



Gaganendranath Tagore, *Poet's First Flight from London to Paris.*

INTRODUCTION

2022 marks the sesquicentennial of what can be called the first use of caricature in an Indian daily. Since that date in 1872 (if not before, in the case of publications with British ownership), illustrated humour has been a key part of India's public life - be it cartoons, strips, political caricature or graphic storytelling. But its long and rich life in the subcontinent has not been substantively archived. This project, financed by Ambedkar University Delhi, is an effort to systematically digitize and annotate a part of the vast visual history of illustrated humour in Bengal. Populated with rare images and a substantive overview essay, the website, divided into three sections (cartoonists, periodicals and storytellers) provides a robust insight into the art of caricature and illustrative narrative in Bengal for the last one and a half centuries. It is an evolving digital archive, a public history resource, and a general corpus on the subject, and is the first of its kind in India.

Comics and caricatures in India, like other parts of its multimodal engagement with modernity, can be traced to British periodicals in the mid-nineteenth-century. Being the first seat of colonial governance in India, Bengal's cultural elite was exposed to public-art practices both in Britain and the Continent, making it receptive to the evolving genre of illustrated humour, satire and lampoon. There were local influences as well, the cultural heterotopia of the *bat-tala* being the most prominent. The first caricatures did have the British mark all over them, whether published by an Englishman or by a recalcitrant Indian. But humour in Bengal's newspapers and journals soon acquired a life of its own, which was most fruitfully revealed in exclusive satirical publications that came into prominence, as early as 1874. Moreover, the target of these early satires was not necessarily the colonial power-elite but carried a mode of self-reflexive humour, often targeting the Bengali baboo and his affectations. In Bengal, hence, cartoons and humour has had several interconnected cultural genealogies since the 1870s, much of which remains under-researched. Like all other cultural forms and modes of expression, the practice and commerce of illustrated humour also went through its own encounter with modernity, coloniality, complex codes of an emergent 'Indian' subjectivity and the promise of an independent statehood. Cartoons soon found newer idioms and codes of expression - speech bubbles, colouring, multi-framing, use of photography, uses in movie titles etc. The post-colonial life of this form has been no less compelling because powerful political and social cartooning and caricature was part and parcel of Bengali (as much as Indian) public life till 1980s, having found not just new practitioners and intrepid editors but also a steady legitimacy as the most easily consumable visual form of social critique. The project covers the coming of cartoons, the institutionalising of a legacy, individual cartoon practitioners and illustrated humour-heavy periodicals for about a century and a quarter, followed by unambiguous signs of decline of public humour in practice as well as sphere of influence. However, in the section on graphic storytelling (comics and novels) it merges, to an extent, with the present.

RELEVANCE AND OBJECTIVE

The project is the first methodical archiving project that hopes to bring to the larger public outside Bengal this long history of humour in the language; or in periodicals/papers/journals that were native to Bengal, both in the colonial period and after. The colonial-era cartoons throw light on the vexed relationship between the rulers and the governed, while the post-colonial forms highlight social change, state-welfarism and myriad political

demands made of the Indian subject. This history of Bengali popular culture was largely un-archived and un-researched for years. Only in the last decade, thanks to individual efforts, a large part of the archive has been retrieved and some have been republished. What was missing, however, was to bring the collections into the public domain or annotate significant samples of individual cartoons/gags/caricatures. The project brings to public domain some of the most culturally significant and unseen examples of caricature and cartoons in Bengal; and attests their place in social and cultural history by annotating them accordingly.

METHODOLOGY

The website does not provide detailed structural analysis of individual cartoons. The methodology is survey-based and helps one to understand the evolution of comics and cartoons (and graphic fiction) as a cultural and visual form in Bengal. This is also why the curation of the artists has been done *without* any recourse to a critical evaluation. Each individual curation has involved discussion about what works to choose (for the practitioners specially) from their oeuvre and what could be their signature illustrations. Beyond that no effort has been made to categorize the cartoonists as per their artistic merit, political leaning or ideological slant. The primary aim of the researchers has been to bring to public attention as many works as possible, which would in turn highlight the diversity and range of concerns and styles that the broad genre of illustrated humour has encompassed in Bengal. To that end, the researchers hope that their works will speak for themselves.

STRUCTURE

The website is divided into 4 sections. **OVERVIEW** is a brief history of humour in Bengal and brings to relief its major bends, including the new life that social media has given to illustrated humour in the political rigmarole of the contemporary. The other three sections are about the eminent **CARTOONISTS**, the illustrated **PERIODICALS** that exclusively or in tandem with news, championed cartoons and comic strips; and finally the **STORYTELLERS**. Each of these entries have annotated illustrations, profiles and contexts as necessary.



Kafi Khan, *Homage to Tagore*