Humour and the Nation: Shankar, Laxman, and the Formation of Cartoon Culture in Early Post-Colonial India

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Abstract:

This article examines the vital role of cartoons in Indian journalism, particularly Kesava Shankar Pillai and R.K. Laxman, during the prime ministership of Jawaharlal Nehru in the early years of independence. This article analyses the contributions of cartoons as satire in India's political discourse, Nehru's relations with the cartoonists, and selected cartoons that deal with the key contemporary political and social issues. It examines how Shankar and Laxman's works represent the political debates shaping public perceptions regarding India's socio-political conditions through their distinct artistic styles and outlooks. Their cartoons portrayed criticism and commentary on governance and reflected the unique relationship between Prime Minister Nehru and his approaches to Indian democracy. This article focuses on the enduring influence of their works and the role of satire on India's democratic discourse in shaping historical narratives.

Keywords: *Political Cartoons, Jawaharlal Nehru, K. Shankar Pillai, R.K. Laxman, Democracy*

Introduction

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, India witnessed drastic political and social transformations, shaped primarily by the birth of nationalism and modernist influences. Western ideas and indigenous movements caused a reawakening of political awareness and a change in conventional social systems. As a result, social cohesiveness developed and printed media, including newspapers, journals, and periodicals, thrived in English, Hindi, Bengali, and many regional languages. These periodicals presented written ideas along with graphic images, including political cartoons. Political cartoons developed as a powerful tool for satire as they offered a funny yet sharp analysis of current affairs. They portrayed political, social, and economic developments, prominent individuals, and cultural issues through the use of wit and humour.

Unquestionably, British colonial influence brought political cartoons to India, yet over time, it developed into a distinctive medium with marked Indian qualities. Modern cartoons arrived in India via British satirical publications such as *Punch* (1841–1992), *Fun* (1861–1901), and *Pall Mall Gazette* (1865–1921) (Bhattacharya 2019: 64). By incorporating British cartooning techniques with indigenous issues and storytelling, such publications significantly helped define India's political satire tradition. Inspired by *Punch*, many Indian publications adopted similar cartooning methods, including the *Delhi Sketch Book* (1850–1854), *Amrita Bazar Patrika* from Bengal (1868-1991), *Basantak* in Kolkata

(1874–1875), the Urdu-language *Avadh Punch* (1877–1937), and the Bombay-based weekly *Hindi Punch* (1878– 1930). Often expressing a distinctly Indian point of view, these magazines employed cartoons as a vehicle for political and social commentary. Often, these cartoons are aimed at criticising the policies and actions carried out by the British against the Indians.

Caricatures and cartoons in India grew as an indispensable part of literature and journalism, emerging as a powerful tool of visual media that effectively created popular appeal for challenging political authority. Over time, this art form became deeply embedded in Indian popular culture since the colonial print media, giving rise to a strong legacy of political cartooning in the post-colonial era (Mitter 1997: 16). This article focuses on two of the most notable cartoonists who established the cornerstone of political cartooning culture in the early post-colonial period, when Jawaharlal Nehru was serving as prime minister and India had just begun its journey as a sovereign nation. To understand the status of cartoon culture within the existing national political landscape, this study examines the relationship these two cartoonists had with the country's political leadership. Additionally, it explores how their astute wit and innovative brilliance in cartoon-making were able to portray the then Indian political discourse to the audience.

The first section of the article discusses how Shankar and Laxman played a crucial role in developing a vibrant political cartoon culture in the national media during the early post-colonial phase. The second section examines the nature of Jawaharlal Nehru's enthusiasm for press freedom throughout his political career and how, as the first prime minister of independent India, he maintained a liberal outlook toward the cartooning culture in the national media and in this way contributed to the creation of a democratic environment within the Indian political scenario during the early phase of Indian democracy. In the subsequent section, this article also discusses how these cartoonists throughout the Nehruvian period illustrated caricatures to convey public opinions on some essential facets of the nation's socio-economic and political development such as the development of the electoral system based on adult franchise; the national economic policy rooted in a mixed economy that emphasized the public sector over the private; and the state's efforts to introduce the Hindu Code Bill aimed at nationwide socio-cultural upliftment. Alongside the portrayals of socio-economic and political developments, this study also analyses how the cartoons of Shankar and Laxman reflect the country's integrity in the face of the threat of Chinese invasion during the last phase of Nehru's prime ministership.

The Cartoonists: K. Shankar Pillai and R.K. Laxman

Shankar Pillai is widely regarded as the father of cartooning in India. Born on 31 July 1902 in Kayamkulam, Kerala, he developed a passion for cartooning. This hobby was noticed and channelized by the editor of *Hindustan Times*, Mr Pothan Joseph, who selected him for the post of staff cartoonist (Kar and Das 2024: 558). From British viceroys to Indian nationalists, Shankar is renowned for lampooning everyone. One of his most famous

cartoons in *Hindustan Times* in the early 1940s showed the British Viceroy Lord Linlithgow as 'Goddess Bhadrakali', standing over a burning body in a cremation ground (Wangchuk 2023). Fascinatingly, while Linlithgow and his wife expressed gratitude for his caricature, Gandhi wrote a letter to Shankar, which, among other things, criticized his drawings of Jinnah and even offered ethical guidance on cartooning (Khanduri 2014, 102). Shankar's cartoons in the *Hindustan Times* were both part of and marked the ethos of an emerging nation (Khanduri 2014: 96).

