Caricaturing Culture in India: Cartoons and History in the Modern World


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In the wake of the January 7, 2015, attack on the French satirical newspaper Charlie Hebdo (in which the magazine’s editor, Stéphane Charbonnier, along with cartoonists Cabu, Tignous, Honoré, and Wolinski, were killed), Ritu Gairola Khanduri’s intimate history and ethnography of Indian cartooning has been given fresh global salience in addition to being an impressive piece of scholarship in its own right. Drawing on a wide range of archival sources and ethnographic methods, the book explores the past and present meanings and uses of newspaper cartoons in India. At once original, carefully researched, and refreshingly candid, Caricaturing Culture in India: Cartoons and History in the Modern World makes a strong contribution to the fields of Indian studies, visual anthropology, political anthropology, and, given the in-between status of political cartooning, the ethnography of both art and journalism.

Taking newspaper cartoons as a medium of political knowledge, communication, and engagement, the book works through a multifaceted analysis of key aspects of Indian modernity, liberalism, and democracy—including the politics of gender, class, caste, and community—from the second half of the 19th century to the present. To connect the different sites and historical locations treated throughout the work, Khanduri designates “cartoon talk” (rather than cartoons themselves) as the central unit of analysis. This smart choice of method opens the way to a multisited ethnographic archive made from the life stories of senior cartoonists, interactions and interviews with junior cartoonists and amateurs, materials from personal and institutional archives, and excerpts from exhibition guest books, newspaper reviews, blogs, and more.

Drawing on this archive of situated knowledge about newspaper cartoons in India, Khanduri tells an intricate story of what she calls “a community existing in moments and fragments” (2014:29). Framed by a detailed introduction that provides a helpful orientation to the history of Indian cartooning as a topic in visual and political anthropology and a succinct conclusion that connects this history back to deliberations about who constitutes a liberal subject, the main body of the text is organized in three parts, arranged chronologically under the rubrics of colonial times, national times, and global times.

Chapter 1 concerns the proliferation of “vernacular Punches” such as Oudh Punch (1877), Hindi Punch (1878), and several other Punch titles from the Urdu, Hindi, Punjabi, Gujarati, and Bengali press. Despite being largely forgotten in contemporary narratives of Indian cartooning, Khanduri shows that these early newspaper cartoons succeeded in carving out a space for subverting colonial politics in India. Advancing the discussion of the public role and politics of cartoons under colonialism, chapter 2 situates Gandhi’s early period of political activism and his development of the language and concept of satyagraha (truth force) in relation to the founding of his career in journalism and his practice of reproducing, reviewing, and disclosing to his readers the concealed political messages of selected cartoons such as John P. Campbell’s “The March of Civilization” and Arthur Wynell Lloyd’s “The Steam-Roller and the Elephant.” Rounding out the discussion of the diverse meanings people made of cartoons in colonial times, chapter 3 underlines the special role of newspaper cartoons in opening a space—through caricature and humor—for conversations about the imagined futures of India and Pakistan and the divergent ideologies of the congress and the Muslim league.

Moving into national times, chapter 4 elicits key “insider perspectives” through ethnographic biographies of two prominent Indian cartoonists: Kutty (1921–2011) and Bireshwar (1920–2007), who were Khanduri’s companions through written correspondence, visits, conversations, and interviews. Providing ample space for the senior cartoonists to speak for themselves through
letters, e-mails, and interview transcripts, Khanduri (2014:144) concludes: “Such life stories highlight subjectivities elusive to the concept of ‘culture’ but were yet a part of culture.” Chapter 5 develops this idea of a distinct “culture” of Indian cartooning by focusing on how junior and amateur cartoonists learn their craft and hone their style within and against a particular set of norms and values handed down through the example of “virtual gurus,” of whom R. K. Laxman, the best known cartoonist in India, is doubtless the most influential. Linking the culture of newspaper cartooning to the complex politics of representation within the field itself, chapter 6 tackles two distinct but related problems: Why are there so few women cartoonists? And why is the figure of “the Common Man” so popular among Indian cartoonists? As with other key questions explored in the text, Khanduri’s analysis of these uncommon women and common men suggests not a single, overarching explanation but multiple, overlapping factors rooted in the social, historical, cultural, and linguistic particulars of nation and region in India. Chapter 7 brings the discussion in part 2 to a close with an examination of debates about the status of cartoons as art. Turning on hierarchical and normative distinctions between word and image (contrasting “visual cartoons” with those that rely on “high-brow captions”) and between different methods and technologies of production (comparing traditional hand-drawn caricatures with contemporary cartoons generated with the aid of digital tools), these debates should be of broad interest due to their resonance with long-standing issues in visual anthropology.

Bringing the discussion to global times, chapter 8 shifts gears from the ethnography of art back to the ethnography of journalism. Here, Khanduri looks to the proceedings of a quasi-judicial bureaucratic institution—the Press Council of India (PCI)—to ask how cartoons-as-news make political sense in a global age. The PCI’s ambivalent stance on the specific petitions that are discussed in this chapter brings out the strong sense in which the interpretive dilemmas of cartoons and their status on the border of art and news “reinscribe the fuzzy liberalism that marks India’s experience of democracy” (Khanduri 2014:270). Completing the historical arc of the study, the discussion in chapter 9 focuses on the “Danish cartoon controversy” of 2005, which reverberated globally from Europe before finding local expression in north India through idioms of Hindu-Muslim relations and violent street politics. With its balanced deliberation on the complicated, often unexpected, and sometimes deadly ways that controversial cartoons (and satire more generally) can be politicized, the discussion here is particularly timely in light of recent events in which magazines and movie studios have become central actors in global contests over the limits of free expression.

Despite its large historical sweep and the many important topics it covers, the argument of the book proceeds in measured steps and is rendered with a light, distinctly ethnographic touch. Unlike a young Gandhi, who we learn “walked the reader through each component of the cartoon[s]” he reproduced in Indian Opinion (Khanduri 2014:85), our guide to the world of newspaper cartoons in India does not force interpretive closure. Rather, with the inclusion of a generous amount of her source material, Khanduri invites us to think through the questions she raises in each chapter. Caricaturing Culture in India thus offers interested specialists and advanced undergraduates an excellent opportunity to keep thinking, pondering, and puzzling over the big questions of modern history through the specific lens of Indian cartooning. In this sense, the generative capacity of the book itself can be compared with the best political cartoons that are discussed and reproduced in the text.

**Anthropology and Art Practice**


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This little collection of essays by artists employing a variety of media is magical! It captivates the reader by its reach, but also by its depth, and the reflectiveness of the short essays of which it is comprised. So regardless of whether the objet d’art is a film, a photography series, or a multimedia installation, the thoughtfulness of analysis that the artists reveal in their words is challenging and enthralling. The artwork is quite edgy, socially conscious, and politically oriented. The artists who speak in these pages engage with issues of a cross-fertilization of art practice and anthropology. They challenge and productively engage with the shifting space between contemporary art and anthropology, and present in this context a large and heterogeneous body of work. The working and research processes involved in these projects are “probing, exploratory, and often remain fragmentary and open-ended in their results” (p. 4). Further, “the process of working with people and materials in ethnographic situations becomes as, or even more, important than the finished product” (p. 4).