

Conversations with Indian Cartoonists

Conversations with Indian Cartoonists:

Politickle Lines

Edited by

Vinod Balakrishnan and Vishaka Venkat

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Editors

FOREWORD

In Asia, India stands out for nourishing political cartoons, a characteristic dating back to the mid-nineteenth century and the launching of what is likely the continent's first cartoon magazine, *Delhi Sketch Book*. By the end of the century, about a dozen such periodicals surfaced, most attaching the name *Punch* to a locale; some taking strong political stands.

Political cartooning in India came into its own in the first half of the 20th century, first with works by Gaganendranath Tagore, nephew of literary giant Rabindranath Tagore, and artists employed by Tamil poet C. Subramania Bharati, editor of the fiery *India*. The 1920s and 1930s yielded K.R. Sharma, Jatin Sen, Chandi Lahiri, and K. Shankar Pillai and cartoon magazines such as *Viswadeepam*, *Rasi*, *Sarasam*, *Narmada*, and, of course, *Shankar's Weekly*, later in 1948.

Shankar was credited with sparking careers of post-Independence (1947) generation of political cartoonists, especially Abu Abraham and R.K. Laxman. In this group of cartoonists, influential during the second half of the 20th century, there were C.J. Yesudasan, Mario Miranda, Sudhir Dar, Sudhir Tailang, P.K.S. Kutty, O.V. Vijayan, G. Aravindan, K.S. Pillai, B.V. Ramamurthy, Bal Thackeray, and Rajinder Puri.

The 10 political cartoonists that Vinod Balakrishnan and Vishaka Venkat interviewed for this book can be divided into those who are veteran (e.g. Ajit Ninan, E.P. Unny, Keshav Venkataraghavan, Ravi Shankar Etteth, and Yesudasan) and those who are younger and/or emerged more recently (Gokul Gopalakrishnan, Manjul, Sandeep Adhwaryu, Surendra [P. Surendranath Reddy], and Satish Acharya). Despite the arbitrariness of this division, the portrayal of their careers offers an insightful glimpse into the world of Indian political cartooning.

Balakrishnan and Venkat are excellent interviewers: they use short, to-the-point questions, avoid "interviewing themselves" with highly-opinionated, leading queries, do follow-up, and draw on their keen knowledge of mythology, history, and cartooning while posing erudite questions.

Because of these skills, Balakrishnan and Venkat elicit much useful information and interesting anecdotes spanning a wide spectrum of topics, from personal material (career development; influences; work habits, philosophies, and styles; sense of ethics/responsibilities; imposed

restrictions/taboos; relationships with editors, and preferred audiences) to analytical and predictive statements on broader subjects germane to political cartooning (cartoonist as political activist, “common man” representative, or activist; the thinking of cartoonists; advantages/disadvantages of contemporary political cartooning; purposes of cartoons; pre-colonial predecessors of cartoons; cartoons and anger; appealing to Indian versus Western audience; the aesthetics of representation; cartoonists’ use of language in a multi-lingual country; social media as a cartooning boost and the future of digital cartoons).

Much can be gleaned from these interviews, of benefit to practicing and aspiring political cartoonists, as well as researchers and aficionados of the art form. Issues the cartoonists relate are common to many parts of the world: unwritten taboo topics in India, the national flag, the three lions, *Asoka Chakra*, and the peacock, all national symbols; decreasing audience awareness of the meaning of traditional metaphors and linguistic twists, because of lack of reading; the necessary migration of political cartoonists to other domains (advertising, animation, graphic design); the grooming of cartoonists to fit the policy/political leaning of a newspaper; the wilting of media under political and conglomerate pressure and the turning more often to social media as avenues of political cartooning.

Besides covering these more universal traits/problems, *Conversations with Indian Cartoonists: Politickle Lines* also homes in on specific points of Indian political cartooning, such as the use of pocket cartoons and regularly appearing “common man” characters and the difficulties of reaching and coping with the sensitivities of a multi-ethnic and multi-lingual audience.

These 10 interviews tell us where Indian political cartooning has been, is now, and is likely to be, all nicely coated with anecdotes, quotable passages, cerebral advice and sometimes dire warnings.

Dr. John A. Lent
Temple University

INTRODUCTION

HUMOUR AND THE THIN LINE BETWEEN AN AFFECT AND A DISEASE

The business of making people laugh is, occupationally, hazardous. Ironically, in these times of digital connectedness, when we are more together than at any time in the past, we fall apart because what is humorous to some is not quite funny for others. It appears that the Ancients had a liberal approach to humour, untrammelled as they were by an albatross called Political Correctness [PC]. The ancient Tamils¹ even codified the social circulation of humour as an eco-critical formulation.

Usually, humour is qualified as “contagious”. Served by this adjective, humour ripens with an ambivalence bringing the intolerant to the perception of injury or hurt. Some of them even turn the injury back on the purveyors of humour. Thus, the role of an artist is reduced to a mere perpetrator of a social crime. The case of the Algerian political satirist, Saïd Mekbel², is illustrative of humour’s double-edged proclivity. One may see that the line between a humorous representation and its unexpected violent reaction, actually, separates the permissiveness that aesthetics is prone to and the motivated misreading that tend to be judgmental about supposed ethics.

