

Illustrating Humor

Analyzing Cartoonist Approaches through the Political Cartoons of Kerala

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Abstract

Political cartoons act as a powerful communication tool that combines artistic skills like sarcasm, irony, humour and wit to raise questions against authority and draw public attention towards political happenings and social ills. Political cartoons exist within a dichotomy between fact and fiction. This is the power of the political cartoons and brings together fantasy and reality. They use fiction to present truth and this truth is created through allusions, metaphors, and associations inspired by true events, combined with the invention of an artist's imagination. The potential of the Political Cartoon genre increases the scope of research in this field as it expresses opinions that a thousand words cannot explain. A semi-structured interview done with the cartoonists of mainstream newspapers gives more insight into this study. The study contributes to the general understanding of political cartoons and how they make political statements. The study also tries to specify the various political themes and its portrayal by the cartoonist. Thus, this study within the political context of Kerala increases our understanding of this political communication tool.

Keywords: *Political Cartoons, Political Communication, Election Campaigns, Humour and Sarcasm.*

Introduction

Political cartoons exist within a dichotomy between fact and fiction. This is the power of the political cartoon—to bring together fantasy and reality, to use factual events as the basis for fiction, and to use fiction to present truth. This truth is created through allusions, metaphors, and associations inspired by true events, combined with the invention of an artist's imagination. Political cartoons are considered to be a sensitive reflection of society's most discussed political events (Desousa, 1981). They bring forth certain issues into the public platform and serve as a powerful tool of mass media in shaping perceptions of public opinion. The potential of the Political Cartoon genre increases the scope of research in this field as it expresses opinions that a thousand words cannot explain.

The newspaper, and the trenchant visual and verbal critique embodied in the cartoon, was paradoxically, the gifts of the Empire. The acquisition of colonies was condoned by the last century's legal sensibility, but having annexed India more through sleight than through bloodshed, the British set about transplanting some of their more charismatic institutions in India. The cartoon genre can also be considered as one of them. However Madhur Upadhyay, who edited a book of cartoons against communalism, traced Indian cartoons to mythology and not history. He elaborates on the character in Sanskrit, called Ashtavakra, deformed from eight sides, who never talks anything right and does everything wrong portraying him as a comic character. Thus, cartooning as an art form in India may be new, but in tradition it is very old (Upadhyay, 1994).

“Great Famine Goddess” a political cartoon published in 1919 in a humor magazine ‘Vidushkan’, marked the beginning of cartoon history in the state of Kerala. The first cartoon itself was a perfect blend of ideas and drawing. With just a few strokes the cartoon explained the impact of the ‘First World War’ to the public. The work was a powerful statement against war and colonialism. The importance of political cartoons is increasing and the large space allotted for the cartoons in the mainstream newspapers of Kerala emphasize its popularity among the general public. Political cartoons take the position of a serious medium, one that reflects the political and social responses of the people in Kerala.

Review of Literature

India has a vast history deep rooted in satire and other art forms. Satire had great impact on people but the art of cartooning was unknown to them. In the early days folk songs and folktales made subtle comments on errant human nature, social evils, and dim-witted rulers. From the 18th and 19th century imperial Britain and its colonies considered cartoons as a persuasive representation that competed with photographs and films. They quickly yield a rich archive on representations of India. Britain established its power in India as a trading company that later took over the power of the whole country. These political transitions from trade to politics, resulting in India's growing prominence in imperial matters, were transmitted to the British public through a variety of images shaped by emerging visual technologies (Khanduri, 2014).

