

## **Caricature in Print Media: A Historical Study of Political Cartoons in Colonial India (1872-1947)**

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### **Abstract**

*With the growth of print media in the nineteenth century there was development of national consciousness and social awareness among the middle class educated gentry of India. The beginning of cartoons started in India with the Colonial influence and gradually the visual culture became a significant part of the print media. The present paper intends to unfold a narration of the growth and development of political cartoons in India in the colonial period and to understand the representation of the then contemporary political situation with humour and caricature. The article tries to look into the racial arrogance, the colonial outlook towards Indians and a reaction of the Indians through the vernacular political cartoons.*

**Keywords:** Punch, British hegemony, racial superiority, caricature, mockery, satire

In the late half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century the political situation and the social condition in India started to change due to the growth of nationalism and modernization in India. There was rise of social consensus and development of printed culture in forms of newspapers, periodicals, magazines in English, Hindi, Bengali and other vernacular languages. It was in these print medias that there was representation of visual thoughts and political cartoons too captured a place in it. The cartoons particularly political was a medium of satirical presentation of the contemporary situation of the country. The political cartoons in the nineteenth and twentieth century cover political, social and economic events, personalities, cultural issues with a touch of wit, humour and satire.

Parody was prevalent in Indian art in ancient India. The culture of parody and caricature as “a weapon of social criticism” began with the popularity of the art of Kalighat in Calcutta in the nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> It is true that modern caricature was introduced in India by the British colonisers in the second half of the nineteenth century. But it underwent changes and adopted many Indian aspects in its characteristics. The present paper intends to provide a narration of the development of political cartoon in India and to understand the representation of the contemporary political situation with humour and caricature. It tries to identify the coloniser’s gaze and the revealing perspective of a master towards the Indians.

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### **The early English Cartoons representing India and Indians**

It is needless to say that with the growth of western education in India there was a profound influence of British culture, knowledge and thoughts in India. The political Cartoons entered in Indian print media with the British. The British satirical comic periodicals like Punch (1841-1992), Fun (1861-1901) and Pall Mall Gazette (1865-1921) brought modern cartoons in India. <sup>3</sup>Political cartoons were definitely a gift of British colonial culture but in India it developed its own style and characteristics. Some of the early newspapers to publish cartoons were the Bengal Hurkaru and the Indian Gazette in the 1850s. Scholars and researches claim that the first journal of satire and comic character was Delhi Sketch Book (1850-1857). <sup>4</sup>During the next two decades of the nineteenth century since 1850s there started a trend of publishing political cartoons in Indian newspapers. The main objectives of the cartoons were the policies and actions taken by the British against the Indians.

Punch was a cartoon based weekly published from London since 1841. It was started by Henry Mayhew the writer, Ebenezer Landells the wood engraver; with Mark Lemon as the editor and James Last as the printer. The British Punch took its inspiration from the Le Charivari, a French publication that ran from 1832-1837, published by the cartoonist Charles Philipon, and adopted the sub-title The London Charivari. Punch was a weekly publication which started with a thin page limit of 12, costing a 'three penny bit' or 3d. It had a deep impact upon the society as it was considered a wonder in the current literature. It was laughter and published in low price. The Punch magazine filled with cartoonist Gillray, Rowlandson and Cruikshank always stood for Britain's and Victorian pride, racial superiority discourse and a representation of imperial authority.<sup>5</sup>

The Revolt of 1857 provided a good opportunity for them and the cartoonist of Punch John Tenniel published a cartoon titled 'The Britain's Lions Vengeance on the Bengal Tiger'. <sup>6</sup>(Fig.1) It showed the political status of India and Bengal. It revealed the power of Britain over India again and the tiger personifying the Indians though a ferocious animal is defeated and punished by the manly lion symbolising the power and hegemony of Britain. The tiger is shown to have killed humans, as it seems from the cartoon it was a woman with a child. The lion besides representing a British pride of victor, it indicates a saviour from the violent ferocious uncivilised tiger who is a threat to the mankind.

Figure -1



THE BRITISH LION'S VENGEANCE ON THE BENGAL TIGER.

Source: *The British Lion's Vengeance on the Bengal Tiger*. *Punch*, 33 (22 August 1857): 76-77.