The boundaries between the jocular, the comical and the humorous are fuzzy and, apparently, there is a vested interest in leaving the boundaries unattended and perpetually frayed. The absence of a retaining wall that can make visible the distinction among various forms of humour renders the quotidian a precarious space when the pen must necessarily confront the

¹ Tamil is the official language of Tamil Nadu, an Indian state. It is also one of the classical languages in the world. The ‘ancient Tamils’ refers to the ancient inhabitants of Tamil Nadu.

² Saïd Mekbel (1940-1994) was an Algerian journalist and a satirist. Following his column “Mesmar J’ha” in the *Le Matin*, which attacked the Algerian regime and the fundamentalists, Mekbel became the target of the terrorists and was assassinated on December 03, 1994. “Killed for a Column”, *Irish Times*, May 02, 1998, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/killed-for-a-column-1.148284>.

sword. Both the humorist who picks up the pen and the reactionary who picks the sword are, equally, eager to achieve the ‘position’ of vantage to make a telling strike.

The strikes by the pen do bring the censors screaming: Sometimes, the censors are grudgingly lenient as in the case of Shashi Tharoor³ and sometimes the censors brandish the sword as in the case of the professor who caricatured a Chief Minister⁴. In strange situations the censors don’t take notice, like most of the delegates at the United Nations General Assembly when one Foreign Minister read somebody else’s speech.

The intervention of the censors must actually help us to know the limits of Political Correctness. In reality, however, it serves to queer the pitch. All their earnest attempts merely expose the many political constituencies that are waiting to respond to a humorous representation, which like the ominous Raven of Poe⁵ utters a silly “nevermore” which in different dramatic contexts echoes a different purport.

“What hangs at a man’s thigh and wants to poke the hole that it’s often poked before?”⁶

This impish question has been cited as the oldest example of British humour, wry though it looks. Researchers from Wolverhampton University, led by Paul MacDonald, a comic novelist and lecturer in Creative Writing, scoured mildewed manuscripts and weathering stone tablets in archives of museums and libraries to locate it in a 10th century book of Anglo-Saxon poetry at Exeter Cathedral. Paul and his team trawled the internet, rummaged through a variety of book collections and button-holed people to arrive at the understanding that in ‘jokes’ Ancients and Moderns “shared willingness to deal with taboos and a degree of rebellion”⁷. Before the coming of Christ the Redeemer, some 2000 years ago, the Egyptians painted on papyrus and the Sumerians cut into their tablets, toilet humour, humour in relationships, sex jokes spiked with witty puns and juicy double-

³ Shashi Tharoor is an Indian politician, a member of the Indian National Congress party. He has also been a diplomat and is a popular writer.

⁴ Professor Ambikesh Mahapatra was arrested in West Bengal, India, for circulating a cartoon of a Chief Minister in 2012.

⁵ Edgar Allan Poe, “The Raven”, *Poetry Foundation*, accessed November 28, 2018, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48860/the-raven>.

⁶ Stephen Adams, “The World’s Oldest Jokes Revealed by University Research”, *The Telegraph*, July 31, 2008, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/2479730/The-worlds-oldest-jokes-revealed-by-university-research.html>.

⁷ Adams, “The World’s Oldest Jokes”.

entendres. The stand-up comedians, the caricaturists, the cartoonists and the clowns of the digital era are only poking “the hole that . . . [the Ancients have] often poked before. As for “What hangs at a man’s thigh?” the response recorded in the *Codex Exoniensis*⁸: “A Key!!!”

About the time the Egyptians and the Sumerians were milking the cow of creativity for laughter, Tolkāppiyar⁹, according to legend, the disciple of Sage Agasthiya¹⁰, was completing his tripartite treatise¹¹ in Tamil language and literature. The third treatise, *Porulathigaaram* deals with the methodology for conveying one’s thoughts. Like the other two treatises, *Porulathigaaram* is also divided into nine sections. However, the divisions are based on combinations of geographical topography such as *Kurunji* (mountain and its adjoining slopes), *Mullai* (forest and regions close to it), *Marudam* (farms and fields), *Neidhal* (seashore) and *Palai* (fallow land).

The sixth section of *Porulathigaaram*, *Meypattiyal* (songs about the body), opens with the division of human emotions into eight parts:

Nagai Azhugai Izhivaral Marutkai
Achcham Perumidham Vekuli Uvvakai Yendru
Appal Ettey Meypattu Enba.

The songs about the body or, rather, the affect on the human body that inform *Meypattiyal*, begin with *Nagai* or Humour. The other seven affects being: Sorrow, deprecation, surprise, despondency, courage, anger and

⁸*Codex Exoniensis* is a 10th century book of Anglo-Saxon poetry held at Exeter Cathedral, Adams, “The World’s Oldest Jokes”.

⁹ Tolkāppiyar, who wrote *Tolkāppiyam*, is considered an author of the first Tamil grammar, G.N. Devy, ed. *Indian Literary Criticism: Theory and Interpretation* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2002), 15.

¹⁰ “Agastya is renowned in the South as the father of Siddha, the southern form of Ayurveda. He is also associated with occult arts of architecture and forecasting as well as formulation of the Tamil language,” Devdutt Pattanaik, “The Sage Who Went South”, *Devdutt*, accessed November 28, 2018, <http://devdutt.com/articles/indian-mythology/the-sage-who-went-south.html>.