With India attaining independence, Shankar's cartoons turned the focus from the colonial administration to Indian politicians and Nehru, thus producing almost 4000 cartoons (Kar and Das 2024, 558). After working for *the Hindustan Times*, Shankar started his publication, *Shankar's Weekly*, in 1948. Inspired by the British satirical magazine *Punch*, it became a venue for several upcoming well-known cartoonists like R.K. Laxman, Narendra, Kevy, and Bireshwar. Sadly, *Shankar's Weekly* stopped publishing in 1975, barely two months after Prime Minister Indira Gandhi declared an Emergency. Although many linked its closing to the political crackdown, Shankar personally disagreed with such assertions (Wangchuk 2023). While *Shankar's Weekly* provided an influential platform for emerging cartoonists during its time, including R.K. Laxman, the latter would go on to establish his own distinct voice through his daily cartoon in *The Times of India*, beginning in 1951.

R.K. Laxman's daily cartoon in *The Times of India* offered a humorous but perceptive view of the life and ambitions of ordinary Indians. In his autobiography, *The Tunnel of Time*, R.K. Laxman talks of how normal, daily items motivated his creative output. Scenes outside his window, including crows, dry twigs, birds, lizards, and many other natural features, drew him in (Laxman 1998: 24). As he portrayed them via his creative perspective and characteristic manner, these ordinary images were important in determining his artistic style. He illustrated stories written by his older brother, the famed author R.K. Narayan, for *The Hindu*, while also producing political cartoons for various local publications, including the *Swatantra*. Laxman joined *The Free Press Journal* in Mumbai as a political cartoonist, where he worked alongside Bal Thackeray, who was also a cartoonist at the time. Inspired by British cartoonist David Low, known for his modest yet strong technique, Laxman, on the other hand, uses minute components to highlight the hilarity and depth in his work (Laxman 1998: 25). His most famous work, *Common Man*, showed his extraordinary capacity for broad popular resonance. He captured common people's daily struggles and frustrations, particularly about the local governments' failures.

In Laxman's work, the *Common Man* fulfils a functional role and embodies a more profound symbolic significance. He saves the cartoonist from having to draw large masses of people representing India's diverse population with different dress and appearance (Laxman 2005: ix). In his early cartoons, Laxman drew quite a crowd to denote India's heterogeneous population (Chatterjee 2007: 303). Over time, he started to restrict the number of characters until he had chosen a lone one, i.e. the *Common Man,* thereby

representing the common man's struggles of similar types. The *Common Man* is frequently portrayed as a helpless figure caught in the grip of India's social and political realities. He sees factories that work without producing anything to employ labour, dams built where there are no rivers, injured people carrying stretchers on which they would be lying if there were no hospital personnel shortages, and ministers announcing that their corruption is in the best interest of their country (Siegel 1989: 429). He is conscious of the social and political drama around him, but cannot take immediate action. His body language subtly gives a feeling of agitation and frustration, yet his reaction remains passive, describing more through quiet presence than active involvement. Through his silent observations, he shapes public opinion, gradually approaching others toward shared perspectives without a single spoken word. Laxman's cartoons became a regular ritual for readers with their morning tea as they offered laughter and a moment for reflection. Though the *Common Man* was not the first pocket cartoon character to attract great affection, he became a classic image of Indian everyday life.

Nehru's Attitude Towards the Cartoonists

Jawaharlal Nehru's diverse personality was notable in that he himself worked as a journalist. Starting his career as a politician and journalist committed to India's independence struggle, Nehru, acting as a Congress member, advocated independence via the media. He worked as a writer and wrote for several newspapers before the nation acquired its freedom. Even if several of his works were best-sellers, he never saw himself as a writer. Like Mahatma Gandhi, Nehru was an activist and a journalist who used the press to further the cause of liberation. Journalism was not only a career but also a duty committed to the freedom movement during the fight for independence. Driven by the aim of national independence, the press sometimes adopted a strong and passionate stance. Understanding the impact of the press, the British government passed several restrictive laws to stifle press freedom, including the Special Powers Ordinance of 1932, the Press Emergency Powers Act of 1931, and the Vernacular Press Act of 1878. Nehru strongly opposed these restrictive laws. Suppressing news, he claimed, would keep the populace from making wise decisions concerning world affairs (Sharma 2021: 196). He said that public opinion was much shaped by the press.