Printed in Barbara Harlow and Mia Carter (Edited) *Archives of India: Volume I*. From the East India Company to the Suez Canal, Duke University Press, 2003. p-230

The cartoon was in reaction to the event in the month of August 1857, when the news had reached London of a heavy toll of retribution a British force had extracted in the region of Cawnpore, now Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh, India. The military force, a mix of the 78th Highlanders, the 1st Madras Fusiliers and a troop of Sikhs, had not just captured back the town from the hands of the rebellion on the 17th of July 1857, but in the aftermath, laid to waste homes and villages in a fit of rage, and inflicted inhuman cruelty to both inhabitants and mutineers. The news had largely been well-received, and both the public and press had joined in to hail the retribution as 'just and deserving' including the British satirical magazine *Punch*-the London. <sup>7</sup>

It facilitated a template for imagining mental states and the violence in the revolt of 1857. The colonial imperial attitude towards the natives was a common content of the *Punch*, therefore, in India its readership was limited to the British administrators and subalterns. Revisiting themes of native indolence and scenes that captured the Indian experience, in such analysis, humour appeared as a sensibility that marked the British and the *Punch* style publications and as a creative act by the British and for the British in India, one that produced humour at the expense of the natives. <sup>8</sup>A similar kind of cartoon was published in *Punch* in 1858. (Fig-2) During this period Sir Colin Campbell had been appointed Commander in Chief

of British forces in India. He lifted a siege on foreigners in Lucknow and evacuated the survivors, and brought in British troops to quell the uprising among Indian sepoys in the British East India Company's army. Here, in the cartoon Sir Campbell presents a cowed but not necessarily tamed Indian tiger to Lord Palmerston, the British Prime Minister, who hesitates to accept the gift. This is a reference to the official disbelief in London about the wisdom of the British government taking the direct control over India after the British East India Company failure was revealed in uprisings and rebellions.<sup>9</sup>

Fig-2



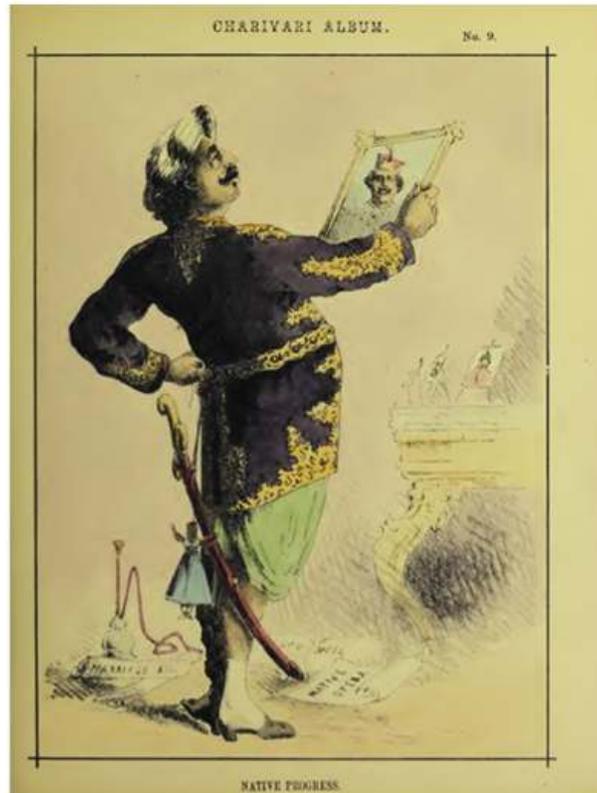
Source: Punch or London Charivari, Mark Lemon Edited, Volume XXXIV, London, Brookellers, 1858

With the growth of English education and development of printing culture there were publication of numerous magazines and periodicals in vernaculars and English language which printed cartoons with distinct style and kind. These include Indian Charivari, The Delhi Sketch Book, Matvala, Basantak, The Oudh Punch, Hindu Punch and many more.<sup>10</sup> The cartoon based publication The Delhi Sketch Book (1850-1857) was created with the "military and subaltern mind" in large consideration. The Pall Mall Magazine (1865-1921) published the British perception of India with the idea that the country was filled with "fat and complacent natives" and "Babus who walked meekly hand in hand".<sup>11</sup>