¹¹ *Tolkāppiyam* is considered as the earliest work on the grammar of Tamil Language, its literature and linguistics written around fourth century B.C. The book is divided into three: *Ezuthathikaram* (Orthography), *Sollathikaram* (Phonology) and *Porulathikaram* (Semantics). V.R. Ramachandra Dikshithar, “The Sangam Age”, *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, Vol. 5 (1941): 154, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44304708>.

contentment. Humour is, further, known to be expressed in one of four ways:

*Yellal Ilamai Pedhamai Madanendru
Ullapatta Nagai Nangu Enba.*

The targets who are held to ridicule or mockery are the old and infirm, the ignorant and the naïve, effeminacy in men (*pedi*) and masculinity in women (*ali*).

What one gathers from the long line of commentators who have kept alive the hermeneutics of the *Tolkāppiyam* like Senavaraiyar¹², Perasiriya¹³, Ilampuranar¹⁴ or Somasundara Bharathiyar¹⁵ is that humour has a location in geography and must wait for a time of the year to kick into life. From time immemorial, the Tamils have been admonished by their elders thus: *Idam, Porul, Eval Arindu Kooravum* (mind the place, the content and the disposition of the listener before you speak). This wisdom should chasten the humorist as well. Humour is considered the primary affect by the Ancients, coming ahead of the other affects, and, quite unlike the other affects, it is contagious.

Some Derrida-like punster would pounce on the oxymoronic suggestions of “contagious” that serves both the “disease” and the “affect” with equal fervour. “Disease” that lies proximate to death and “affect” that cozies up to life are suggestively and equitably qualified by the word “contagious”. A pun that comes closer to “contagious” is what the digital world called selfie-dom would use as a superlative: “insane” - which is an approbation of any astounding performance that beats the imagination. The connotative field of humour is threatened by the occupation forces of intolerance that refuse to see it as an emotion but a disease; who don’t read “insane” figuratively, but react exactly the way they read the jibes and cartoons directed at them, literally. The indomitable cartoonist picks up his

¹² There have been several commentaries on *Tolkāppiyam*. Senavaraiyar is famous for his commentary on the *Sollathikaram* of *Tolkāppiyam*. “Senavaiyar”, *Tamil Dictionary*, accessed online November 25, 2018.

¹³ Perasiriya’s commentary was also popular during the medieval period in Tamil Literature. Vijaya Ramaswamy, “Tolkappiyam”, *Historical Dictionary of the Tamils*, (Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017), 379.

¹⁴ Ilampuranar “one of the great grammarians in Tamil who...contented himself with writing a commentary. His commentary, the first of six such was on the sutras of *Tolkappiyam*”, Amaresh Datta ed., “Ilampuranar”, *Encyclopaedia of Indian Literature Vol II: Devraj to Jyoti* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1988), 1630.

¹⁵ Navalar Somasundara Bharathiyar is also famous for his contributions to the studies in Tamil Language.

pen to draw that oblique line between 'life' and 'death'. Sometimes, and with increasing frequency in our times, he himself becomes that oblique line between a disease and an affect: caught, inescapably, between a creatively 'inexact' *insane* and a cretinously 'exact' *insane*.

If, like the *vidūṣaka*¹⁶ (the comic actor-manager in Sanskrit drama) one asks: Why did Saïd Mekbel die in December 1994? One would have a few funny responses. Those who presume that Saïd Mekbel is a figment of the imagination, would say, perhaps, 'December is a decent month to die for accounting purposes'. Or, that 'he could not choose to die a moment sooner or later than that fateful afternoon'. Now, if we take him to be the Algerian satirical editorialist who saw the rapier sharp wit from his pen hurting on the one side, the corrupt and absurd political system and, on the other, the terrorist outfits owing allegiance to the Islamic Salvation Front¹⁷, we would know that he was, between two forms of insanity, waiting for the inevitable; welcoming it like a daredevil.

Cutting back 20 years and with the context spread on the table like the lunch laid out for Saïd Mekbel and his friend, let us repeat the question: Why did Saïd Mekbel die in December 1994? One is sufficiently braced up against a fumble into frivolity to think of all possible responses that could be summarised thus: Saïd Mekbel's pen was mightier than the sword of Zorro¹⁸, with whom he identified, and he believed that he could do more with his pen for Algeria than what Zorro could accomplish with his sword for the Mexicans. When the assassins peppered his person with bullets they

¹⁶ G.K. Bhat, *The Vidūṣaka* (Ahmedabad: The New Order Book Company, 1959).

¹⁷ "Islamic Salvation Front, French Front Islamique du Salut (FIS), Algerian Islamist political party. Known best by its French acronym, the organization was founded in 1989 by Ali Belhadj and Abbasi al-Madani". "Islamic Salvation Front", *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, accessed November 26, 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Islamic-Salvation-Front>.

¹⁸ Zorro is a "fictional character created in 1919 by writer Johnston McCulley. The masked, sword-wielding vigilante defends the poor and victimized against the forces of injustice", Peter Sanderson, "Zorro", *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, accessed November 26, 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Zorro-fictional-character>.

were overwriting and re-writing Bulwer-Lytton's¹⁹ words²⁰ by writing over Mekbel, in blood: "Those who combat us with the pen will die by the sword."²¹ So, did that scare the humorist adequately to put his pen away? Brahim Guerroui²², a cartoonist was kidnapped and murdered in September 1995. Mohamed Dorbane²³, a columnist and caricaturist, was killed by a bomb that terrorists had placed by his office in February 1996. When the unrelenting wave of terror and mayhem consumed 200,000 Algerians, a sizeable number of intellectuals among them, writer Mustapha Benfodil²⁴ coined an ingenious portmanteau that is pregnant, poignant and is a resurgent dare of the humorist in the face of death: "intellectocide"²⁵.