Nehru was fervent in the role the media played in shaping national dialogue even after independence. Particularly in bolstering the policy of non-alignment and for more significant challenges of the developing world, he thought the press had a crucial part to play in a newly independent India. Press freedom, to Nehru, was essential to democracy. Even if severe, he welcomed criticism as he saw it as a normal democratic process. But he could not stand journalistic, historical ignorance, lack of respect, or hatred (Sharma 2021: 200). Nehru's interaction with the media was ultimately one of tolerance mixed with expectation. He saw democratic government and nation-building as depending critically on the media. Though he differed with some of its features, his commitment to press freedom reflected his excellent vision for democratic India. One of his admirers, the *National Herald* editor

M. Chalapathi Rau, said of Nehru: "For him, freedom of the press consisted essentially of editorial freedom and not of freedom of the owner of the press. He disliked press barons of all kinds, and post-war developments in the Indian press oppressed him so much that he took an interest in the appointment of the Press Commission" (Rau 1964: 1247). This commitment to intellectual freedom and critical expression found resonance in the relationship between Nehru and contemporary cartoonists such as K. Shankar Pillai and R.K. Laxman, whose work exemplified the spirit of independent thought that Nehru championed.

Though Shankar was a close friend of Nehru's, the latter had embraced, even praised, the witty commentary of the cartoonist. His cartoons introduce us to a newly independent country's prime minister trying to be economically self-reliant while negotiating its place in global politics. The cartoonist Abu Abraham recalled that once Nehru congratulated Shankar for his fearless expressions through cartoons and sincerely asked him, "Do not spare me, whenever necessary" in a public gathering (Mukhopadhyay 2024: 18). Moreover, Shankar acknowledged Nehru with this statement: "…for helping him spot his inherent weakness. He liked to be reminded that he, too, was mortal. Perfection is not for any man, however powerful and highly placed he may be. Nehru had the wisdom to realise that" (Kar and Das 2024: 558).

Like Shankar, Laxman, too, was respected throughout by Nehru. Once, Laxman ridiculed Nehru during the Sino-Indian War in 1962. Without taking any offence, Nehru rang up Laxman and said, "Mr Laxman, I enjoyed your cartoon this morning. Can I have a signed, enlarged copy to frame?" (Tharoor 2014). In an interview, Laxman was asked what phase he enjoyed the most. Was it the Jawaharlal Nehru phase when there was a lot of idealism? In reply, he said, "No, that was not interesting. A cartoonist enjoys not a great man but a ridiculous man… I used to go and meet Pandit Nehru, and he really liked me. I was once given five minutes to meet him, and he spent more than an hour with me" (Dalal and Basu 2010).

From the above statement by Laxman, it is evident that Nehru was an ardent lover of cartoons and did not mind getting ridiculed through his caricatures. It was an age where humour was much better tolerated in our public discourse (Tharoor 2014). For Nehru, cartoons were more than news and perspective, they were a way of direct touch with loved ones, particularly when he was separated by imprisonment (Khanduri 2014: 93). Ritu G. Khanduri notes that Nehru's letters from prison to his daughter Indira frequently reflected his delight at receiving books of cartoons, such as *Lancaster: More Pocket Cartoons* (Khanduri 2014: 93).

Visualising the Early Post-Colonial State: Nehruvian Era in the Cartoons of Shankar and Laxman

As contemporaries, both Shankar and R.K. Laxman produced cartoons that captured the socio-political landscape of early post-colonial India, particularly during Jawaharlal

Nehru's tenure as Prime Minister (1947-1964). As mentioned above, Nehru was a staunch advocate of press freedom and demonstrated a notable tolerance for criticism, including that expressed through satire. Selected works by Shankar and Laxman from this period are examined in the following discussion to highlight their engagement with the socio-economic and political dynamics of the time, and their cartoons are analysed to understand how they represented these issues to their audience.

- **Laying the Democratic Foundation: Early Elections**

The first general election held in 1951–52 represented the largest democracy experiment anywhere in the globe. Over 173 million people cast ballots, who were primarily rural, impoverished, uneducated, and without prior election experience (Chandra, Mukherjee, and Mukherjee 2008: 168). At the time, the main concern was how the public would react to this opportunity. Many were dubious about such an electorate, as to make it a success, the citizens needed to cast a vote in a politically mature and responsible manner. Some said that only a benign dictatorship could be successful politically in a caste-ridden, multi-religious, uneducated, and backward country like India. The elections lasted almost four months, from 25 October 1951 to 21 February 1952. Later, this time was cut to nineteen days in 1957 and seven to ten days for the next elections (Chandra, Mukherjee, and Mukherjee 2008: 168). Jawaharlal Nehru ran a vigorous campaign during the first general elections in India. Nehru showed remarkable commitment by travelling around 40,000 km nationwide and addressing almost 35 million people (Chandra, Mukherjee, and Mukherjee 2008: 170). His speeches were not just political but also educational for the people. According to his biographer S. Gopal, Nehru's speeches reflected his pre-independence attempts to inspire mass critical thinking and raise public knowledge of their rights and obligations (Chandra, Mukherjee, and Mukherjee 2008: 170).