The Indian Charivari founded in 1872 was owned by Colonel Percy Wyndham. He arrived in Calcutta for earning opportunities and launched the cartoon and comic magazine. The magazine persecuted its aim and objectives as “reviewing current topics and matters of interest in a light, playful spirit” but in fact it reflected racial superiority and colonial mentality of imperialism. The comic characters figured mostly the mentality of colonial culture and caricatures of the Bengali character, exploiting the views of westernised Bengali as a buffoon with the intentions to be equal and rival in culture and intellect of the Bengalis. The Indian Charivari published ‘Baboo Ballads’ a series of caricatures of the educated gentlemen (bhadralok) after the Revolt of 1857. Their contempt was deep seated because educated Bengalis questioned British superiority and tried to equal themselves as to British Civil servants.<sup>12</sup>

In its Volume I, the Indian Charivari album depicts the figure of The Maharaja of Vizianagram (Fig-3) giving a description of The Highness The Maharaja of Vizianagram, K.C.S.I. as “combined with an English education” and adds to it that “The people of his own presidency sometimes find fault with him as an absentee landlord ,.....he is respected as one of nature’s gentleman”.<sup>13</sup>

Figure -3



Source: Indian Charivari Album, Volume I , Calcutta , 1875.

A ridiculed character of the Maharaja is depicted with the caption 'Native Progress' and the passing of the Age of Uniformity Bill in 1885 regarding the eligibility of marriage in his estate is mentioned as a label to the Hookah smoked. The Maharaja carries a sword and a puppet hanging which further mocks the bravery, independence and position of a princely state in British India. It poses a mockery on the steps taken for modernisation in India by a native king. A native Indian Maharaja trying to modernise his state was a move to equalise like the British or a European so it was a ridiculous act and this was shown in the cartoon. ParthaMitter has argued that, Indian Charivari was a racial malice. Caricature thrives consensus on a shared culture: 'us' versus 'them'. The joke is shared and so is the hostility.<sup>14</sup>

One of the leading running English language comic magazines published by an Indian to take up political issues was Hindi Punch (1878-1930). Its editor was Barjorji Naorosji, who belonged to the Parsi community in Bombay, supported the moderates in the Indian National Congress founded in 1885. This magazine's favourite was the personification of India as Panchoba, an Indian version of the figure of Punch. It adapted the prints by the popular academic painter Raja Ravi Verma. One of the parody published in 1905 was the portrayal of Lord Curzon, as Saraswati, the Hindu goddess of learning in the style of Ravi Verma.<sup>15</sup>(Fig-4) It was a parody of the high handed treatment of the academics at the Simla Conference of 1905. Curzon appeared also in another cartoon of Hindi Punch as Ganesh, wit elephant head who needs to be worshipped for wealth and success.<sup>16</sup>(Fig-5)

Figure-4



Propitiating Shri Ganesh

Figure -5



On the Heights of Shimla

Source :H. A.Talcherkar, *Lord Curzon in Indian Caricature, Being A Collection of Cartoons*, D.B.Taraporevala Sons & Co, Bombay, 1905.p-16

### Political cartoons in Vernacular magazines and periodicals

The spread of English language and political awareness led to the rise of Indian cartoon magazines. There were growth of English and vernacular cartoon illustrations with distinct style of each. These included the Matvala, Basantak, HarbholaBhand, The Oudh Punch , the Hindi Punch, Parsi Punch, and many more.<sup>17</sup>

In Bengal , the Amrita Bazar Patrika started the trend of publishing caricature by portraying for the first time the parody of Lieutenant Governor of Bengal , Sir. George Campbell, (1872). With the growth of nationalism and rising discontent against the British raj, there were publications of two periodicals namely Basantak and HarbholaBhand (1874 ) based on caricature literature. The periodicals published cartoons on political issues as growing demand for the right to participate in the municipal elections of Calcutta known as the Municipality Movement. Basantak was run by the DuttaBrothers of Hatkhola ,PrananathDutta and GirindranathDutta who were the leading activists of the municipality movement.<sup>18</sup> Basantak criticised the high British officials like Steward Hogg , the Mayor of Calcutta, who was sketched as the Baraha (pig) Avataarof the Hindu God , Vishnu, and his surname 'hog' were shown. The racial superiority of the British were largely criticised. The VarahaAvataar was carrying the Victoria Memorial in its horns and the loyal Bengalibabus were in folded hands in a posture of religious worship.<sup>19</sup>(fig-6).