¹⁹ Edward George Earle Bulwer-Lytton, first Baron Lytton (1803-1873) is a "British politician, poet, and critic, chiefly remembered, however, as a prolific novelist. His books, though dated, remain immensely readable, and his experiences lend his work an unusual historical interest", "Edward George Earle Bulwer-Lytton, 1st Baron Lytton", *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Last Updated January 14, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Edward-George-Earle-Bulwer-Lytton-1st-Baron-Lytton>.

²⁰ The phrase "the pen is mightier than the sword" was first used by Bulwer-Lytton in his historical play *Cardinal Richelieu* (1839). Edward Bulwer Lytton, *Richelieu; or, The Conspiracy: A Play in Five Acts* (Boston: Walter H. Baker, 1896), 29, <https://ia801406.us.archive.org/3/items/richelieueurcons04lyttgoog/richelieueurcons04lyttgoog.pdf>.

²¹ Elizabeth Perego, "The Dangers of Being a Humorist: Charlie Hebdo is Not Alone", *Origins: Currents Events in Historical Perspective*, January 30, 2015, <http://origins.osu.edu/connecting-history/1302015-dangers-being-humorist-charlie-hebdo-not-alone>.

²² Brahim Guerroui, also known as Gebe, is an Algerian journalist and cartoonist who worked for *El Moudjahid*. He was found dead near his home. "I.P.I. Report: Monthly Bulletin of the International Press Institute, Volume 44", *Google Books*, accessed November 29, 2018, <https://books.google.co.in/books?id=m64KAQAAMAAJ&q=Brahim+Guerroui&dq=Brahim+Guerroui&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwi2k5aJl5rgAhVZFHIKHUjzCoUQ6AEIMDAB>.

²³ Mohamad Dorbane working with *Le Soir d'Algérie* was also assassinated. Karima Bennoune, *Your Fatwa Does Not Apply Here: Untold Stories from the Fight Against Muslim Fundamentalism* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2013), 128.

²⁴ Mustapha Benfodil is an Algerian novelist and a playwright. He also works as a reporter for *El Watan*. "Contributor: Mustapha Benfodil", *Words Without Borders*, accessed November 28, 2018, <https://www.wordswithoutborders.org/contributor/mustafa-benfodil>.

²⁵ Karima Bennoune, "Algeria Twenty Years On: Words Do Not Die", *Open Democracy*, June 24, 2013, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/karima-bennoune/algeria-twenty-years-on-words-do-not-die>.

Freud's *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (1904), opens on "The Technique of Jokes" with a reference to Hirsch-Hyacinth of Hamburg, a lottery-agent and extractor of corn whom the poet Heinrich Heine²⁶ meets during one of his travels. Hirsch of Hamburg boasts to Heine: ". . . Doctor, I sat beside Salomon Rothschild and he treated me quite as his equal – quite famillionairely"²⁷. On the face of it, Benfodil's portmanteau is akin to Heine's. Their "jokiness" [*Witzcharacter*]²⁸, that makes us choose between thinking and laughing, also brings into play the aesthetics of form and the ethics of judgment. And choose we must because we have come a long way from innocence. It did not matter then whether we could tell the difference between the jocular, the comical and the humorous.

This world is too much with us that we need to see the triple-economies of Freud: *Economy in expenditure upon Inhibition* (Joke); *economy in expenditure upon Ideation or Cathexis* (Comic); *economy in expenditure upon Feeling* (Humour)²⁹ not only for the pleasure that may arise from each but also for the reason that we would be called to make judgments even as we would be judged for our representations. While Heine's coinage would amount to a joke, Mustapha Benfodil rises above the sea of distress and affects to coin a response wrapped in humour. Moreover, if credence is given to the fact that the writer demonstrates a "tenacious hold upon his customary self and his disregard of what might overthrow that self and drive it to despair"³⁰ then Benfodil's coinage is a classic case of "gallows humour"³¹ [*Galgen humour*]³².

As for the comic, one needs to only turn to the *desi*³³ billboard where Amul³⁴ has been running the longest campaign of brand imaging³⁵.

²⁶ Heinrich Heine (1797-1856) was a German-Jewish poet and renowned for his lyric poetry.

²⁷ Sigmund Freud, *The Joke and its Relation to the Unconscious*, Joyce Crick Trans. (U.S.A.: Penguin Books, 2003), 136.

²⁸ Freud, 10.

²⁹ John Carey, "Introduction", *Joke*, xxvii.

³⁰ Freud, *Joke*, 221.

³¹ Gallows humour is "grim and ironical humour in a desperate or hopeless situation", Pearsall, *Oxford Dictionary*, 753.

³² Freud, *Joke*, 221.

³³ *Desi* is a hindi word for local or indigenous.

³⁴ Amul is an Indian Dairy company based at Anand, Gujarat, India. It began in 1946 and led the white revolution in India by boosting the production of milk and milk products.