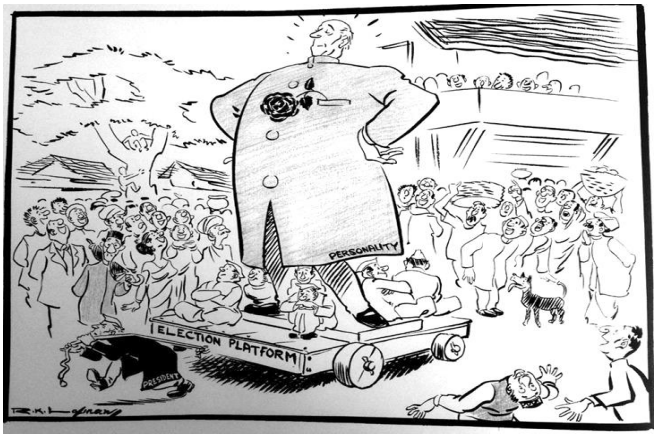


Fig. 1: 'A giant among men' by R.K. Laxman, *The Times of India*, November 1951 (Source: The Times of India)

Laxman's cartoon (Fig. 1) vividly captures Nehru's enormous public appeal rather brilliantly. Nehru's prominence was so evident that political opponents focused their attacks mostly on him rather than on the Congress policy. Understanding his significance, Nehru admitted that the government would have found it difficult to maintain stability without him (Chandra, Mukherjee, and Mukherjee 2008, 170). By showing Nehru as a towering figure atop a wheeled 'Election Platform,' the cartoon depicts this reality, that the campaign focused more on his personal appeal than party policies. 'Personality' written on his coat implies that the election focused more on Nehru personally than on policies or manifestos of the party. The respect of the people emphasizes how charismatic leaders could overshadow policy discussions. The 'President' figure straggling to pull the platform implies that institutions played a secondary role in Nehru's dominance. The platform's small size highlights the Congress party's dependence on his popularity. Being a key figure in the independence struggle, Nehru's leadership was considered a sign of stability and advancement, which helped Congress to be expected to triumph decisively. The cartoon grasps the irony of a democratic election shaped by a single leader's overwhelming influence, reflecting public affection and a subtle critique of personality-driven politics in India's early democratic journey.

Similar to the situation in 1952, the election of 1957 was perceived as a support of the prime minister and his party. Nehru once more took the pivotal position as the Congress's principal strategist, representative, and campaign leader. Throughout Nehru's time in office, further general elections took place in 1957 and 1962 for both the Lok Sabha and state assemblies. There was a modest rise in voter participation, moving from 46% during 1951–52 to 47% in 1957 (Chandra, Mukherjee, and Mukherjee 2008: 235-6). In both elections, Congress achieved a significant majority in the Lok Sabha, even though its total vote count was below fifty per cent. Although neither the right-wing nor left-wing parties presented a considerable challenge, they succeeded in diminishing Congress's influence in certain states.

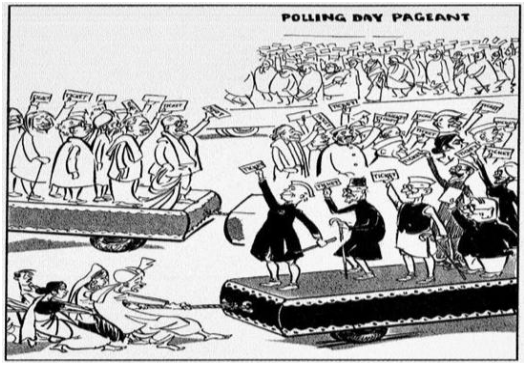
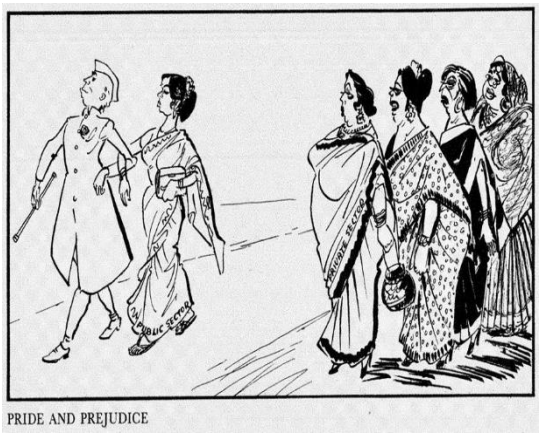


Fig. 2: 'Polling Day Pageant' by K. Shankar Pillai, *Shankar's Weekly*, 26 January 1957 (Source: Shankar's Weekly)

Shankar's cartoon (Fig. 2) helped to depict the campaigning for the 1957 election. In this picture, a vast parade marked 'Polling Day Pageant' consists of several politicians, including Nehru in front, carrying cards bearing 'Ticket.' Published on Republic Day, this cartoonist gently substitutes or overlays the procession with an election extravaganza, implying that political campaigning now takes centre stage. Calling it a 'Polling Day Pageant,' the cartoon suggests that the approaching election surpasses Republic Day's spirit. In doing so, the cartoon invites viewers to read the election as a civic duty and public theatre, where power is affirmed as much by ritual as rules. It hints that legitimacy in this period rested on fairness at the polls and the spectacle of leadership that framed the act of voting. India had shown by the 1957 election that it could conduct fair and free elections. This cartoon highlights how the dominance of the ruling party and its leaders continued as a distinctive characteristic of the elections, regardless of India's successful democratic approach.

