

## R. K. Laxman % The Uncommon Creator of Common Man



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With the demise of the legendary cartoonist R.K.Laxman on Jan 26<sup>th</sup>, 2015 the curtain was drawn down on an era of cartooning which represents great deal of ethics and balance. Laxman enriched the genesis of political cartooning for decades through his brilliant creation of Common Man which proved to be his outstanding contribution to the columns of the *Times of India*.

Born in the year 1924 in Mysore, as the youngest son of Venkatarama Krishnaswamy Iyer, a very strict head master of Maharaja's High School in Mysore, Rasipuram Krishnaswamy Laxman rose to be a national icon. Much to his disappointment he was denied admission to famous J.J. School of Arts, and his cartoons were returned by the Dean with the remark; 'I see no talent whatsoever. Please continue with your studies.' (*Tunnel, 60*) It was the time when Laxman was already contributing to local magazine *Koravanji*, besides illustrating his brother, R.K. Narayan's stories in *The Hindu*. The rejection of the application, however, didn't discourage Laxman. He continued with his art without any formal education in that sphere and after many years, he was honoured with an invitation by the dean of J.J. School of Arts to distribute prizes to the winners of the annual exhibition of paintings by students.

Laxman contributed to several journals and magazines like *Swarajya*, *Blitz*, *The Hindu*, *Swatantra* and Kannada humour magazine, *Koravanji*. In 1947, he joined the *Free Press Journal*, Bombay as a political cartoonist. Six months later, he joined *The Times of India*, beginning a career that spanned for over fifty years. *The Times'* readers had been very fond of his political cartoons and *You Said It* column that used to appear on the front page for years. Laxman is known for his distinctive illustrations in several books, most notably for the Malgudi stories written by his elder brother R.K. Narayan. Shankar Nag directed a serial on these stories.

He also created a popular mascot for the Asian Paints group called *Gattu*. His cartoons have appeared in Hindi films such as *Mr. and Mrs. 55* and a Tamil film *Kamaraj*. Laxman also tried hand on short stories and travel articles, some of which are collected in *Idle Hours*. His two novels, *Hotel Riviera* and *The Messenger* as well as the collections of his cartoons in the series *The Best of Laxman* and *Laugh with Laxman* have been published by the Penguin. In June 1998, the *Times of India* published a collection entitled *Fifty Years of Independence through the Eyes of Laxman*. For his fabulous art Laxman has been honoured with numerous awards, including Asia's top journalism award, the Ramon Magsaysay Award, in 1984 and the prestigious Padma Vibhushan by the Government of India, in 2005. An honorary degree of the *Doctor of Literature* was conferred on him by the University of Marathwada. Through his graphic representation of the contemporary reality, Laxman has emerged as one of the most penetrating satirists of the day. His cartoons are hilarious and thought-provoking.

The art of cartooning and caricature which was initially denounced as 'a low art' by art critics and art historians gradually won currency as 'the ideal type of deformity' the grotesque, which Leonardo da Vinci used to grasp the concept of ideal beauty. In the sixteenth century the Italian caricaturist Annibale Carracci compared the caricaturist's task with the art of a classical artist as both of them are able to notice the truth masked behind surface reality%

The one may strive to visualize the perfect form and to realize it in his work, the other to grasp perfect deformity, and thus reveal the very essence of a personality.

(Navasky, 28)

Thus, a caricaturist aims at perfection even in deformity. For the renowned Indian cartoonist R.K.Laxman:

The art of ideal caricature is to bring out the essence of a personality through credible exaggeration.

(Tunnel, 133)

The word caricature has been derived from the Italian word 'caricare' which means 'to load' as in 'a vessel or a weapon.' A caricaturist invests his image with lots of meaning. Steve Platt, the editor of the *New Statesman* writes that the nature of caricature is 'to take a distinctive feature and exaggerate it literally to overload it.'(Navasky, 37) Caricature is a quick impressionistic drawing that exaggerates prominent physical characteristics to humorous effect. It brings out the subject's inner self in a kind of physiognomic satire. Though caricature is the earliest mode of graphic humour and satire, it could not gain currency as a form and expression of artistic excellence for ages.

Caricature is an important component in the creation of political cartoons along with allusions. Caricature parodies the individual and allusion creates the situation or the context in which the individual is placed. In his widely illustrated work *The Art of Controversy: Political Cartoons and Their Enduring Power* Victor S. Navasky focuses on the emotional power of cartoons and caricatures as well as their capacity "to enrage, upset, and discombobulate otherwise rational people and groups and drive them to disproportionate- to- the- occasion, sometimes violent, emotionally charged behavior."(Navasky, xxi)

A political cartoon is motivated by the contemporary political situation. According to Jonathan Burack: Political cartoons are vivid primary sources that offer intriguing and entertaining insights into the public mood, the underlying cultural assumption of an age, and attitude towards key events or trends of the times.