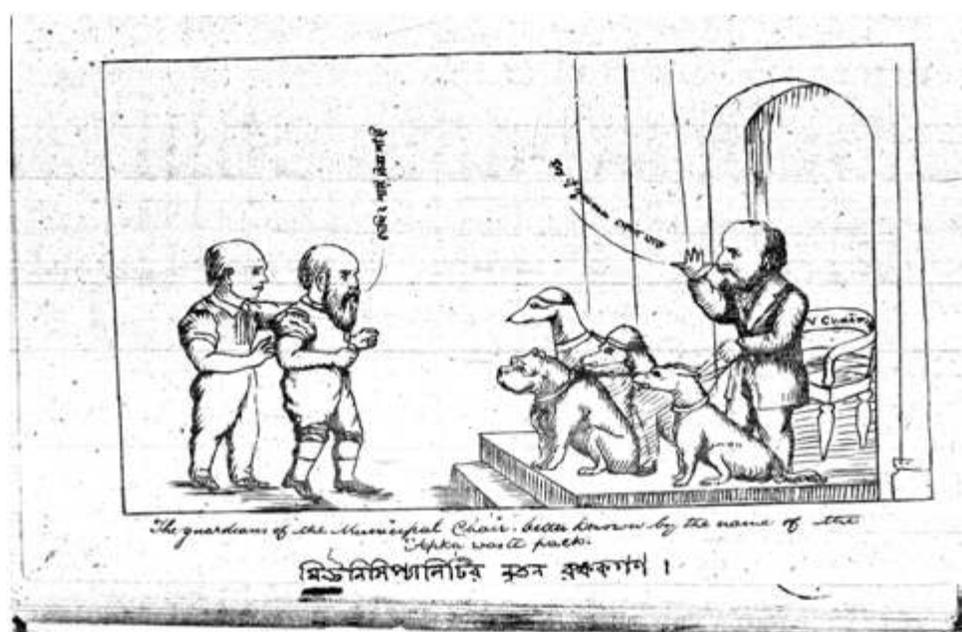
Figure -6



Source: Basantaka Illustrations 1874-1875, Volume -2  
Archives, centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta.

The periodical became highly popular among the educated Bengali middle class. The periodical targeted the high British officials and Anglicised Bengalis. Basantak took issues of deindustrialisation of Indian handloom industries due to import from Manchester textiles, the British Government's inefficiency in providing relief to the famines and the corrupt British officers and their allies.<sup>20</sup> The Municipality of Kolkata and its inefficiency in running the city is mostly portrayed in the cartoons.<sup>21</sup>(Figure 7).Basantak was critical of the social reformers too. It made caricature of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and policies for the upliftment of women in India during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>22</sup>

Figure -7



Source: Basantaka Illustrations 1874-1875, Volume -2  
Archives, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta.

In North India a vernacular periodical named Oudh Punch which was published from United Provinces of Agra and Oudh edited by Sajjad Hussain in 1877. Hussain was inspired by the boom in the publication of English and Vernacular newspapers, and set up his own ethnographic press in Lucknow. It published cartoons on the West Indian Rebellion of 1865 “drawing an analogy between the rebellion and the nationalist unrest in India”.<sup>23</sup>The Oudh Punch like other cartoon periodicals adopted the illustrations printed in the London Punch. One such illustration was of Dadabhai Naoroji printed in 14<sup>th</sup> June 1892 along with the figure of Britannia and Hind. The image commemorates the election of Dadabhai Naoroji as the Grand Old Man of India to the House of Commons in Britain in 1925.(Fig-8) The Urdu