Together, these two cartoons illustrate India's election process's early years of development. The 1951 cartoon stresses the great personal impact of essential leaders, especially Nehru. At this point, the charisma of a particular personality rather than organized political processes greatly affected elections. Political campaigns had focused on other aspects by 1957. The second cartoon emphasizes the growing complexity of elections, in which party connections, ticket distribution, and mass mobilization of volunteers were more important. Political parties were deliberately securing votes, and the election process had grown more ordered, like a great show. These pictures together present a precise but humorous analysis of India's development as a newly established democracy. They ensure that elections empower the people and convey the difficulties of incorporating strong personal leadership with institutional party systems.

- **Public Sector over Private Sector: The State's Early Economic Choice**



PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

Fig. 3: 'Pride and Prejudice' by K. Shankar Pillai, *Shankar's Weekly*, 03 May 1959 (Source: Shankar's Weekly)

Another example of Shankar's cartoon 'Pride and Prejudice' (Fig. 3) emphasizes Nehru's support of public sector firms. It presents the public and private sectors as lean and stout ladies. While Nehru leaves with the 'lean' public sector, the 'stout' private sector looks on with envy and dismay. Inspired by Jane Austen's 1813 work *Pride and Prejudice*, the title captures the essence of the visual satire. The Cambridge Dictionary defines 'pride' as self-importance and respect, and 'prejudice' as bias. The cartoon implies Nehru's apparent inclination toward the public sector over the private sector.

This artistic representation aligns with actual events, as Congress established the National Planning Committee (NPC) in 1938 to shape India's economic future. Inspired by Russia and Japan, it underlined governmental intervention, particularly in an economy still under colonial influence. Promoting public sector-led growth in places where private businesses were unreliable, the group pushed a 'service before profit' philosophy (Guha 2017: 202). India's second five-year plan, which gave fast economic development top priority via public sector expansion and heavy industrial development, was partly shaped by this concept. The cartoon encapsulates Nehru's ideological commitment to state-led economic planning.

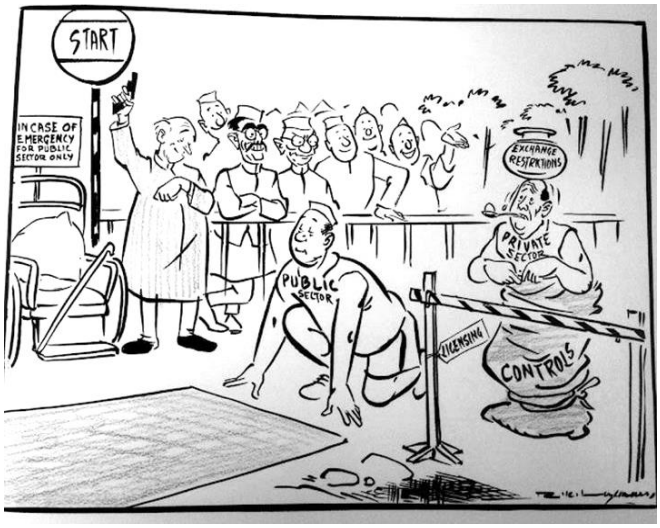


Fig. 4: 'One-horse race' by R.K. Laxman, *The Times of India* (Source: https://yousaidit-rklaxman.blogspot.com/2018/12/jawaharlal-nehru-ii.html)

As the public sector was enjoying state support, the private sector was curbed to a much larger extent, and it is also evident in Laxman's cartoon (Fig. 4) 'One-horse race'. This cartoon illustrates the controls and restrictions imposed on the private sector. The cartoon 'One-horse Race' title justifies the scenario, as the race that Nehru is conducting between the public and private sectors is only single-sided because the other contestant (i.e., the private sector) faces many hurdles to finish the race. On the other hand, the contestant

labelled as a 'public sector' has a clear path for the race. The cartoon even has a wheelchair reserved for the public sector. The obstacles for the private sector in the cartoon represent the rules and regulations imposed on the private sector by the government.

This image aligns with the economic reality of Nehru's era, where the government regulated key industries like coal, steel, power, and manufacturing. Private enterprises were allowed but strictly controlled by the government. Nehru believed government action was necessary to avoid monopolies. He defended small businesses and created employment through industrial expansion, believing state-led development would lift millions. Still, this idea faced enormous challenges. Government control of most firms reduced competition and made state-owned corporations ineffective. While industry was prioritized, agriculture, on which most Indians lived, was neglected. Poor yields from outdated technologies caused food shortages and rural economic stagnation. Another challenge was the 'License Raj,' which required government approval for most of the commercial actions. This caused delays and widespread corruption. While well-connected giant enterprises negotiated the system, small businesses may hit dead ends, limiting private entrepreneurship and economic vibrancy. Through this satirical portrayal, Laxman emphasizes the imbalance in economic policies that shaped India's early industrial landscape.