Laxman (1989) in his study examined that the art of sculpture always depicted devotional themes. It is very likely that the cartoons of John Bull and Bharat Mata appeared to the viewer as extensions of those mythical concepts, showing in new versions the eternal conflict between evil and good. In fact, in later years, when the cartoonist gained a little more independence, their task of looking for ideas was considerably eased because they borrowed heavily from the numerous ready-made incidents and anecdotes in our mythology and dressed them up to fit the irony in current political events. Thus, the 10-headed demon king Ravana came in very handy to represent the number of evil aspects of the alien administration. Similarly, the British rulers' show of liberalism through reforms was shown in the role of Rama, with his mythological bow and arrow representing in a complicated way that combined forces of patriotism and determination. Such cartoons made a great impression on the people who were illiterate or semi-literate. They were able to comprehend the political content in a cartoon because it was presented to them in a manner familiar to them. Though Political cartooning developed as an art form of criticism in India while it was a still a colony of Britain, and the cartoonists here were influenced by the British cartoonists, over the years cartooning in India developed its own unique style and became a popular part of print journalism. Political cartooning got a late start in Kerala but at present a good number of local Kerala newspapers publish political cartoons. Newspapers in Kerala have cartoons that deal with issues such as corruption, faulty governance, policy implementation, politics, social injustice, under development, unemployment, poverty and price rise.

Analysis and Findings

This study involved interviewing prominent cartoonists of mainstream newspapers, who have carved their a niche in the field of cartooning. The expert interview was conducted with four cartoonists of Kerala to get more insight into the form and content of the cartoons. Questions for the experts were formulated together. The interview focused more on the creative process of cartoons and how it acts as a form of political communication. The duration of interviews in each case depended on the time taken by the interviewees to give their expert responses. After interviewing the political cartoonists, the researcher developed themes based on the theoretical framework of semiotics, intertextuality and the theory of incongruity. Hence, the themes justify the analysis and interpretation made by the researcher. The major themes derived from the interview with the experts in the field of cartooning were divided into:

1. Kerala's Cartoon tradition
2. Image building
3. Negative art
4. Readers involvement
5. Creative Process
6. Voice of the people

Kerala's Cartoon Tradition

Kerala marked its presence in the early history of Indian cartooning by exporting the cartoonists from Kerala to different parts of the world. Eventually, the state carved its own cartoon legacy inside the state. By the first half of the 1960's Political Cartoon became a part of Kerala's Media culture (Sukumar, 2018). The cartoonists in Kerala were creating their own style both in their drawing and in the use of sarcasm. The prominent cartoonist Yesudasan of Kerala alone has created around 30 cartoon characters which became the part of a Malayali's morning newspaper. Sukumar (2018) explains that the political cartoons became a part of newspaper in 1919 with the first cartoon "Great Famine Goddess" that portrayed the 'First World War' and how it affected the people. As the cartooning culture completes its 100th year, the political cartoons receive more prominence in today's newspaper. Most of the cartoonists are of the opinion that the Kerala has its own traditional art form such as '*Ottamthullal*' which has an influence on the cartoonist to criticize the wrongdoings of the

political leaders and other prominent personalities (Ragesh, Sujith, 2018). Kunchan Nambiar who lived in the 18th century (1705-1770) was Kerala's most noted satirical writer and his satirical verse has been recited over the years in various dance forms like *thullal* (Abraham, 1995). Compared to other newspapers more space is allotted to cartoons in Malayalam newspapers (Ragesh, 2018). This shows the interest of the readers in political cartoons. 'Kittumavan' was one of the pocket cartoon that was published in the newspaper 'Janayugam' in 1959. The cartoon used humour as a technique to communicate political ideologies and it had a great impact on the public as they started to dress like the characters in the cartoon and participated in the campaign programmes which explains the influence that cartoons had on the public (Unnikrishnan, 2018). Paulose (2018), explains that one of the reasons for the increase in number of cartoonists from Kerala is due to the increased interest shown by the mainstream newspapers in bringing this form of criticism to the mainstream. The new technologies' including Social media gives the cartoonist a platform to publish their works and to reach a large number of audiences (Sujith, 2018). Hence, there are more than a hundred cartoon blogs in Malayalam and this shows the acceptance of this form of political communication among the general public.