(Burack)

The apparent simplicity of political cartoon is deceptive: the simpler the drawing and the visual image, the more complex is the thought behind it. A political cartoon plays an important role in influencing the contemporary political reality. Michael Foot, the former leader of the British Labour Party has commented:

'Nothing to touch the glory of the great cartoonists! They catch the spirit of the age and then leave their own imprint on it; they create political heroes and villains in their own image; they teach the historians their trade.'

(*Encarta M.S.*)

The awesome power of political cartoons has often caused worldwide uproar resulting into censor, threatening, incarceration and even murder of the cartoonist and caricaturist. Doug Marlette's *What Would Mohammad Drive* (2009) Barry Blitt's *The Politics of Fear* (2008), Danish newspaper *Jyllands – Posten's* cartoons depicting Prophet Muhammad, and in India, Harish Yadav's cartoon of Narandra Singh Modi, the Chief Minister of Gujarat at that time, are among several instances of caricatures and political cartoons that have aroused protest among people. R.K. Laxman also faced the threat to be banned when Morarji Desai became the chief minister of Bombay. When Laxman drew a cartoon on the theme of the prohibition to snuff out, Desai was so outraged that he held a meeting of the cabinet to hush him. He argued that the cartoonists should be banned from ridiculing the politicians, ministers and the government.

Thankfully, it did not work: Desai was gently reminded that our constitution protected freedom of speech and expression, and better sense prevailed.

(*Bhandari 12-13*)

Like any other form of art, cartoons are meant to be studied and interpreted. Although other forms of art can also be misinterpreted, cartoons' vulnerability to misinterpretation is greater than that of any other form because of cartoons' use of image- language instead of words. An "artist's intention is one thing and the message transmitted by a cartoon, which once released functions as a totem beyond control, is another."

(*Navasky, 37*)

R.K. Laxman exercised 'controlled distortion' to appeal to a class of readers having 'sophisticated taste' (*Ibid*) The caricaturist in Laxman distorts human face without losing the essence of humour in it. He exaggerates and exploits the physical features of great personalities like Morar ji Desai, Nehru, and Indira Gandhi. Rajeev Gandhi's tall, handsome exterior was a challenge to the cartoonist yet he managed to find point in his features for distortion. In his autobiography Laxman describes how he exaggerated the physical features of Rajeev Gandhi to meet his ends. He shortened his nose, thickened his eyebrows, reduced his hair to make him look more bald- headed than he really was and presented that image in *The Times*.

Shortly, people started to remark that Rajiv had begun to resemble my cartoon version of him, losing his original God-given good looks!

(*Tunnel, 194*)

As Laxman exercises 'controlled distortion,' his caricatures and political cartoons are less vulnerable to misinterpretation and controversy. This disciplined response is rooted into the vibrant comic tradition that India has nurtured for ages. Unfortunately, Indian comic tradition is not widely known and noticed. Even R.K. Laxman, in the introduction to the collections of his cartoons acknowledges;

Just over a century ago the art of cartooning came to India from England and struck roots. Although other forms of art like sculpture, poetry and painting had flourished in our country for centuries, the art of graphic satire and humour was unknown.

(*Village, vii*)

Laxman further concedes that humour and satire existed in India in folklore and popular poetry, and also in the 'funny antics and humourous articles of the court jester.' (*Ibid*) In India, there is rich tapestry of court jesters like Birbal, Tenali Rama and Gopal Bhar. The tradition is continued in Nehru's friend Shankar, in modern India. The stories about the legendary court jesters and tricksters Tenali Rama, Gopal Bhar and Birbal have been handed down to the generations of Indians through oral tradition. These stories have been told and retold in the form of comic strips and story books.

Lie Siegel, in his serious and hilarious study of the Indian comic sense of life entitled *Laughing Matters: Comic Tradition in India*, brings to light the essence of Indian comic tradition through a profound survey of the unexplored realms of Indian classical literature. The traditional Indian categories of laughter include "laughing at others and laughing at oneself." (*Siegel, xiii*) These two categories are roughly parallel to the western tradition of satire and humour. Comic laughter is caused when people try to be what they are not while satire focuses on the affectation and hypocrisy itself:

While satire attacks the vice that claims to be virtue and the folly that is accepted as wisdom, humor celebrates the virtue (or at least the delight) of roguery and the wisdom (or at least the humanness) of folly.