Laxman's cartoon underscores the private sector's challenges more explicitly than Shankar's work. While Shankar's cartoon illustrates Nehru's apparent preference for the public sector over private enterprises, Laxman further depicts the government's strong support for the public sector and the multiple hurdles set on private businesses. His depiction implies that the economic race was uneven, with the public sector moving smoothly while the private sector struggled against government-imposed restrictions. This contrast highlights the imbalance in economic policies during Nehru's era, where state-controlled enterprises were prioritized, leaving private businesses underprivileged.

- **A Contested Reform: Debating the Hindu Code Bill**

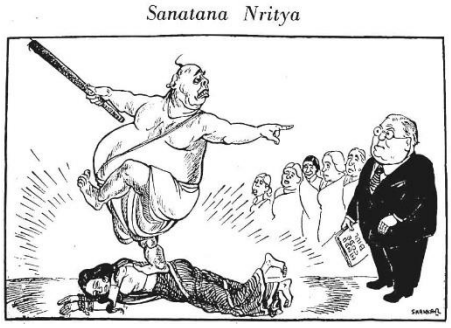


Fig. 5: 'Sanatana Nritya' by K. Shankar Pillai, *Shankar's Weekly*, 20 February 1949 (Source: Shankar's Weekly)

After India gained independence, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and Law Minister B.R. Ambedkar strongly supported a common civil code. For them, the reform of personal laws was a crucial test of the country's dedication to secular values and its progress toward modernisation (Guha 2017: 224). The Rau Committee created a Hindu personal law code by 1946. In 1948, a Select Committee led by Law Minister B. R. Ambedkar reviewed and revised it through several readings (Guha 2017: 225). The Hindu Code Bills (passed in parts during 1954–56) aimed to grant women equal rights, such as divorce and inheritance of property, and abolish practices like polygamy. This was seen as a progressive move to align Hindu law with the Constitution's ideals of liberty and equality. However, the Bills were highly controversial. Religious leaders and caste conservatives mobilised massive protests and lobbied against the reforms, seeing them as an attack on tradition. Nehru himself campaigned on the issue and ultimately split the legislation into four separate Acts to win passage. The Hindu Code Bills were a landmark charter of women's rights in India, but they sparked fierce debates over gender, religion, and social reform in early independent India.

In the cartoon by K. Shankar Pillai (Fig. 5), we see a Brahmin priest dancing triumphantly over a cowering Hindu woman. To the right, B.R. Ambedkar appears clutching a document labelled 'Hindu Code Bill.' Around Ambedkar stand several women (identified as his supporters) who look on and point at the scene. The Brahmin's dance atop the woman is a striking visual metaphor. It suggests oppression of women by orthodox Hindu forces, as if traditions were stomping on her. The woman's submissive posture and the alarmed looks on the supporting women emphasise her victimhood and caste patriarchy. Shankar's style uses clear caricature: the Brahmin's ecstatic grin and raised foot dramatise cruelty, while Ambedkar's upright stance conveys determination. This aligns with contemporary narratives that saw Ambedkar championing women's rights. For instance, supporters like the All-India Women's Conference urged that the Bill would not break with true Hindu law but restore justice (Singh 2020: 23). Shankar's cartoon thus endorses the Bill's goals, using the extreme image of a Brahmin trampling a woman to highlight the need for reform.

Fig. 6: An editorial cartoon by R.K. Laxman on the Hindu Code Bill, *Times of India*, February 1950 (Source: *Brushing Up the Years: A Cartoonist's History of India, 1947-2004*)

Laxman's cartoon (Fig. 6) shows Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru on the right, carrying a 'Hindu Code Bill' mattress, pointing forward or speaking earnestly. On the left is a monk with a small child labelled 'New India,' lying on the bed of nails, representing the challenging and unpleasant situation prevailing. Nehru is urging the monk to accept the reform. The monk's defensive posture symbolises the conservative backlash against change. In other words, the cartoon is critiquing the way the Bill debate is causing social strife. By showing the child's distress, Laxman suggests that the execution of reform and the resistance it provoked could harm the nation. He implies a more cautionary perspective that even Nehru's logic faces societal pushback. In the historical debates, many opponents, including Congress stalwarts, indeed argued that marriage was 'sacramental' and that giving women equal property rights would 'crumble' joint families (Kishwar 1994: 2152). Laxman does not depict Ambedkar directly here, but he signals the generational tension, i.e. Prime Minister Nehru, the harbinger of the new India, versus traditional Hindu sentiment, with the newly formed nation caught in between. The commentary seems to warn that even well-intentioned reforms can tear at the social fabric if people (like the monk) feel coerced.

