one Mr Saunders' *The Delhi Sketch Book* being one. Another early example was Herbert Benjamin Edwards - the English Commissioner of Peshawar and Ambala - who drew cartoons under the pseudonym Brahminee Bull. The short-lived *Indian Punch (*and sundry other Indian variables of *Punch*) carried much promise but they were all short-lived. It was hence left to Percy Windham's 1872-born *Indian Charivari* to bring caricature to the fore with its savage critique of Bengali ambition of attaining the stature of the British. Art historian Partha Mitter, in a 1997 essay tried to offer a brief history of early cartoons in India. He writes[iv]:

> What kept the Britons together was a tacitly shared ideology of imperial calling which permeated Victorian self-image and threw into bold relief the essential *otherness* of the colonised. The clearest expression of British attitude was the popular

Illustrated
Humour in Bengal

Overview
A Public History Project Under the SMG Scheme
at Ambedkar University Delhi

Ambedkar University Delhi

literature of the period glorifying the empire's civilising mission.

There was particular resentment against the Bengali *bhadrolok*, which, as Mitter says, constituted a competitive and disaffected intelligentsia. This class, while imitating its ways and fast learning its language, remained consistently critical of British 'values'. Hence no amount of canvassing for the Empire's so-called 'benign intentions' helped in securing the unquestioned conformism of that class, who had, post the mutiny, started to use liberal public debates in England against its policies in the colony. Much of that *speaking back* came in the form of caricature, which poked fun as much at the hypocrisies of settler whites as much as the affectations of those who imitated them thoughtlessly.

First cartoon in a Bengal daily- Lord Campbell trying hard to 'elevate' lowly clerks into 'administrators'.

We must note that the idea of satiric periodicals which would poke fun at everything predates the original *Punch* by almost two decades in Bengal. As Chaiti Basu's recent work has brought to light, it was *Brahman Sebadhı* (Worshipper of Brahmins, 1821) that may have initiated the trend of satiric periodicals, followed by *Dalbrittanta* (Tale of Factionalism, 1832) *Saṃbad Rasaraj* (King of Juicy news, 1835–1839), *Paṣaṇḍa Puṛan* (Chastisement of Rogues, 1840–1857), *Bhairab Daṇḍa* (The Staff of Bhairaba [the henchman of the god of death Yama], 1847), *Prakrita Mudgar* (The Veritable Mace, 1854), *Durjjandaman Mahanabamı* (The Wicked-Quelling

Monthly, 1847), *Yeman Karma Temni Phal* (As you Sow, So you Reap, 1861). They were popular, short lived and had no pretence to sobriety and cultural authority. As Basu[v] says, "a clear tone of aggressive violence is detectable in many of the above-mentioned titles. Most of these magazines engaged in undiscriminating mud-slugging and slanderous scandal-mongering and relied mainly on gossip". What can be deduced that the tenor and content of these periodicals (or as is likely, their heirs) seemed to have improved substantially when they consciously tried to reach out to a more educated, discerning readership that was fed on *Punch*, specially 1860s onwards. The various *Punch* editions had shown that circulation increased when colonial power relations were explained through caricatures. So there was increasing appetite to include funnies, the difficulty of printing images notwithstanding. Indian publications, gaining traction in the nascent anti-colonial sentiments prevailing post-1857, found the political turf productive for caricature. Hence came the more sophisticated, sometimes illustrated satires of *Harbola Bhaṛ* (The Mimicking Jester, 1874), *Basantak*, Indranath Bandyopadhayay's *Ponchananda* (1878-1883), *Hutom* (The Hooting Owl, 1875), *Bongıyo Bhanṛ* (The Bengali Jest) etc. But only *Harbola Bhaṛ* and *Basantak* published caricatures in every issue in their short lives.

It was two years before them, in 1872 (28th February, to be precise) that *Amrita Bazar Patrika* published an anonymous cartoon, a first for a daily in Bengal, on Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal George Campbell's efforts at training Bengali bureaucrats. Was this the first work of indigenous caricature in any Indian language? History says so. And it is indeed a most illustrious – pun intended - history since. The turf had been prepared. The first municipal polls in Calcutta, in 1874, for example, gave birth to one of the most telling cartoons *in Bosontok*[vi].

