



Pictorial Satires and the History in Making: Indian Emergency Through Abu Abraham's Private View

Harivansh Mani Bhardwaj

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Abstract

Wars, famines, political and economic upheavals, dogmas and taboos in faiths, occurrences of any nature and magnitude that could have taken hold of human life, cartoons have been put to use for the purposes of recording the event without any revisionist impulses, primarily in the void of aftermath thinking and agendas, which happened to cloud other forms of literature heavily. This immediacy and their invocation to the collective consciousness and cultural frameworks of the masses make cartoons the holy tools of history in the making. The study harks back to the days of Emergency, notably remarked as India's first dictatorship by scholars and locates the vital role of caricatures in the grim times and how they became the voice of dissent and the prohibited and least debated aspects of history. The argument presented delves into studying the event of Emergency which clamped down austere on citizens' rights and freedom of expression among other restraining measures, through non-conventional sources of history, not journalistic accounts, fictional works or autobiographies but caricatures. In the times when visuality yields a captivating influence on human attention and conscience, cartoons promise something fundamental, penetrating the view and mind while also preserving the chronotope by bringing to the fore, characteristics and values of the societies that produced and circulated them. Earmarking these arguments as significant, this paper analyses select cartoons from Abu Abraham's pocket cartoon series *Private View*, which subjected authorities to tough and necessary questions and flourished awareness pertaining to the distress of democracy throughout the public sphere during the period. The paper also aims to examine how they avoided the vulnerabilities and compulsions of the written word and contributed to chronicling history in real-time.

I. Introduction

Alexander Pope while acknowledging the significance and relevance of Gulliver's Travels, in

the context of the public sphere remarked, "From the highest to the lowest, it is universally read, from the cabinet council to the nursery", it happens to be appropriate in the case of History as well, it is universally read, from the cabinet council to the earlier stages of school education but the readings, methodologies and motifs differently, there could not be a homogeneous approach in the process. Since history was deemed fit to be studied by human cognition or before any of such developments, it has always been a subject of intellectual skirmish and a contested space. Many historians have asked the question, what could actually be called history, especially in the aftermath of what is described as a postmodernist or discursive turn, where every reality or fact became a construct or discourse, history also met a similar fate. E.H. Carr, a historian while contemplating on the vital paradox of history to serve nation-states or to further an emancipatory political agenda and specific politics, as has been the case in clashes between the left of centre engaged history writing and traditional or conservative forms of history writing, came up with his succinct definition of history, "an unending dialogue between present and past". This unending dialogue between past and present provides space for 'History in Making', devoid of the final and conclusive argument and therein lies the significance of art forms like Cartoons, which on other occasions might be targeted for limiting the imagination, but here as they draw primarily from the characters and events just betting upon the collective consciousness and cultural frameworks of readers, they set free the imagination and charges.

Among many allegations levelled against conventional history writing, politically aligned discourses, agendas of patrons, and ideological leanings induce the primary concerns for the scholars. Much of it could be attributed to the vulnerabilities of the written word and cartoons hold the potential to do away with most of these and present a more liberal and democratic aspect of history. As Ermarth justly puts history to be something, post discursive turn, that would



emphasise the importance of detail at the expense of generality, the absence of objectivity, the plurality of meaning, even including contradictory meaning, and the volatility of the language (Macfie 2013). All these traits could very well be found in the histories produced in the subsequent decades. Caricaturing as an art form is best placed to encapsulate these values, J Maggio cites George Ketab, "In other words, applying this concept to aesthetics, the artform of comics/cartooning has an inherent element of democracy to it: democracy based on cognitive freedom and self-creation. This notion of cognitive freedom forms a basis of democratic individualism".

It opens up the process of that very discursive formation, though not claiming to be inviolable, as Abu writes in the foreword to his book *The Games of Emergency*:

The drawings and articles that follow depict a historic period in India's independent existence. Each one speaks for itself and illustrates a point of view, an attitude. Just as there is no final objectivity in history-it depends on when and by whom it is written- these bits of instant history reveal my bias as well as my convictions...No cartoon or essay has been kept out for reasons of wisdom after the event. I claim no superior understanding of politics. All I can claim is that each one of these contributions, most of which appeared in the Indian Express and Sunday Standard, expressed what I honestly felt on the day I did it.

In the foreword, Abu states his understanding of history which might not appear to have any methodological differences from traditional history writing but where he draws the line is, the exclusion of aftermath wisdom and the agency which comes with the cartoons, the democratic attitude, "what I honestly felt on the day I did it".

Visualizing Indian Emergency

From rampant corruption in Indonesia (Padiatra and Setiawan 2017), the debate around metro development in Paris city (Soppelsa 2011), the collapse of the American dream, the Vietnam war to colonial legacy, independence movement etc. at home, occurrences of any nature and magnitude that could have taken hold of human life, cartoons have been put to use to chronicle the event, and so was the Emergency. They draw the event without any revisionist impulses, primarily in the void of aftermath thinking and agendas, which happened to cloud other forms of literature heavily. "Cartoons are a visual medium where memories jostle, history is imagined and lines of empathy are demarcated".