translation says, “ Well done ! My Son! Well Done! This achievement is possible only by you ; this is how men with noble character act”. This illustration is inspired from the illustration of London Punch of 1873 drawn by John Tenniel on the visit of Naser-al –Din –ShahhQajar of Iran to England who signed a peace treaty with England and was knighted too under the Order of the Garter. In this illustration, the speaker is the Shah speaking to Britannia and assuring her that no one would “ cross into the gardens” of her child Indiana. Both the images show a transcultural exchange as in Tennial’s image , India or Indiana is a young defenceless girl who is being threatened by the dominating masculinity of the Shah , but is protected by the bulwark of her guardiuan “ Britannia’ . She has no voice of her own and is a silent spectator. But in the Oudh Punch she is as a proud mother who is looking benevolently at her “son’ with Britannia. <sup>24</sup>

Mary Lousie Pratt opines that, the cartoon periodicals as Mr.Punch , Oudh Punch andPunchoba operated or interacted in ‘contact zones’ which are “ social spaces where desperate cultures meet , where clash and grapple with each other , often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination —like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today”. The process of trans-culturalism is actually a process through which the subordinated or marginalised groups use the materials and thoughts of the dominated culture in order to engage in a barter system with the dominant group.<sup>25</sup> The Oudh Punch is not just inspired and copied the image but actually wanted to converse and convey messages to the coloniser and with each other.

Figure -8



Source: MushirulHasan, Wit and Humour in Colonial North India , Delhi,Niyogi Books 2007.

Another very important illustration was a satirical image of Lord Lytton's victory over Afghanistan. In the image Lord Lytton is shown as Lord Ram who is breaking the stone bow (*Haradhanu*) and Afghanistan is portrayed as Sita, a shy lady holding a marriage garland waiting to marry him. The war and valiant fights in the battlefield is symbolised by the breaking of bow. The cartoon was drawn by a Hindu artist for an Urdu publication, on a contemporary event that has occurred outside Indian borders yet socially and culturally tied to the Indians.<sup>26</sup>

Figure -9



Source: Mushirul Hasan, *Wit and Humour in Colonial North India*, Delhi, Niyogi Books 2007.

The *Parsi Punch* was a weekly publication printed from the Bombay Presidency from 1854 edited by Barjoji Nowrosji. It was much like the *London Punch* and was represented by Punchoba, a short, rotund man with a hooked nose, Punchoba wore an Indian vest, communicating in English. It adopted western styles and aesthetics in the interaction of Punchoba with Governors, Nawabs, industrialists and other British officers. In 1884 the Punchoba was seen giving bouquet of flowers to Lord Ripon whose term as Viceroy was at

its end. While the figure of Grant Duff, the Governor of Madras is seen to be disliked due to his role in the riot of 1881. <sup>27</sup>(Fig-10)

Figure -10



Source:MushirulHasan,Wit and Humour in Colonial North India , Delhi,Niyogi Books ,2007.

It levels Duff as Duffy (that mischievous boy of Madras ). The Punchoba thus is closer to the Viceroy and speaking to the Governor. <sup>28</sup>

By the beginning of the twentieth century pictorial journalism gained popularity and became an indispensable part of literature. The middle class Bengalis were the sole receiver of these illustrated magazines .RamanandaChatterjee published Prabashi which had a brilliant section of illustrated cartoons, followed by a number of monthly magazines like Bharat Barsha, Manasi O Marinabani and MasikBasumati which provided a great opportunity to the cartoonists who published illustrations on absentee zamindars , hypocrite academicians , British corrupt officials , Indian loyal officer, national movement, Anglicised Indians and many other political issues. <sup>29</sup>

A noted personality who produced some important political cartoons was Gaganendranath Tagore. He produced illustrations in lithograph on British coloniser and anglicised Bengalis. He published in Modern review and Probashi with styles he borrowed from Europe. His

cartoons were more on a British style than on the local KalighatPatachitra. He was much critical of the adoption of western thoughts in Indian nationalism leading to the development of a fractured identity. He published *AdbhutLok* (Realm of The Absurd) in 1912.<sup>30</sup>(Fig-11).

Figure -11



Source:Sunderason, Sanjukta. 'Arts of Contradiction: Gaganendranath Tagore and the Caricatural Aesthetic of Colonial India.' *South Asian Studies* 32, no. 2 (July 2, 2016): 129–43.