³⁵ The Amul girl, a little moppet with blue hair in polka dotted dress, has grown to be the most loved icon of India. "Back then, [in 1966] advertising on television and print media was wildly expensive and so Sylvester DaCunha, the founder-chairman

Like the Common Man³⁶ of R. K. Laxman³⁷, Amul's "utterly butterly" mascot has appeared on every significant historical event for more than three decades now. The bilingual portmanteau first appeared on February 21, 2011: "Portugalti"³⁸ where we see an economy of cathexis; a telling instance of the ad-man coming up with yet another 'insane' campaign.

Bulwer-Lytton's idea which journalists have wooed since 1839, has been like Othello's kiss to Desdemona, an affair foredoomed to a bloody end. The confrontation between the 'pen' and the 'sword' has never been without incident. The eddies of sinister intrigue have swirled, trying to subdue the defender of the cause. This has been the case from the first fictional situation where Cardinal Richelieu, the chief minister to King Louis XIII discovers the plot to kill him. As a priest he is forbidden to take arms against the desperados. Reminded by his page, Francois, Richelieu realises the power of the pen to save the state.

of DaCunha Communications, decided to design an Amul ad campaign for the more affordable outdoor hoardings. The Amul girl was created by Eustace Fernandes, the art director of DaCunha Communications in 1966, the same year the simple yet catchy phrase "Utterly Butterly" was coined by Sylvester's wife, Nisha DaCunha," Sanchari Pal in "Utterly Butterly Wonderful: The History of India's Most Loved Ad Icon, the Amul Girl", *The Better India*, October 17, 2016, <https://www.thebetterindia.com/71904/amul-girl-golden-jubilee/>.

³⁶ Common man, wearing a plaid jacket and a dhoti, is the iconic character created by R.K. Laxman. The common man remains a mute witness to the socio-political events that happens around. Ritu Gairola Khanduri, *Caricaturing Culture in India: Cartoons and History in the Modern World* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 194.

³⁷ R.K. Laxman (1921-2015) is a renowned cartoonist of India, who is known for his creation of the common man, through his column "You Said It" in the *Times of India*.

³⁸ "Portugalti" billboard came out in connection with "S.M. Krishna's, External Affairs Minister of India in 2011, reading out the speech of the Portuguese foreign minister at a UN meeting on Friday. He cottoned on to the mistakes a couple of minutes into his delivery", Chidanand Rajghatta, "S.M. Krishna reads Portuguese minister's speech at UN", *Times of India*, February 12, 2011.

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/SM-Krishna-reads-Portuguese-ministers-speech-at-UN/articleshow/7483448.cms>. The term "Portugalti" is a portmanteau, as on one side it conveys the event, the delivery of the "Portugal" minister's speech by an Indian minister but, at the same time, "galti" is a Hindi word for mistake, which in turn humorously presents the mistakes with which the speech was read.



Fig. 1.1 © GCMF, Amul, *Portugalti*. 2011.

Whoever picks his pen or pencil to draw the line between a disease and an emotion is in the serious business of making the world laugh for we still don't understand how the pen or pencil would be counted for weapons of conquest. A pencil may look fragile. It could also be snapped into two pieces. However, by breaking into two, the pencil brings one more soldier to fight for the cause of humour. Jean Paul Richter³⁹, a humorous novelist and short story writer, whom Freud quotes, may be talking about what makes a joke work, but as if by a Freudian slip, puts the pen and the sword within striking distance of each other when he says: "Victory owes so much to sheer position, whether in marshalling soldiers or sentences."⁴⁰

The power of position works not only figuratively as with respect to warriors or words. The position one takes at the table would, literally, decide whether one would return after a lunch with a friend. It was the case with Saïd Mekbel on that fateful day in December 1994. So, "Why did Saïd Mekbel die?" The answer: "His gunmen came through the kitchen". Like most journalists who are constantly staring at an assassin's weapon, Mekbel sat facing the entrance to the hotel. His killers played a joke to its fault by doing the unexpected in order to execute a cruel joke. The irony of the situation just does not end there. Mekbel signed his editorials under the assumed name of a "ghoul"- a character from Arabic folklore that could assume any shape. With his death Mekbel alias the "ghoul" became a part of Arabic and journalistic folklore as "Ghoul" alias Mekbel.

³⁹ Jean Paul Richter (1763-1825) was a renowned German romantic writer.

⁴⁰ Freud, *Joke*, 11.

Lichtenberg embodies the three domains of creativity that Arthur Koestler outlines in a triptych in *The Act of Creation* [1964]: Humour [Jester], Discovery [Scientist/Sage] and Art [Artist]⁴⁴. Lichtenberg, who standardised the A4 size for the sheet of paper on which Saïd Mekbel and his tribe constructed their sentences, had the habit of keeping Scrapbooks which were designated from the letter A. The massive corpuses of his satirical, witty and aphoristic notes, preserved today in Gottingen University, were gathered in a book from 1765 till his death in 1799. The last designated was an unfinished Scrapbook⁴⁵ with the letter L. Strangely, the books G and H and most parts of Scrapbook K are known to have vanished. Predictably, they contained sensitive material that his descendants chose to censor. From Notebook G, written between the years 1779-1783, he wrote under the ominous number 13 thus: “It is almost impossible to carry the torch of truth through a crowd without singeing someone’s beard.”⁴⁶ While this comment uses “analogy” to elicit humour, Lichtenberg was adept at manipulating the epithets that put the vehicle of a joke in a different gear: “That is the weather side of my moral constitution; I can stand things there quite well.”⁴⁷ And one more that Freud dwells upon to illuminate the “technique of jokes”: “Everyone has his moral backside, which he does not show except in case of need and which he covers as long as possible with the breeches of respectability.”⁴⁸