These cartoons mirror the larger social currents of the era. Progressive voices, like Nehru, Ambedkar, and women's groups, were on one side, demanding equality. On the other side were conservative forces, like traditionalists, Hindu right groups, who viewed the Bills as an assault on religious customs. The monk in Laxman's cartoon and the Brahmin in Shankar's cartoon epitomises this reaction. In this way, the cartoons encapsulate the tension between gender equality and religious conservatism.

- **China's Attack: Nehru's Era of Strategic Reckoning**

Another interesting example of Shankar's cartoon 'Shall Not Go Unnoticed' (Fig. 7) depicts India's hardships during the late 1950s and early 1960s Sino-Indian border tensions. Surrounded by his worried colleagues—S. K. Patil, Lal Bahadur Shastri, Morarji Desai, Govind Ballabh Pant, and Krishna Menon, Nehru counters Chinese intrusions into Indian territory and airspace. Chinese officials Zhou Enlai and Mao Zedong, representing the disputed boundary, survey a barrier while somewhat contemptuously watching the Indian leaders. While India's response was to document and report every invasion, the cartoon shows China's confidence and military build-up. The title, 'Shall Not Go Unnoticed,' captures India's awareness of the rising conflicts.

Fig. 7: 'Shall Not Go Unnoticed' by Shankar, *Shankar's Weekly*, 20 November 1960 (Source: Shankar's Weekly)

This pictorial commentary is deeply embedded in the historical context of India's early engagement with China. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, India and China faced growing tensions over their disputed border despite ongoing diplomatic exchanges. Recognizing the People's Republic of China on 1 January 1950, India hoped for close collaboration given their common history of colonial persecution and economic hardships. India was unhappy that China had not consulted it before taking over Tibet, but it did not question its historical claims to the area. Both countries signed a pact in 1954 wherein India publicly acknowledged China's sovereignty over Tibet and committed to abide by the *Panchsheel* principles. China said that

while it had not yet examined old Kuomintang-era maps, border problems may be handled later (Chandra, Mukherjee, and Mukherjee 2008: 208). On 8 September 1959, Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai responded to Nehru's letter from March, rejecting India's expectations regarding Tibet and opposing the British-drawn McMahon Line (Guha 2017: 308). He argued that the boundary was never officially defined and called for a new border settlement. Zhou also accused India of encroaching on Chinese-claimed territory and supporting Tibetan separatists. Nehru strongly refuted these claims, emphasizing India's longstanding support for China and pointing out that no Chinese government had previously contested the McMahon Line between 1914 and 1947 (Guha 2017: 310).

Laxman's cartoon (Fig. 8) emphasizes China's false accusations against India and thus brilliantly portrays the core of these events. Mao Zedong is seen in the picture fiercely invading Indian land, symbolized by shattered fences, therefore reflecting China's territorial invasions. Mao clutches a rope, representing the false accusations, provocations, and diplomatic pressure used to challenge India's government. Emphasizing the mutual

mistrust between the two countries, as both governments saw the other as the primary aggressor in the conflict, the cartoon shows Prime Minister Nehru warning others. Laxman captures the political tensions and many points of view of the period using this graphic depiction.

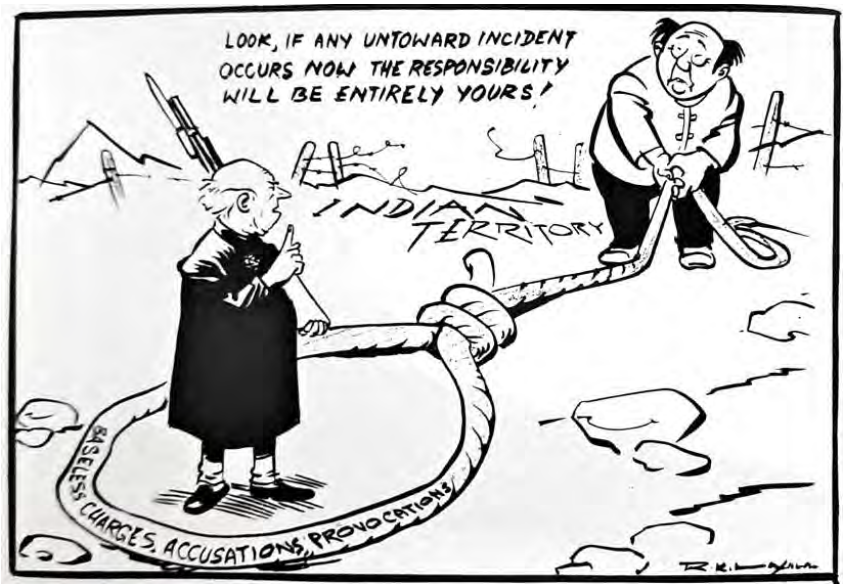


Fig. 8: An editorial cartoon by R. K. Laxman, *Times of India* (Source: *Brushing Up the Years: A Cartoonist's History of India, 1947-2004*)