Image building

Political cartoons develop an image of the political leaders and other prominent personalities in the mind of its readers. It is not done just by the drawings. People already have an image of their politicians. For example, the first thing that is noticed in former Chief Minister Oommen Chandy is his hair and that of V.S. Achuthanandan is his rigid body. Hence, with a few lines the cartoonist exaggerates those features and it becomes easy for the reader to identify the character which is already registered in their minds (Paulose, 2018). The cartoonist actively takes part in the image-making process as they always engage with those politicians. Cartoonists can contribute to the image development of a candidate during election time by offering simplified portrayals of those politicians (Ragesh, 2018). Every politician has created a cartoon profile of themselves, by their character traits, dressing and talking styles, political activities, corruption and scams related to them. Therefore, a cartoonist caricatures them from this already created profile (Sujith, 2018). In one of the cartoons by the prominent cartoonist O.V. Vijayan, he portrays Morarji Desai the former Prime Minister of India as the central character and a dialogue was given to him that, 'it is been so long being a character in a cartoon' pointing out the in activeness of that political

leader. The cartoon should be enjoyable to those who are being criticized in the cartoon. Earlier the politician considered it to be a credit to be featured in a political cartoon as it shows how active a he is in politics (Sujith, 2018).

Most cartoonists are of the opinion that it is easy to portray a politician who is popular and has an influence on the general public (Sujith, 2018). Mahatma Gandhi has become the character or a symbol in the cartoons of almost all cartoonists. This is because he has influenced the public and had created a great impact on the public through his ideologies. Thus, even the specs that Gandhi wears, can be used in cartoons and the readers could easily connect it with Gandhi and his ideologies. So, cartoonists usually use Gandhi in their cartoons for expressing non-violence, truth and justice.

Negative art

A cartoonist is seen as a social critic by the general public. The role of today's cartoonist is not unlike that of the court jester of yore. "Their business in a democracy is to exercise the right to criticize, ridicule, find fault with and demolish the establishments and political leaders through cartoons and caricatures" (Laxman, 2000). Thus, it is an art of disapproval and complaint. It treats men and matters with certain healthy scepticism and good-humoured ridicule, but never with malice. Cartoons and complaints of offense generate searching queries about how to interpret the cartoon's unique visual form. The blurry boundary between offense and humour is at the heart of such cartoons (Sugumar, 2018). The cartoonist sees things more deeply, humour is just a cover that is used by the cartoonist to draw attention to a serious issue as it is an easy way to reach the public (Sujith, 2018). Cartoons are not meant to please the politicians but to criticize their wrongdoings (Paulose, 2018). Cartoonists usually take a critical stand on the government and who occupies the chair doesn't matter to the cartoonists (Acharya, 2018). Thus, they act as an opposition that doesn't have any inclination towards a particular political party.

Reader's involvement

It's interesting to consider how the visual form that is at the border of news and art provides remarkable insight into key political themes. To read between the cartoons image and words is to engage in cultural politics. Humour and wit are the social glue that helps us look deeper into political happenings. The message is transmitted at a certain wavelength, but the findings can never be the same as it depends on many factors and mainly the readers understanding on

an issue (Paulose, 2018). They should find meanings that a common man never expects of, and then try to link it with the current issues that makes people to think differently (Acharya, 2018). Sometimes the cartoonist links a political event with a story in the Bible, or other religious epics or myths, so the cartoonist should have a proper understanding on the texts and should be able to relate it with the present political conditions (Ragesh, 2018). This shows that no texts are free from the influence of other literature. In political cartoons cartoonists use various elements such as film dialogues, songs, proverbs, advertisement taglines, idioms and so on. The readers who are familiar with such elements find it easy to relate it with the politics (Sujith, 2018). Sometimes the cartoonists connect more than one or two political issues and if the reader fails to connect those issues then the cartoon itself will be a failure. Political cartoon is not just a process of portraying a political issue, it is a process that starts from the cartoonist and ends in the readers were both the cartoonist and readers should be actively participating in it for the proper communication. For example, one of the prominent cartoonists of India E.P Unni once published a cartoon on the corruption of the petroleum ministry. He draws a door with a security sitting in front of it and a man asks him whether the ministry is not working and the security replies it is working and this is just the front door. The readers get a picture from it that all the corruption happens through the back door but here the cartoonist hasn't drawn a back door and hasn't mention anything on corruption. So, it is the imagination of the reader that makes them to visualize a backdoor and the corruption. Thus a cartoon gets completed within the reader on the basis of how they generate meaning out of it (Sujith, 2018). Thus both the cartoonists and the readers should be in the same page to get a fuller understanding of the text (Acharya, 2018). Even though the cartoons are not moving pictures it gets developed in the human minds and makes people think, which makes this medium different from the trolls and memes in social media. In trolls and memes, they use film dialogues and songs as do cartoons but once you get the humour out of it the communication process stops there whereas in political cartoons people start thinking more and try to get new meaning out of it (Sujith, 2018).