Reading between the lines of Lichtenberg and Heine we would be able to see how our inchoate times are constituted and why, sometimes, we require, the lines of the humorist to negotiate it. There is an aporetic point at which the laugh elicited by a joke is deadlocked with hurt elicited by a misprision. So, while we would always have people joining in the laugh that works, the same joke is abandoned like a sinking ship when it is misplaced. When Shashi Tharoor tweeted that he would travel “cattle class out of solidarity with all our holy cows!”⁴⁹ (Sept 14, 2009), Congress⁵⁰ spokesperson

⁴⁴ “The triptych”, Arthur Koestler, *The Act of Creation* (London: Hutchinson and Co, 1964).

⁴⁵ Lichtenberg is also the author of Scrapbooks (*Sudelbücher*). Beginning with letter A, Lichtenberg continued to maintain the scrapbook till his death in 1799.

⁴⁶ Freud, *Joke*, 69.

⁴⁷ Freud, *Joke*, 71.

⁴⁸ Freud, *Joke*, 71.

⁴⁹ Shashi Tharoor (@ShashiTharoor), “Absolutely, in cattle class out of solidarity with all our holy cows!”, *Twitter*, September 14, 2009, <https://twitter.com/shashitharoor/status/3985855085?lang=en>.

⁵⁰ The Indian National Congress also known as Congress is one of the major political parties in India. Founded in 1885, it led India through the freedom struggle and has governed post-independent India for more than five decades.

Jayanthi Natarajan⁵¹, like most in the party, served this condescending remark as a passing shot that Mr. Tharoor was not conscious of the sensitivities since he was new to Indian politics. What makes the situation comical is the quirky logic that someone new to Indian politics is also passed off as someone new to India. What garnishes the situation with humour is the fact that Mr. Tharoor started his writing career with a rollicking allegory of Indian politics rippling with the Derridean “burst of laughter”⁵² – *The Great Indian Novel*. One more count on which the spokesperson found the tweet “unacceptable because thousands of Indians travel ordinary class”⁵³. So, the spokesperson is insinuating that Mr. Tharoor should have been more PC [Politically correct] by invoking “ordinary class” for “cattle class”, after all he was not on Bill Maher’s show⁵⁴. But the after-thunder of Jayanthi’s school-marmish admonition takes a comic turn. Her comment is only meant to remind Mr. Tharoor, who till then was a globe-trotting Under Secretary General of the United Nations, that in all the trains that ply on Indian railroads, there is no “cattle class”, never has been; only “ordinary class”.

What the Congress spokesperson leaves unsaid is more the reality in many parts of India where that part of India travels ordinarily by train: along with cattle, chicken, monkeys, snakes and bear. So, for a writer of Mr. Tharoor’s standing he was only saying half the truth with his reference to “cattle”. He was found wanting in the collective noun for cattle, chicken, monkeys, snakes, bear and man. As a member of the party that has preserved our secular democratic traditions, it is not surprising that Jayanthi Natarajan must find it imperative to respect the sensitivities of the fellow-passengers who are not always standing on two legs. Mr. Tharoor does not merely agree to travel “cattle class” but provides his reason for doing so: “in solidarity with all our holy cows”! Those cows would have remained figurative

⁵¹ Jayanti Natarajan is a member of the Indian National Congress. She has also served as the Minister of Environment and Forests between 2011 and 2013.

⁵² Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, Alan Bass Trans. (London: Routledge, 2002), 319.

⁵³ Anita Joshua, “Tharoor’s “Cattle Class” Tweet Annoys Congress, *The Hindu*, September 16, 2009, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/Tharoor's-cattle-class-tweet-annoys-Congress/article16881830.ece>

⁵⁴ “Real Time with Bill Maher” is a show hosted by the comedian and the satirist Bill Maher. It is a “long-running, Emmy-nominated talk show, covering the week’s news and featuring a panel of guests, including actors, activists, politicians, musicians, comedians and more”, “About”, Real Time with Bill Maher, *HBO*, accessed November 26, 2018, <https://www.hbo.com/real-time-with-bill-maher>.

references had not Sonia Gandhi⁵⁵ flown economy class to Mumbai⁵⁶ on the same day to demonstrate her party's commitment to austerity.

However, not everyone is as privileged as Mr. Tharoor to get away with a humorous quip. Mr. Tharoor took a swipe at a class of "ordinary" people and got away with a gentle rap on the knuckles. That was certainly not the treatment Jadavpur University professor, Ambikesh Mahapatra, received after his collage about Mamata Banerjee landed him in jail. But not before a gang of 80 Trinamool Congress workers physically assaulted him. Ambikesh was arrested on charges of defamation, outraging the modesty of women and hacking. The state government invoked provisions of the draconian Section 66A of the IT Act⁵⁷ to incarcerate Ambikesh. More than 56 intellectuals including Noam Chomsky⁵⁸ appealed to the Prime Minister for the release of Ambikesh. Over 30 cartoonists' associations appealed for the preservation of free speech. The Chief Minister chose to ignore the appeals of the intelligentsia. Shall we remember, Mustafa Benfodil here?