Mitter mentions another source [vii]: "One of the first cartoons by an Indian to make a political impact was published in the Bengali newspaper *Sulav Samachar* in the 1870s, highlighting a glaring injustice. Often poorer Indians were assaulted by Europeans, leading to their death. lf the case came to court at all, the victim's 'enlarged spleen' was blamed for his death. The cartoon shows a dead coolie with his wife weeping next to him. A European doctor conducts a perfunctory post-mortem while the offender

stands nonchalantly smoking a cigar. The cartoon, with its suggestion of collusion between European authorities and the offenders, was one of the seditious pieces that provoked the Raj into imposing vernacular press censorship in 1878.”

In 1872, *Harbola Bhand* and *Basantak* were published and touted, again, as 'Indian Punch', as it was working within the conventions set by the magazine. But their humour was substantially more developed and pointed that their peers. *Basantak* in fact, went on to play a pioneering role in the popularisation of cartoons in Bengal. The illustrated periodical commented on a host of contentious issues including the management of the city, the thoughtless implementation of arbitrary laws, delusional social mores etc. It is also said to have introduced the sequential/composite narrative, moving away from the conventions of a single-frame cartoon. Mitter writes[viii]: “The stock characters - hypocritical zaminder, henpecked husband, pompous academic, obsequious clerk, illiterate Brahmin were the cartoonists' favourites. Characteristic behaviour and typical cultural situations, such as the plump head clerk returning from the bazaar with his favourite fish or the thin schoolteacher with stick-like arms and legs were well-captured in drawing after drawing”. Another recurrent motif in caricatures was about the liberated modern women, often feeding on the anxieties of the Bengali man in perpetual threat of being emasculated. Not just *Punch*, in early comics in Bengal, Mitter also sees traces of Thomas Rowlandson and James Gillray, two of pioneers of the form, who worked in London in the early years of 19th century. *Basantak* has also received attention from other younger scholars. Chaiti Basu has expounded on the bigger influence *Punch* had in Bengal. But none could surpass *Basantak,* whose promoters had a two-fold interest. She writes[ix]:

> Firstly, the presence of the English *Punch* began to be felt in Kolkata, not only among the Europeans of the so-called white town, but also among the educated babus and bhadralok (gentle folk). Many of them were well-versed in English and other European literatures and cultures, and they saw in *Punch* the ablest means of self-criticism and self-

> mockery. They tried to employ this very
> mechanism to expose the hypocrisy and corruption
> in their own society. On the other hand, it had also
> enabled the babus and bhadralok to exercise
> indirect criticism of British colonial power without
> entering into any direct open conflict, as was
> witnessed some years later in 1891 with the
> defamation suit against the neo-Hindu *Bangabasi* by
> the British Government.

There is also a parallel history of sequential illustrated narrative (often synonymously if not always correctly, called comics), which also seems to have been born in the thorny racial relations of the colony. And here too, *Basantak* played a key role. It was in *Basantak*'s 12th issue, (31st January,1874) where 'Kirkwood Bilas, Chittagong Plantain' (The Kirkwood Episode at Chittagong Plantain) was published. It was a sequential narrative in pictures, which highlighted the plight of Chittagong Municipality member Lalchand Choudhury at the hands of Kirkwood, a high-ranking British official. It was alleged that Kirkwood humiliated him during one of their encounters, after which Lalchand lodged a complaint, went to court and won the case. But Kirkwood was promoted. The three-page humorous take on this incident had all the makings of a comics[x].

Thus by the early 1870s, born out of a thick public discourse about negotiating the Colonia, Bengal had seen both the single-image caricature and sequential storytelling that were home-grown and derivative at the same time and provided a platform for lampooning the colonial administrator as well as the native acolytes. This was just the beginning. As Srimati Ghosal has recently written[xi], the first phase of political cartooning, which so began in 1972, continued till 1910, this phase being marked by,

> The development of nascent political aspirations
> within the Indian subcontinent in demanding self-
> governance. With the suppression of the Revolt of
> 1857, the handover of power from the East India
> Company to the Queen and parliament, and a
> general ushering in of political modernity in the

subcontinent, there was a characteristic change in the public sphere and political aspirations of the Bengali colonial subject, which reflected in the cartoons of this era.

