Comics, Cartoons and the Politics of Censorship in Digital India

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The culture of cartooning emerged in India in the 1870s when several local newspapers and periodicals began producing vernacular variants of the British satirical magazine, *Punch*. The figure of Mr Punch appeared in regional versions with narratives that engaged with the politics of colonial India. This brought together the medium of graphic narration with the culture of caricature and critique of the socio-political milieu of the country. Later, this style of graphic satire evolved in the form of newspaper cartoons, comic periodicals and even graffiti in postcolonial India. In 1951, R.K. Laxman created the "Common Man" for *The Times of India*, giving Indians an ordinary individual from the middle class who acts as a silent spectator and critiques the system. This history has established the visual medium as a tool in the hands of artists, as common citizens, to express middle-class sentiments of disappointment and disapproval on matters that affect the nation-state.

With the growing power of the digital world in the 21st century, the 'Common Man' has gradually transcended beyond the newspaper to occupy the newsfeeds of social media networks. This new-age citizen is represented by several digital artists. Some like Satish Acharya, Manjul, Siddhesh Gautam and Aroop Mishra employ critical perspectives on national politics. Others like Rachita Taneja and Harshveer Jain probe into an array of power structures. Besides making anti-establishment comics, they also discuss body and gender politics in mainstream society. Acharya, Manjul and Mishra have worked both in print and online news platforms, but they also regularly share their cartoons on social media. Acharya, whose work manifests a prompt response to every significant political event in the country, reveals: "Social media has given them (i.e., cartoonists) a dynamic platform to post their work and reach a large number of readers/viewers. And, in spite of hostile reactions from organised cyber bullying, cartoonists have been brave up till now." [1]

This sums up the dual aspect of cartoons in a digital age. While this space provides a substantial amount of liberty to cartoonists to create and share their work with a wide audience, this also generates its own censorship and bullying. Acharya's own experience with the print edition of a newspaper exposes the kind of censorship cartoonists often face.
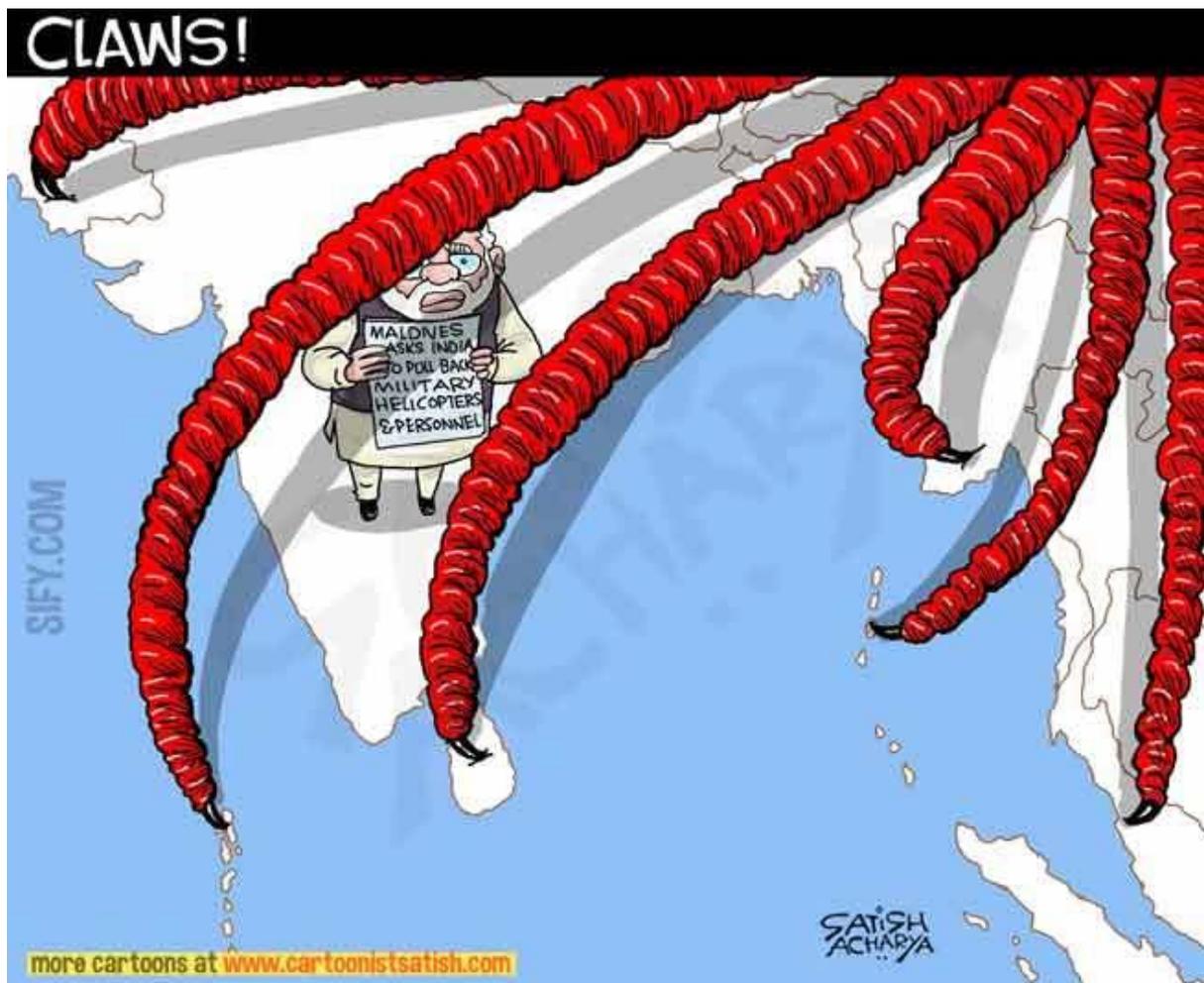

Fig. 1. Satish Acharya's rejected political cartoon. Image courtesy: CartoonistSatish.Com, August 12, 2018.