Nine months after Ambikesh walked out of prison, Ram Nayan Chaudhury, a college student in Kolkata shared cartoons of Mamata Banerjee on Facebook⁵⁹. This time, the spokesperson of Trinamool Congress (TMC), Derek O'Brien⁶⁰, suggested that the party was not pursuing the matter aggressively. The complainant, he added, was "a young over enthu TMC

⁵⁵ Sonia Gandhi was the president of the Indian National Congress from 1998 to 2017; she was succeeded by her son, Rahul Gandhi.

⁵⁶ Mumbai is the capital of the state of Maharashtra; formerly called Bombay.

⁵⁷ "The Information Technology Act, 2000 was amended in 2008. The amended Act which received the assent of the President on February 5, 2009, contains section 66A. 66A. [offers] Punishment for sending offensive messages through communication service, etc", "Section 66A. of the Information Technology Act", *The Centre for Internet and Society*, accessed November 26, 2018, <https://cis-india.org/internet-governance/resources/section-66A-information-technology-act>. The act was later repealed by the Supreme Court.

⁵⁸ Noam Chomsky is an American philosopher and a linguist. He is often addressed as the father of modern linguistics. Some of his famous works include *Syntactic Structures* (1957), *Language and Mind* (1972) and *Studies on Semantics in Generative Grammar* (1972).

⁵⁹ "Complain Against College Student for Circulating Anti-Mamata Cartoon on Facebook", *India Today*, January 19, 2013, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/east/story/college-student-booked-for-circulating-anti-mamata-cartoon-facebook-152066-2013-01-19>.

⁶⁰ Derek O'Brien, a member of All India Trinamool Congress, is an Indian politician and is popular for hosting quiz shows.

boy . . . [who] obviously needs to tune up his sense of humour”⁶¹. Why did the TMC affect visible restraint when only a few months ago they chose to ignore all the intellectuals and the cartoonists coming together to demand the release of a battered professor whose attempt at allegory went awry? The reason: First, the Kolkata High Court ordered the release of the professor and second, the Supreme Court struck down Section 66A of the IT Act as anathema to free speech.



Fig. 1.2. © *The Hindu*, Surendra.

Do instances of intolerance towards humorous representations make us wary of holding the torch of truth that, as a comment, a cartoon or caricature carries enough fire to singe a few beards in society? That torch of truth – let us call it history – has had a precarious existence in our country. One needs to know the place of history in our lives. As a nation, are we capable of negotiating the events of our past as well as the present quotidian events that constitute the epistemological archive of our nation? And, like the history of any other nation in the world, there are inconvenient truths. Would we approach our history to know the truth about ourselves as a nation or would we indulge in the subversion of our history because it is

⁶¹ Samira Shaikh , “Complaint filed against student for circulating anti-Mamata cartoon, *NDTV*, Last Updated January 19, 2013, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/complaint-filed-against-student-for-circulating-anti-mamata-cartoon-510823>.

inconvenient? Do we, as a nation, need to “tune up ...[our] sense of humour”? Are we, through our public display of hurt sentiments, snuffing out the torch of truth, for the overwhelmingly secular democratic reason that a few beards might not be singled.

James W. Loewen dedicates his book: *Lies my Teacher told me: Everything your American History Textbook got Wrong* (1995) to: “all American history teachers who teach against their textbooks”⁶². One of the four epigraphs of the book is a *samizdat* letter written to a history journal by Gen. Petro G. Grigorenko in 1975 in the erstwhile USSR. It reads: “Concealment of the historical truth is a crime against the people”⁶³. As a people, our own credentials with respect to history are nothing to write home about. A case in point is the furore over Shankar’s⁶⁴ cartoon on the drafting of the Constitution of India⁶⁵. Both the protagonists, Pandit Nehru⁶⁶ and Dr. Ambedkar,⁶⁷ were still around to enjoy Shankar’s “economy in expenditure upon feeling”. But Parliament erupted a good 60 years after the cartoon first appeared.

From the momentous Midnight to the dawn of the Millennium this country took kindly to that cartoon, reflected in the cheerful faces of the onlookers in the same cartoon. But, when the National Council for Educational Research and Training [NCERT]⁶⁸ decided to put it in the

⁶² James W. Loewen, *Lies my Teacher told me: Everything your American History Textbook got Wrong* (New York: Touchstone, 2007), v.

⁶³ Loewen, *Lies*, 8.

⁶⁴ Keshav Shankar Pillai (1902-1989), popular known as Shankar, is the pioneer of Indian political cartooning. He was awarded Padma Vibhushan in 1976. He is also known for establishing Children’s Book Trust and International Dolls Museum.

⁶⁵ Ambedkar cartoon drawn by Shankar between 1948-1949 became controversial after its inclusion in a NCERT Political Science textbook prescribed to Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) schools as it was perceived as hurting Dalit sentiments.

⁶⁶ Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964) is the first Prime Minister of Independent India. He is a key political figure in the history of Indian freedom movement. He was a member of the Indian National Congress.