A potential voter assailed by vote-seekers. *Janmabhoomi*. 1892

Since late 1870s, there is increasing evidence of British discomfort in the intrepid nature of local press and we see, starting 1878, laws that were enacted to chain ambitious promoters and editors who thrived on critique *of* and provocation *against* the empire. This could one of the reasons for the comparative retreat of political caricature after its brazen beginning in Bengal. Social humour continued, nevertheless. In fact, the *political* in the tradition of illustrative humour returned to public life only when the subcontinent entered the last three tumultuous decades of its colonial life.

CARTOONING AND STORYTELLING IN THE 20TH CENTURY

The second phase of the history of caricature in Bengal could be said to have been inaugurated in 1921, when Sukhalata Rao introduced speech bubbles in her work for the *Sandesh* magazine, then run by her brother Sukumar Ray. In fact, *Sandesh* nurtured illustrated humour and gave it a sophisticated edge, especially with the incredibly pregnant caricatures of Sukumar himself, a legacy his son Satyajit carried in his own illustrations years later. Sukhalata's comic strip was complete with a plot, conclusion and speech balloon. The comics *Jemon Kormo*

Temni Fol (As you sow, so you reap) is about a boy who plays pranks with his teacher - who looks every bit a Brahmo – by emptying a bucket of water thinking him to be Sidhu, the milkman. 'Here cometh Sidhu, the milkman' were the first words enclosed in a speech balloon in the history of comics in Bengal. Sukumar's sequential pictures had a rhyme in place of a speech balloon. His *Bujhbar Bhul* (Mistaken Perception) and *Chobi o Golpo* (Pictures and Stories) were also published in *Sandesh* in 1922, and could be said to be the earliest example of funnies in Bengal.

If Ray family members Sukumar and Sukhalata provided one major traction to the life of cartoons in Bengal, the other was the redoubtable Gaganendranath Tagore. By the second decade of the 20th century, he had modernized the art of cartooning with three remarkable books - *Birup Bajra* (Play of Opposites), *Adbhutlok* (Realm of the Absurd) and *Nabahullor* (Reform Screams). Tagore is said to have elevated cartooning to high art, filling them with satire against Bengalis trying too hard to imitate the British. For both Mitter and Prof Subhendu Dasgupta - a senior author and researcher on the subject- Gagan Tagore brought a distinct modernity with his play of light and shade, depth and volume, and an 'expressionist' urgency comparable to the best of European illustrative humour art. Even the hard-to-please Nirad C. Chaudhuri had famously compared Gagan Tagore to the French pioneer Honoré-Victorin Daumier, whom the novelist Balzac had called the Michelangelo of caricature.

The ballast that Gaganendranath provided did not wane in the next few decades as cartoons and caricature became more political, responsive and biting. It found new platforms, new practitioners and a new public. Ghosal writes[xii] that since the 1930s, new political events:

> "Found deep resonance with the cartoonists of the era. *Yugantor*, the Bengali daily from the Amritabazar Patrika group, opened up to famed cartoonists including Revati Bhushan, Kafi Khan, Amal Chakraborty and Saila Chakraborty. *Yugantor* cartoonists brought with

Illustrated
Humour in Bengal

Overview
A Public History Project Under the SMG Scheme
at Ambedkar University Delhi

Ambedkar University Delhi

them a new lexicon of nation building that went beyond criticising the British and focussing on the idea of nationalism. While some openly supported the two-nation theory, others contested this with a more secular outlook. The most striking images, however, were the works of the socialist artist Chittoprasad Bhattacharya. He covered the Bengal Famine extensively in simple pen-and-ink drawings. Easily reprinted in cheap copies, these were used by the Communist Party of India (CPI) as socialist propaganda against the colonial government as well as the Indian National Congress, which was perceived by the socialists to be an ally of the British ruling class. The striking factor about most of Chittoprasad's work is that it was made to mobilise and organise rather than express opinions, criticise or simply produce humour, in fact, much of these cartoons were not even humorous.