### **Nationalism and Cartoons in Newspaper.**

Since the second decade of the twentieth century there was a rising popularity of visual literature in the newspapers. There was a spontaneous political event with the advent of Gandhi and Gandhian movements. The Quit India Movement, the Hindu-Muslim Unity, the Gandhiansatyagraha, anti –colonial movements by masses, the Bengal Famine of 1942-43 , the decline in Indian economy, the Second World War and the partition of India became important theme of illustrations of the cartoonists. The *Amrita Bazar*

Patrika, the Hindustan Times, the National Herald published illustrations from the a nationalist outlook on the political success of Indian National Congress.<sup>31</sup>

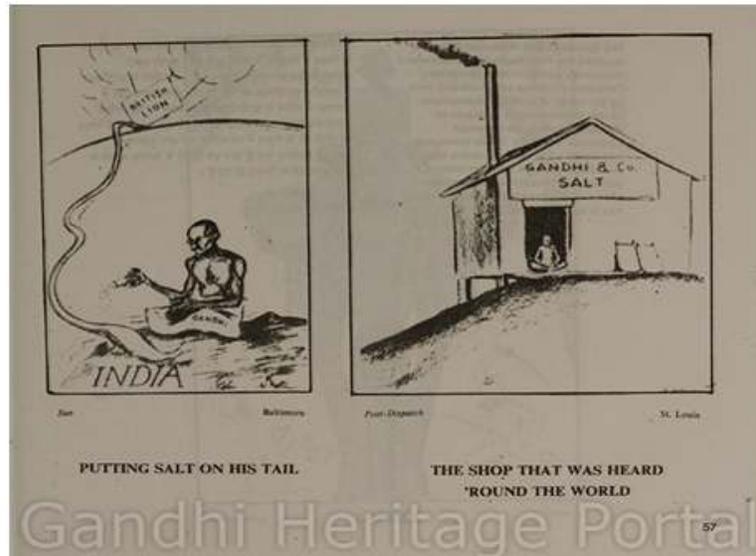
Nationalist Weekly India was published and edited by the famous Tamil poet C.SubramaniaBharati, was the first page cartoons on the front pages of his weekly was a common sight.He also planned to run a bilingual monthly newspaper in Tamil and English named Chitravali solely devoted to political cartoon in 1925. K.R.Sharma was one of the famous names of the Early South Indian cartoonists who published his works in the pages of Tamil Nadu in the 1920s. The short lived Viswadeepam(1939) in Kozhikode, Rasi( in Alappuzha) , Sarasam (in Changanacherry), and Narmada (in Kottayam) were some of the early cartoon magazines which were published from Kerala.<sup>32</sup>

In Bengal, Jatin Sen, who worked with monthlies like Manashi, Bharat Bharsha, Pravashi and ChandiLahiri who pioneered the pocket cartoon with his Third Eye View for Amrita Bazar Patrika.<sup>33</sup>A number of othercartoonists became popular namely RevatiBhushan, Kafi Khan, AmalChakraborty, SailaChakraborty, and many others. In the next few years K.ShankarPillay who became popular as Shankar started cartooning from South India.His illustrations were published in The Free Press Journal and the Bombay Chronicle. Later in 1932, he joined in Hindustan Times and remained till 1946. From 1948 he started publishing his independent magazine named Shankar's Weekly which became a breeding ground for eminent cartoonists like Ranga, Kutty, Lachke, Vijayan, Abu Abraham and others.He influenced and inspired next generation cartoonists like R.K.Laxman. These cartoonists elevated cartoons in newspapers to the status of editorial commentator and political analyst in India.<sup>34</sup>

The political cartoons in the twentieth century was largely directed in favour of the nationalism under the Indian National Congress and drew illustrations against the British imperial policies.