⁶⁷ Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956), was an economist, politician and a social reformer. He is known for his fight against social discrimination against Dalits. He was the Chairman of the Constitution Drafting Committee and is known as the Architect of the Indian Constitution.

⁶⁸ NCERT “is an autonomous organisation set up in 1961 by the Government of India to assist and advise the Central and State Governments on policies and programmes for qualitative improvement in school education. The major objectives of NCERT and its constituent units are to: undertake, promote and coordinate research in areas related to school education; prepare and publish model textbooks, supplementary material, newsletters, journals and develop educational kits,

Social Sciences Textbook for school students, the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (Liberation Panther Party)⁶⁹ [VCK] protested. Soon, politicians of all hues found ways to add all affects except the affect of humour and complain that the cartoon was un-PC. The Thorat Committee,⁷⁰ which recommended the sanitisation of the textbook, went on to expunge many cartoons.



Fig. 1.3 © Children’s Book Trust, Shankar.
“Don’t spare me Shankar”, 22.

Drumming up emotional support has become a viable option of public demonstration that we are, as a people, manipulated towards the affects of sorrow [**azhugai**], deprecation [**izhivaral**] and anger [**veguli**]. When Kapil Sibal⁷¹, then Human Resource Development (HRD) Minister stood up in Parliament to “apologise”, his gesture had nothing to do with

multimedia digital materials, etc.”, “About Us”, *NCERT*, accessed November 28, 2018, http://www.ncert.nic.in/about_ncert.html.

⁶⁹ VCK is a political party from Tamil Nadu and is led by Mr. Thirumavalavan.

⁷⁰ A committee was set up under Professor Sukhadeo Thorat, Professor Emeritus, Jawaharlal Nehru University, to scrutinise the cartoons which were published in the NCERT textbooks.

⁷¹ Kapil Sibal is an Indian Politician, a member of the Indian National Congress. He has served in the ministry of HRD, Science and Technology, Law and Justice and Communications and Information technology between 2004 and 2014.

the reflex of humour that the cartoon generated. His appeal to the political class to desist from making it an issue for vote bank politics, which is the actual reason for the public “apology”, points to constituencies that can be coerced into an emotional identification with the issue. In Arthur Koestler’s Triptych of Creativity, the pendulum of public opinion swings from a reflex of bathos to the affective identification that yields pathos.

One does not have to work hard to bring out the comical [we shall avoid the standard usage for such situations – ridiculous] content of the Thorat Committee that soldiered to apply ointment on “our” hurt sentiments. The six learned scholars applied the following criteria for identifying objectionable content:

1. Whether the illustrations or pictures were “event specific or person specific”.
2. Sense of proportion in presentation, balance in content, illustrations, visuals, cartoons and other visuals.
3. Level of satire: What is the level of satire? Is it appropriate for students of that age? Is the satire subtle or abrasive?
4. Quality of illustration: Quality of the illustration was seen in terms of being eye-catching and stimulating the imagination.
5. Sensitivity: a) How sensitive are the cartoons and illustrations towards communities, castes, ethnicity, religions, women, language and other groups and minorities? In a country as diverse as India the above considerations cannot be disregarded. b) Individual specific and issue specific visuals.⁷²

It is quite enlightening to see a couple of samples of the supposed objectionable content: Class IX - Democratic Politics-I: “Page 67. Cartoon may be deleted due to the possibility of negative messaging. The cartoon shows a criminal politician as a dark man . . . Class X - Democratic Politics –II: Page 60. The word ‘mature’ in the note below Unni may be deleted and the sentence will be rewritten as – because we are a developing democracy”⁷³.

What Lichtenberg leaves unsaid about the “weather side of his moral constitution” is its precise location. While calculating politicians are

⁷² “A Report of the Committee constituted for Reviewing the Textbooks of Social Sciences / Political Science, for Classes IX-XII constituted by NCERT, May 14, 2012”, NCERT, accessed November 28, 2018, [http://www.ncert.nic.in/announcements/notices/pdf_files/NECERT_SKT_\(final\).pdf](http://www.ncert.nic.in/announcements/notices/pdf_files/NECERT_SKT_(final).pdf), 21.

⁷³ “A Report of the Committee”, NCERT, 25-26.

cautious to locate the weather side of the moral constitution of their constituency, the cartoonist committed on the side of drawing the reflex of humour, is committed only to the logic of humour. Georges Bataille reading Henri Bergson's 1904 essay *On Laughter* felt that "This reading didn't satisfy me much, though it strongly interested me"⁷⁴. The tribe of Saïd Mekbel and Shankar may not be working to satisfy us, for the business of humour is to merely be interesting. Bergson's theory about laughter, which Bataille endorses as one of the most durable theories on the subject, tells us why the humorist will always be a humorist. Bergson's reasons: because he is human; because he inhabits a domain of social significance [we may add political] and, above all, he must necessarily affect an absence of feeling for "indifference is the natural environment" for humour and it has "no greater foe than emotion"⁷⁵. Out of fear of a possible "intellectocide" that may happen as a fall out of the fabulous work of our humorists, we would, till we are sufficiently "mature" for the risible, see ourselves as law abiding secular citizens of a "developing democracy".

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⁷⁴ Georges Bataille, *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, Michelle Kendall and Stuart Kendall Trans. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 139.

⁷⁵ Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the meaning of the Comic*, Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell Trans. (Maryland: Wildside Press, 2008), 4a, 4b.