(Khanduri, *Caricaturing Culture in India* 3) Indian Emergency, which made a criterion shift from the natural and fundamental characteristics of the Indian democratic republic, notably remarked as India's First Dictatorship (Jafferlot and Anil 2020), was clamped down upon the citizens, to say the least, undemocratically. "When India's Emergency arrived with a midnight knock, the lights, and humour, went out in newspaper offices", writes Vishwajit Gosh in an India Today article. It austere curbed the dissent by putting opponents behind bars and introducing pre censorship for newspapers, and deprived citizens of fundamental rights. Statistical understanding of the subversion enforced during the time has not certainly been the victim of oblivion boon yet for those who lived it and public discourse could not be sterilised to inform the later generation. As Shah commission report mentioned, 11 million Indians were sterilised and 1,10,000 locked up which encompassed the opposition leaders, dissenting press personnel etc.

Cartoons overcame the compulsions and vulnerabilities of the written word through the methodological tools, which are hailed as a cartoonist's armoury, employing political/social commonplaces, literary/cultural allusions, personal character traits and transient situational themes (Gombrich and Kris 1940). Since much of the press was under censorship and editorials critical of the government became an impossibility, cartoons held the ground and became the voice of the dissent and the prohibited. They visualized the subversion, corruption, authoritarianism, and distress of democracy, the leverage of genre also corresponded well with the urgent and subtle needs of production, circulation, and consumption. The cartoons were treated as a visual "deep text", which can be deconstructed through its specific contexts and their spatio-temporal dialogue' (Raento and Meuronen 2011). Cartoons that were drawn during the Emergency exacerbated and vividly put on display the whispering discourse about the decline of morality, honesty etc in the private and public life of Indian polity and bureaucracy. Cartoons like "Vote your Caste here", "Save-d Democracy", and "Lovely censor of humour", duo of short but fat and thin but tall politicians ruminating about various issues sometimes engrossed in a non-sense, at another dwelling on narcissistic thoughts. Roy Douglas argued that a cartoon tells the modern reader 'a great deal about the ideas and assumptions of the people for whom it was drawn: what they took for granted and what they questioned'. For what the Indian democracy stood since the formation of republic, all



those values of liberty, of thought, life, and expression as they were compromised so depicted in cartoons, reaching a wide range of people.

Abu's Private View

"His cartoons during emergency raj did not become the victim of censor's scissors. I have a feeling Mrs Gandhi must have directed censorship authorities to leave Abu alone. It could also help her show an island of humour in the *Indian Express*, which was opposed to her emergency raj, and give the impression that she was tolerant to criticism after all.", Abu's colleague at Indian Express in the days of Emergency, H.K. Dua recalls thus his acquaintance at work with him. Abu also writes in the foreword to *The Games of Emergency*:

After my first few Emergency cartoons, beginning with the two 'speak no evil monkeys', that appeared on June 28, two days after the Emergency was declared, pre censorship was ordered. It was lifted after some weeks. It was again imposed after a year later for another shorter period. For the rest of time, I had no official interference. I have not bothered to investigate why I was allowed to carry on freely. And I am not interested in finding out.

Abu was very particular in his approach, he emphasized more on the particulars of the characters drawn than the artistic aspects, as he was called the man of simple lines, states Dua. For instance, while caricaturing President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed in the cartoon where he is shown signing ordinances from his bathtub, very minute anatomical details are taken care of, it could also be for the reason, Presidents are not really popular people among the masses in India. The concern of democracy and the values that it encapsulates have been very close to his heart and craft. He sincerely commented on the issues like India Pakistan war which culminated in the formation of a new state, Bangladesh, the Vietnam

war, and on the Emergency through his painstaking cartoons. Abu's confidence in his work usually arises from his understanding of its historical contingency. He sees his reading of the Emergency not just as a comment on the period, but also as a product of it (Devadawson 123).

The formation of Private View is not simply a subservient way of commenting on the chaos unleashed on society, it was Abu's way of making the political act, a very commensurate and synchronised element of the public's daily life, a metaphor for extending and criticizing the public view. Devadawson explains in her work:

[...] Shankar's passionate yet thoughtful reconstruction of Jawaharlal Nehru in Man of the week' offers a critical medium through which to understand the hopes and anxieties of the new republic. R.K. Laxman's much-loved mascot, the Common Man, helps us understand the complexities of the Nehruvian Legacy, While Abu Abraham's 'Private View' seeks to keep the public conscience alive through the difficult months of Emergency[...] (22)

His genuine effort was directed towards the preservation of this public conscience through his cartoons, although he drew the event in all the forms, like editorial cartoons, and long-form ones, but this study limits itself to analysing select cartoons from his pocket gag, which was rhetorically titled as *Private View* by Abu himself. He emphasised more on the topical necessity and grave concerns associated with the critique that he intended than humour or the artistic niche of caricaturing. As recommended by Peter Burke, a good cartoon can be a vivid, sharp commentary on the key issues of the moment, reminding the historian of the immediacy of questions which otherwise might easily be overlooked.