Gaganendranath drew for landmark intellectual periodicals like *Probashi* and *Modern Review,* which made way *Bharati*, *Agamani*, *Narayani*, and *Basumati.* They compulsively and compulsorily included caricatures, indicating its new found respectability in Bengal cultural life. New practitioners like Dinesh Das, Charu Roy, Jatin Sen, Banbihari Mukhopadhyay, Satish and Jatish Chandra Singha, Binoy Basu, Haripada Roy, Debiprasad Roychowdhury and Ramkrishna Bhaduri came to the fore. Magazines like *Sachitra Bharat*, *Joshti Madhu*, *Sanibarer Chithi* made cartoons a major part of their attraction. The 1930s onwards, we see major caricaturists emerging with their signature styles. Prafulla Chandra Lahiri, a history professor, left his job to become a professional cartoonist in *Jugantor* and *Amrita Bazar Patrika.* He took the pen-name of both Khafi Khan and Piciel. Lahiri was joined in succession by Saila Chakraborty, Rebotibhusan Ghosh, Naren Ray (or Sufi), Amal Chakraborty, Chandi Lahiri and others,

each enriching their art with their own style, mannerism and the nature of their encounter with both social forces and the polity of their time.

The near-history of cartooning and caricature in Bengal, say from the 1960s to 2000, is surely to be written but certainly it is one of great triumph followed by inevitable decline, a pattern familiar to those who have studied Bengal's cultural life closely. In this case, the decline has much to do with the decline in publications that were willing to back, stand by and even promote irreverence, satire, lampoon and general scepticism for holier-than-thou institutions in particular and civilizational trappings in general. Cartooning and caricature (unlike comics), as the example of *Punch* had since its dawn made clear, needs platform of expression. Even better, if they are in tandem with commentaries on public affairs. Cartoon strips, singles, gags, by definition, so not stand on their own. So as mainstream dailies in Bengal abandoned daily cartoons/pocket cartoons, the political edge of cartooning culture thickened over time. Funny illustrations accompanying reports or features are still visible but the cartoonist as an influential public intellectual and purveyor of public debate declined irreversibly since the 1980s. It is precisely for the same reason that the explosion in social media penetration in the last decade has resuscitated stand-alone strips and political cartooning, because now the cartoonist as artist can once again reach out, this time directly, to the reader/consumer/viewer.

The story of comics is a bit different.

The serialised storytelling continued on the side lines of the golden age of cartooning in Bengal (1930s-1960s), even if it lacked the piquant bestiary of Sukumar and his wondrous critiques of the archetypes of the Colonia. Comics stayed true to its roots in children's adventures, slapstick, and somewhat forceful gags, be it Jatin Saha or Samar De or Pratul Chandra Bandopadhyay. Cartoon practitioners Saila Chakraborty and Prafulla Chandra Lahiri did some interesting work in comics, but not much indigenous content was generated through the years before Narayan Debnath arrived on the scene. Much of what was popular was derived from landmark western comics, some were indigenised adaptation of popular western classics, or were about lives of great men. Some of the them distinctly stood out as a painstaking effort to create a Bengal

specific iconography within the framework of greater nationalistic aspirations. But that's about it. Amal Chakraborti, Naren Ray (Sufi), Reboti Bhusan were also drawing comics occasionally. Publishers like Deb Sahitya Kutir strongly invested in an overtly nationalistic project of shaping the middle-class, literate Bengali readers into 'model citizens' of the independent democracy. They liberally borrowed and transformed the existing Anglo-American genre fiction tropes and comics into hybridized, indigenous forms in text and visuals.

It was all set to change with Narayan Debnath.