Creative Process

A cartoon attempts to preserve the sense of humour of the community which is so essential for survival in day to day existence. Newspaper cartoons are incomparable public texts that evoke a rich interpretative vocabulary that no other images can match. The symbolic languages used in the cartoons are changing because of the larger influence of technologies.

The cartoonist should have a proper update on the new changes and observe more to adapt those changes. Earlier the symbol such as a tiger were used to explain patriotism and so on but now the old symbols have lost their edge (Khanduri, 2014). The symbols used are more connected to the modern world as the people easily interpret such things. This bring visual relief and some fun, but the image is meant to do more (Sujith, 2018). A cartoonist should be a journalist, artist and humourist. Expression of the eyes and the lips are most important thing in caricature as it describes the character of that person (Sudheernath, 2017). Exaggeration is one of the major techniques used by the cartoonist; characters in cartoons are also compared to animals or birds. In a cartoon published in *Malayala Manorama* that talks about the ‘Somalia’ statement made by the Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the cartoonist portrays Modi as an unhealthy tiger and Oommen Chandy as a healthy cat. This shows the strength of the Kerala Chief Minister Oommen Chandy. In another cartoon the current Chief Minister of Kerala Pinarayi Vijayan is portrayed as a flower pot with a sapling that refers to the ‘go green campaign’ by the LDF government. Thus, through exaggeration the cartoonists create laughter and make the public to think deeper (Unnikrishnan, 2018). The prominent cartoonist Kutty once said, “Drawing is free but ideas are sacred” (Khanduri, 2014). Thus, it is the idea that matters more. But imitation of certain ideas is also common in cartooning. For example, the former President of Indian National Congress, Sonia Gandhi was portrayed as ‘Monolisa’ in many cartoons because of her Italian origin and Monolisa is a famous painting done by an Italian painter Leonardo Da Vinci. This is the reason for the repetition of ideas. Thus, such kind of ideas comes under cliché ideas (Sudheernath, 2017). Earlier the cartoonists drew political cartoons a day before the newspaper gets published but with the advent of the technology people get news at the very moment itself thus it is a challenging job for the cartoonists.

Voice of the people

Cartoons are a source of news that gives a view of the underside of politics. It explores the things that a common man discusses about deeply held political convictions in their day to day life (Paulose, 2018). Political cartoonists act as a voice for the voiceless, as the cartoon portrays the problems faced by the general public due to the irresponsible politicians. Most of the political cartoons are drawn as a spontaneous response of the general public towards an issue and it supports the majority of the public’s opinion (Sujith, 2018). Political cartoons may not have a direct impact on the electoral decisions of the people, but a gradual change

often takes place and it shapes the opinion of people on a certain issue (Ragesh, 2018). It acts as a counter statement to the political changes or a controversial statement made by a politician or some corruption and scam. Thus, it gives voice to the people's opinion on a particular issue (Ragesh, 2018). It mainly portrays identifiable issues and the public emotion of distrust. The cartoonists try to be unbiased and neutral; they always take a stand with the general public and speak for them. Unlike other forms of media, political cartoons have the ability to display the public's criticisms (Sugumar, 2018). The cartoons function not as a change agent but as a statement of consensus, an invitation to remember cultural values and beliefs, and by implication, to participate in their maintenance.

Conclusion

Political Cartoons have now become an important part of political activities and act as an artistic commentary beyond the boundaries of the written word. Political Cartoons of Kerala have provided us a glimpse of the political debate and the public opinion on certain issues and events that occurred during Kerala's most recent political history. The frequency of cartoons shows how this genre is gaining popularity due to its social and official recognition. This paper addresses how satire is blended with criticism, and aimed particularly at political leaders and mainstream political parties. Analysing the issues depicted in these political cartoons enables us to uncover a historical plot and helps in understanding it. Many political cartoonists unconsciously express their culture's paradigm in the cartoon they draw. Indeed, culture is a useful tool to understanding the way meaning is constructed in Political Cartoons.

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