The Emergency Cartoons: Visual Prototypes of Contemporary Press, Parliament, and Public Sphere



Figure 1
(Source: The Games of Emergency)



Figure 2



Figure 3



In the face of Emergency, when most of the print and electronic media was in exile or complacency, the act of Emergency seeped inside the psyche of the populace, it moulded victims into collaborators, according to the historical anthropologist, Emma Tarlo, driven by compulsions and restraints enforced upon them, cites Rita Gairola Khanduri. As famously quipped by Lal Krishna Advani, a prominent opposition leader, “You were asked only to bend, but you crawled”. Abu was among the most vociferous critics of Emergency and he drew it quite prolifically. The cartoons of Abu triumphed the state censorship and bans and nurtured dissent, as Advani maintained in his prison diary, “In the desert of conformist crap that newspapers are these days, Abu’s cartoons are like an oasis (Khanduri, *Caricaturing the Dissent* 2014).” This articulation of him, puts emphasis on the role performed by cartoonists in those months of emergency. The cartoon (figure 1) deals with the ghost of censorship that has always haunted artists, journalists and anyone speaking their minds against the prevalent authorities. Censorship has been a weapon in the hands of the state since ancient times, But what good it would do the resistance if those accorded with the role of resisting opt to collaborate, this cartoon deals with this central paradox of the times. The use of self-preventive censorship by the editors is put against the backdrop of idealism thought of by the founding figures of the nation and the reality a few decades later. The vision of society having a vibrant discourse, as the debates of the Constitution assembly represent, has been set against the reality of time with a touch of satire.

Figure 2 schedules an ironic jibe at the fundamentals of the Indian Parliamentary functioning, democracy as it is conceived around the liberal world comes to house the idea of a multi or at least two-party system, and Emergency threatened all of it. Indian constitution demarcates the roles of the different authorities and the enshrined power, but the ruling dispensation brought ordinances to bypass the constitutional process and more to it, they amended the constitution itself while the legislature was in exile. There are provisions for certain bills and acts to be presented in the plenary sessions of the parliament, but all the acts or bills of any importance were presented and passed while the opposition, though weak in numbers were rotting in jails or was on the run. So, it contrasts the life of a possible session against the usual timespan of parliamentary sessions, around two-three months, reading Every little counts.

3rd figure mocks the lacunas of the constitutional system, and how come the provisions that were provided for the safety and perpetuation of civil liberty and institutional independence, become the tools for ostracizing the same. As studies suggest, legal jargon creates many such escape ways for evil practices. The constitutional amendments of the time, which made essential changes in the nature of the basic framework of the constitution can never be a subject of forgetfulness for the Indians. This very cartoon is an emblem of the distortion and threat intended upon the fundamental institutions of a democratic nation in that bleak moment of the Emergency. It sets the tone against the discourse of a free nation, free people. The achievements and progressions made since the Independence are hinted at making the retreat, the independence which was the result of long battles replete with constant oblations in many forms, exceptional movements at the cost of innumerable lives belonging to all the strata of society, from the colonial power. This cartoon symbolizes the hunger for power that politicians harbour in their minds and at times act that out in such crude manners. The cartoonist here draws the irony with his ‘congressmen’ contemplating and apparently not so pleased with the recent amendments while also showing a tinge of optimism, residing the hope in the constitutional loopholes to protect the citizens’ rights. The constitution was a product of many rounds of deliberations, and scholarly debates on the nature of the Indian society, culture, citizens, and other essential attributes, which went on for 2 years, 11 months and 18 days. And as the preamble of the constitution mentions “We, The People of India, having solemnly resolved...to secure Justice, Liberty, Equality, Fraternity” all these values were null and void in that moment of Indian democratic history.

II. Conclusion

Carr’s Idea of history being an unending dialogue between present and past disposes us with the discourse of ‘history in making’, the history with unsettled questions, no ‘The final Verdicts’, and inclusive towards the non-conventional sources. It occasions the existence of the kind of history encapsulating traits like an emphasis on the importance of detail at the expense of generality, the absence of objectivity, the plurality of meaning, even including contradictory meaning, and the volatility of the language, as Ermarth puts it. Cartoons inherit all these characteristics and they make a sound case for democratic individualism.



Commensurate to the argument, Devadawson elucidates, “If one believes the old adage, that journalism is just the first edition of history, it must be true that political cartoons published in newspapers are one of the most vibrant manifestations of history in the making[...]”(11). Abu Abraham visualized Indian Emergency with humanly possible precision and objectivity, as he also maintains in the foreword, “[...]these bits of instant history reveal my bias as well as my convictions... All I can claim is that each one of these contributions, most of which appeared in the Indian Express and Sunday Standard, expressed what I honestly felt on the day I did it”. His cognisance of history and reaching out to synchronic commonplaces and socio-cultural allusions to keep the public conscience alive through the contours of his private view, construct a valuable passage for perpetual discussion around the subjects of history, democracy, and the impact of visual caricaturing in the process of History in Making.

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