The most favourite of the newspapers was the cartoons on Mahatma Gandhi and the reaction of the colonial Government. The Salt Satyagraha was followed with a cartoon in a newspaper (figure- 12) showing the British lion who is a mighty animal is scared by a pinch of salt in the tail.The courageous act of Gandhi was heard and known all over the world.<sup>35</sup>

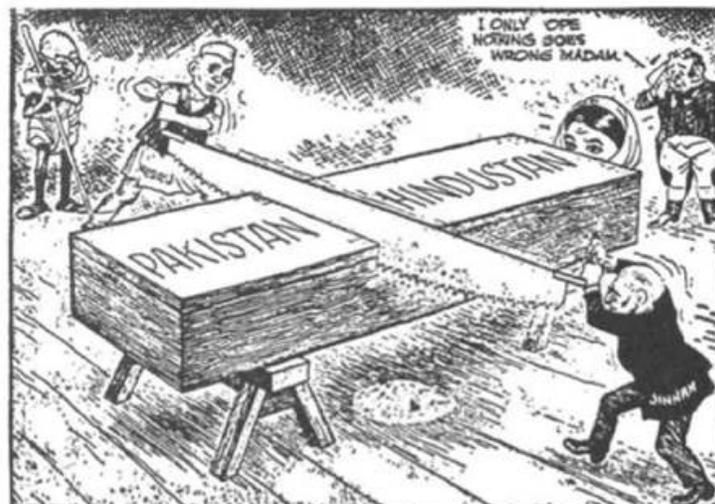
Figure -12



Source: Gandhi through the Sketches,p-57 Gandhi Heritage Portal, <https://gandhi.gov.in/cartoon.html>.

Partition of India became another important issue of political cartoon during 1947. As a political cartoon, “Sawing through a woman” provides great insight into Partition imaginations. JawaharlalNehru, the man dressed predominantly in white, symbolizing a man of peace and Muhammad Ali Jinnah, dressed in all black, are depicted as sawing the box that contains the Bharat Mata or Mother India (better known as the embodied feminine, nationalistic, representation of India). In the background is shown the British representatives and Mahatma Gandhi who looks helpless and worried.<sup>36</sup>( Figure -13).

Figure -13



Source: Pioneer, 8<sup>th</sup> July 1947

The cartoon personifies India as the “Mother”, the feminine body is shown as a box and a Mother India’s head on the side of the box that is labeled as *Hindustan*. She is central to the cartoon, just as she was central to Partition. Based on this depiction of the Mother, it can be said that identities, deconstructions, and formations in light of Partition or Independence, would occur not because of the event itself, but in the act of saving the Mother. In saving her both the Muslims and Hindus are actually moving away from the mother and for their own self interest both for the Hindus represented by Nehru and the Muslims represented by Md. Jinnah are causing pain to her. It seems from the illustration that there is no other way to save the country but to partition her. The only way to save the Mother would be, to cut her in the process.

### Conclusion

Caricatures and cartoons became an important part in the literature of the nineteenth and twentieth century. Visual art developed into an expression against the oppressor by the oppressed in a language which was different from the Sanskritised Bengali and the cheap publication of the Battala. The British edited periodicals took a racist look in its feature and outlook. The Indian periodicals were mostly pro nationalist anti British in its characteristics. But it should be noted that the cartoons and caricature was limited to the western educated middle class population who were the main readers and were politically conscious in the rising nationalism in India. It was a representation of politics with humour and wit which created racial conflicts with the British and roused hatred against the colonizers. It must be accepted that the cartoons and caricatures were not for the masses and the marginalized groups who remained away from the light of literacy. Cartoons made laughter became a medium through which political and national consciousness was aroused in India in the nineteenth and twentieth century .

### Notes and References

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<sup>8</sup> Punch or London Charivari,Mark Lemon Edited , Volume XXXIV,London, Brookellers, 1858

<sup>9</sup>HimangshuGoswami,op cit, p-86

<sup>10</sup>Ritu G. Khanduri, op cit, p-86

<sup>11</sup>MitterPartha, *op cit*, p-17

<sup>12</sup> Indian Charivari Album, Volume I , Calcutta , 1875

<sup>13</sup>MitterPartha, op cit, p-17

<sup>14</sup> Ibid , p-18

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<sup>34</sup>*Gandhi through the Sketches*, p-57 Gandhi Heritage Portal <https://gandhi.gov.in/cartoon.html>.

<sup>35</sup>Pioneer, 8<sup>th</sup> July 1947