(*Siegel, xiv-xv*)

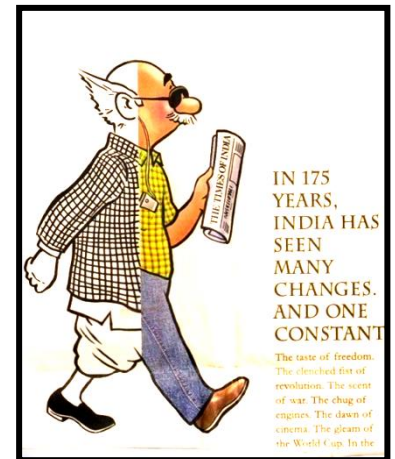
Whereas the humourist laughs at his own cost, the satirist attacks the follies and vices of others; 'But reform is merely an occasional by-product of satirical laughter, the excuse for it, not its goal.' (*Siegel, 63*) R.K. Laxman continued to work with his cartoons and caricatures for long but he could hardly change the mind of a politician. He once said;

" If I had lashed at granite with a feather with the single-minded zeal as I have bestowed on my work, by now I would, perhaps, have been able to show some faint feather marks on the rock.... [but ] not a trace of a dent have my cartoons caused in any sphere of human activity, whether social, economic or political."

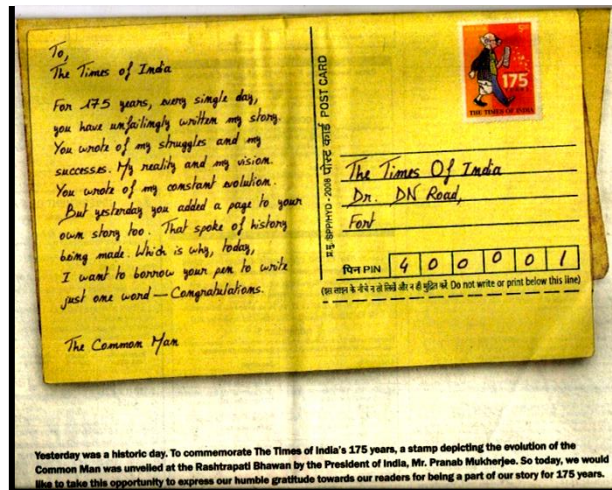
(*You Said It, vol.5, intro*)

It is the motif of the satirist to make the world laugh with him at the existing rot and the consequent speculation is only accidental. Satire and humour are two sides of the same coin; satire makes one laugh at the incongruities of life with a spirit to mend them while humour makes one laugh at the absurdities that are inherent and natural.

When a cartoonist comments on or ridicules the existing reality, he aims at redeeming the world of the existing evil. Laxman's cartoons and caricatures characterized with humour, and satire are meant to perform the function of the licensed court- jester, unveiling to the administration and the government authorities the other side of development and prosperity. His drawings are full of penetrating satire and humour that appears to overshadow the enveloping gloom. His cartoons covered a vast range of Indian administrative, political and social system depicting widely corrupt ministers, outcasts and underprivileged folk leading a roofless existence, sights of flood, fire, famine, corrupt practices and red-tapism in various forms and so on and so forth. His comic vision catches unity in disunity. His art of cartooning is primarily focused upon the political wrangling and political byplays that have been staged in India's politics. His passion for political cartooning has made him draw every significant happening in India's politics so minutely and painstakingly that 'A Cartoonist's History of India' could be drawn from his cartoons that appeared regularly in the pages of the *Times of India* for more than fifty year.



His Common Man is a fabulous creation that remained constant despite waves of changes in the country. The Times of India celebrated 175 years of its odyssey as the leading newspaper in India with this 'ONE CONSTANT' (*TOI, Nov.14, 2013*) striding on the front page. This unique creation of Laxman can be seen hanging around a cabinet room, a slum-area, a public place, a busy street, a housewife's kitchen and the like. Through him, Laxman intends to appeal to the common Indian who has mutely accepted the humdrum around him. He is his creator's instrument to comment on socio- economic and socio- political aspects of Indian life. This legendary creation became synonymous for *The Times of India* for more than sixty years. To commemorate 175 years of the newspaper, a stamp depicting the evolution of the Common Man was released at the Rashtrapati Bhawan by the President of India, Pranab Mukherjee:



(TOI, Nov 14, 2013, 7)

With the help of his Common Man Laxman attempted to "bring down from their lofty heights, the national, international and local events and render them accessible to the common people." (*Tunnel*, 145) His graphic images illustrate a point effectively and convey it instantly to the onlooker without any lanes and by lanes of verbal discussion. Visual images are often seriously misinterpreted and arouse immediate uproar but Laxman's 'controlled distortion' has carefully avoided these potholes. His visual satire and attack on the political paraphernalia of the country have largely functioned without raising any controversies. His ironic detachment restrains him from taking sides. Like his brother R.K.Narayan, Laxman, too, is a minute observer of the incongruities of life and avoids condemnation or rejection. He only projects the situation with light humourous vein and holds an ironic smile at the absurdities of society. As a cartoonist of promising career Laxman cast a keen, observant glance at every social and political occurrence of the time and drew a response whose impact was difficult, rather impossible to avoid as "The quicksand of graphic protest is difficult to anticipate and impossible to escape." (*Devadawson*, 1)

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