This portrayal accurately reflects the actual dilemma that India faced when it experienced China's sudden military aggression. Though it was first considered a minor event, Chinese soldiers stormed Thagla Hill on 8 September 1962, uprooting Indian troops. One week later, China started a major attack, overrunning Indian forces in NEFA (now Arunachal Pradesh), where the Indian commander withdrew without opposition. China seized thirteen advanced positions in the western sector of the Galwan Valley on 20 October, endangering the Chushul airport (Chandra, Mukherjee, and Mukherjee 2008: 209). India was stunned by the unexpected attack, which sent off national hysteria. Many worried that Chinese soldiers would overrun Assam and beyond, marching further into the plains. India was vulnerable because of military unpreparedness, particularly in the eastern sector, when the Indian commander withdrew without challenge. The conflict exposed India's strategic weaknesses and eroded the former confidence between the two countries, altering their relationship.

Shankar's cartoon vividly illustrates the helplessness and distress of Prime Minister Nehru and his colleagues as they face a critical predicament. Laxman's cartoon depicts the significant discontent of Indians, as their continual assertions of Chinese invasion seem

futile, with China persisting in its advances despite diplomatic protests.

Conclusion

Both Laxman and Shankar carefully popularised the tradition of satirising India's social, political, and economic conditions during the early phase of Indian democracy in visual media, on a national scale. Their cartoons are influential weapons for criticism, directing public thought and impacting historical and cultural changes. Shankar's graphic and literary editorial work illustrates the dynamics of the cartoonists' strengths and limitations (Devadawson 2014: 23). However, in depicting the early post-colonial era, both cartoonists gave Prime Minister Nehru the centre stage.

Although both Laxman and Shankar depicted Nehru in their cartoons, their technique and approaches differ. Shankar's cartoons are more inclined to symbolism, such as the cartoon's title, where the criticism lies. His work is often more complex, depending on a deeper meaning than explicit critique. Prime Minister Nehru deliberately helped to shape the nature of Shankar's critique. Nehru, fully aware that people often do the opposite of what is asked, cleverly told Shankar, "Do not spare me," knowing that if he had expected leniency, Shankar might have been more critical; as a result, Shankar naturally softened his stance (Khanduri 2014: 116). Though usually showing Nehru in an ideal light, Shankar's cartoons allow critical readings, implying that alternative and opposing interpretations of Nehru's leadership were feasible even with his usually positive public perception. By contrast, Laxman has been well-known from the beginning for his sharp and direct criticism of the government and for unfolding the ordinary people's hardships. His cartoons often aim at Nehru's policies, portraying a justified critique. However, in the initial phase of independent India, both cartoonists, Shankar and Laxman, presented the election process, the foundation of the democratic system, in a satirical manner through their cartoons, along with the characterisation of the popular image of the prime minister that played a vital role in the early elections. Laxman and Shankar created cartoons on the 1951 and 1957 elections, focusing on Nehru's charismatic leadership and the grand scale of election campaigns. These depictions show that both cartoonists recognised Nehru as a central figure in electoral politics.

Simultaneously, through their distinct cartooning styles, both cartoonists also presented the existing socio-economic issues before the audience, playing an essential role in constructing popular perception. In projecting the current economic policies of the state, Laxman stressed the limitations put on the private sector more than Shankar did. While Shankar's cartoon illustrates the public sector as Nehru's sole choice over other private industries, Laxman draws attention to the government's support for the public sector and the challenges the private sector encounters amid economic competition. In terms of social messaging, during the early years of independence, amid the debates surrounding the Hindu Code Bill and concerns about the status of women in Indian society, these two cartoonists were committed to delivering a progressive message to the national audience

through their popular cartoon presentations. They portrayed national leaders like Nehru and Ambedkar as heroic figures for their efforts to provide social justice to women, while representing conservative Hindu groups opposing the Hindu Code Bill as villainous forces against the destiny of a new India.

However, in the case of foreign affairs, both tried to reflect national integrity in the face of the threat of Chinese invasion during the last phase of the Nehruvian era. China's aggression was projected as a serious foreign threat to national security, and the national leadership was shown as being deeply concerned about it. Laxman's cartoon on Indo-Chinese relations portrays China as the definitive aggressor and its persistent encroachments. Laxman presents Nehru as assertive, directly warning Mao. On the other hand, in Shankar's cartoon, Nehru and his colleagues are helplessly stuck in the situation and counting the Chinese misconducts. Thus, K. Shankar Pillai and R.K. Laxman played a progressive role in presenting existing national issues before the audience in the form of cartoons, thereby laying a strong foundation in the early post-colonial period for the tradition of highlighting serious national concerns with a touch of humour in public perception. The evidence indicates that these cartoonists were not merely biased or uncritically pro-Nehru. Instead, they kept their professional ties with Nehru, which allowed them to criticise him candidly while still respecting his position. Even though their cartoons often focus on the big picture of national leadership and societal changes, we can see a more profound message about how policies affect different levels of government, even those closer to home. They covered significant state-level political developments, and their approach focused on the broader implications of state policies rather than making direct partisan attacks.

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