Narayan Debnath, who drew gags and funny capers, launched his hugely successful *Batul the Great* in 1965, creating an artistic precedent in nearly everything that followed its publication. It is argued by many that Batul comic strips, whose likeness with Dangerous Dan is unmistakable, is a kind of localization of the superhero theme for an audience who doesn't respond too well to jingoism and blood and gore. The heroics of the broad chested invulnerable Batul acted as morale booster in the wake of the Bangladesh Liberation War, even if Batul differed sharply from his American counterparts in becoming an instrument for national propaganda. Debnath's other characters, particularly Nante and Fante, was a strip in the lineage of his famous Hada and Bhoda sans tussle, even if neither could avoid gross and repeated use of tedious stereotyping. Debnath's contemporary Mayukh Choudhury drew recklessly and almost singlehandedly created several genres in comics in Bengal – adventure, thriller, action, western etc., which has not been followed with any sincerity by one artist since Choudhury. After 1964, Indrajal Comics, an imprint of Bennet and Coleman, published syndicated comics from the United States - Phantom, Mandrake, Rip Kirby, Flash Gordon. They touched a chord with the Indian readers. 1966 onwards, they were translated into Bengali and became staple of childhood attraction in the 1970s.Exceptions came in the form Saila Chakraborty's *Domru Charit*, a comic adaptation of Troilokyanath Mukhopadhyay's famous work; or in the form of Sufi's *Maidane Timi Shikar* (Whale Hunting in Kolkata Maidan, 1976).

By the middle of the 1970s, *Anandamela* magazine, which acquired, translated and published syndicated comics, had captured much of the

market of *Shuktara* and *Kishor Bharati*, and the local artists and meagre local content lost even more ground. Only exception was perhaps Adventures of Sadashiv, a photorealistic comics based on a popular historical fiction by Saradindu Bandopadhyay (the author of Byomkesh) that appeared in *Anandamela*. It has since remained a hallmark in Bengali comics.

Even if Indian comics and graphic novels have progressed to explore newer territories of expression, style and content in the last two decades, Bengali comics has lacked new, edgy material, exceptions being Madhuja Mukherjee's *Kangal Malsat* and *Gandur Mundu* by Oddjoint Narrative (drawn by Sambaran Das) and a small body of work by Abhijit Chattopadhyay, Sarbojit Sen, Sujog Bandopadhyay, Harsho Mohan Chattoraj etc.

Together, the life of illustrated humour and narrative in Bengal, which have gone through periods both of thrive and decline, is ultimately rich, colourful, persuasive and spirited. The current emprise profiles forty-five cartoonists, periodicals and storytellers and provides annotated sampling of their multifarious concerns, political bent and caricaturing craft. It is an effort to restore to public domain an essentially public art.

Much more can and should be done in this domain.

Rituparno Basu
Sayandeb Chowdhury

NOTES

[i] E. H. Gombrich, (with Ernst Kris) 'The Principles of Caricature', *British Journal of Medical Psychology*, 17:1938, pp 319-42; p 319

[ii] Ritu Kahnduri, Caricaturing Culture in India: Cartoons and History in the Modern World, Cambridge University Press, 2014; p4

[iii] Richard Scully and Andrekos Varnava (ed) *Comic Empires: Imperialism in Cartoons, Caricature, and Satirical Art,* Manchester University Press, 2020, p 3.

[iv] Partha Mitter, 'Cartoons of the Raj', *History Today,* 47:9, 1997, pp 16-21, p 17.

[v] Chaiti Basu, 'The Punch Tradition in Late Nineteenth Century Bengal: From Pulcinella to Basantak and Pancu', H. Harder and B. Mittler (eds.), *Asian Punches, Transcultural Research*. Heidelberg Studies on Asia and Europe in a Global Context, pp 111-149; p 113

[vi] See entry on this website

[vii] Mitter, p 16.

[viii] Ibid p 19

[ix] Basu, p 111

[x] See panel accompanying entry on *Bosontok*.

[xi] Srimati Ghosal, *Political Caricature in Colonial Bengal* (1872–1947), Sahapedia, June 22, 2020. See https://www.sahapedia.org/political-caricature-colonial-bengal-1872-1947

[xii] Srimati Ghosal, *Political Caricature*