The above cartoon, on the spread of Chinese influence in India, was rejected by the editor of a newspaper who felt that it was "very defeatist and the China problem is being overplayed". [2] The editor further asserted that this particular work did not pass the "editorial standards" of the paper [3] and hence, it was turned down. It must be noted that the issue was a developing concern for the Indian government as it was being reported in the papers and on television. Then, how does a cartoon 'overplay' the already known news

of conflicting countries? The answer lies in the power that a cartoon possesses in making an impact on its readers. A graphic rendition of the India-China conflict could potentially magnify the situation, affecting the reader much more than a written or verbal description.

This case uncovers the limitations dominant in the print medium and in mainstream culture. Based on such experiences, many cartoonists have shifted to the digital realm to publish their works. Acharya shares his cartoons every day on Instagram, Twitter and Facebook, which critically evaluate the government, their policies, the opposition parties and leaders. His digital cartoons reflect a concern for the social, political and economic issues of the country. It is a voice of dissent that comes from a 'common man' and at the same time, it also inspires other ordinary citizens to develop their own political consciousness.
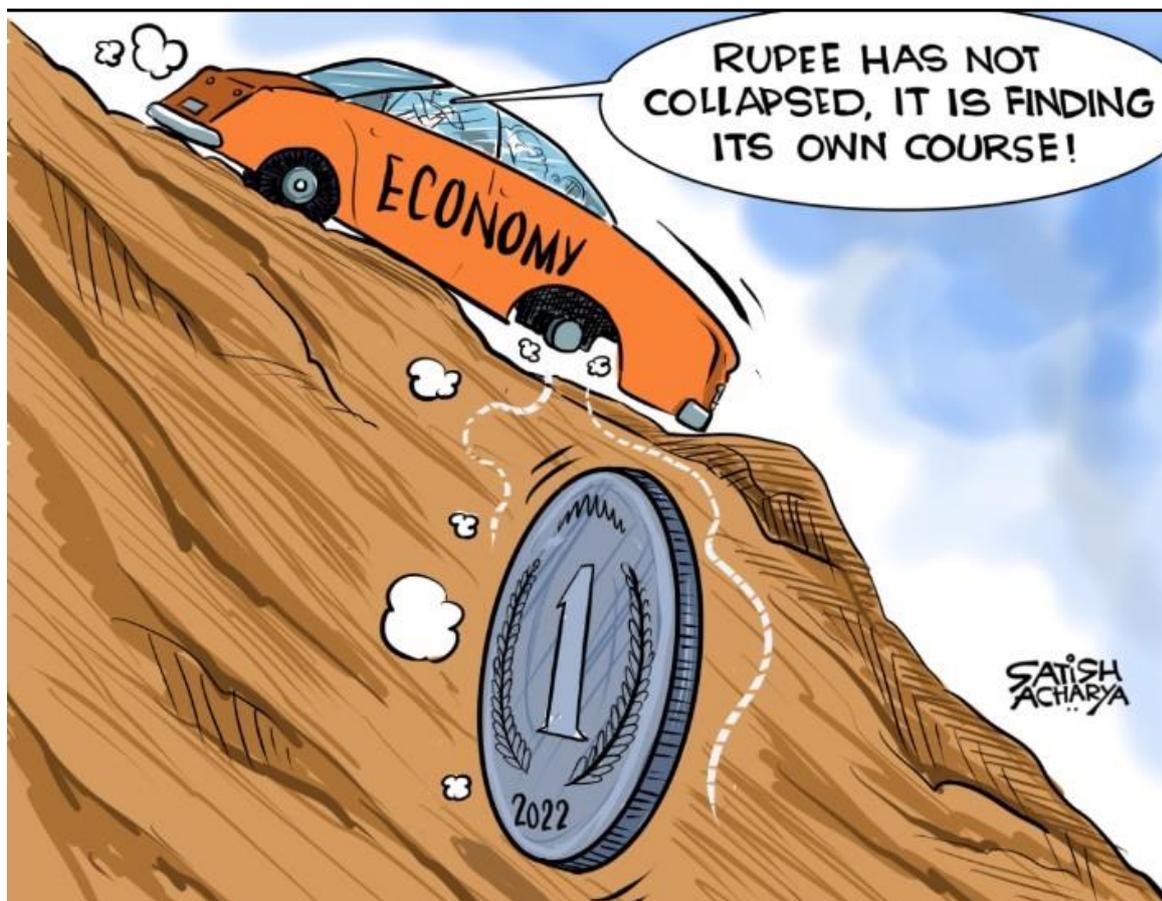

Fig. 2. A recent cartoon by Satish Acharya critiquing the current Finance Minister's explanation on the fall of the Indian economy. Image courtesy: Twitter, August 5, 2022.

Another digital artist whose works have consistently examined dominant power structures is Rachita Taneja. She began her journey as a webcomic artist in 2014, when she drew a three-panelled comic strip that depicted the arbitrary arrests of people who criticized the government. Shared widely on social media, it resonated with a large number of readers. Taneja is successful in underscoring subjects which are silenced or considered taboo, yet affect the lives of people in society. The name of her page, *Sanitary Panels*, and its titular image, address one such topic i.e., menstruation. Through her comics she also redefines concepts which have been highly politicized by the right-wing government of the country. For instance, one of her works discusses the meaning of "patriotism" and how it is not about supporting the government blindly.
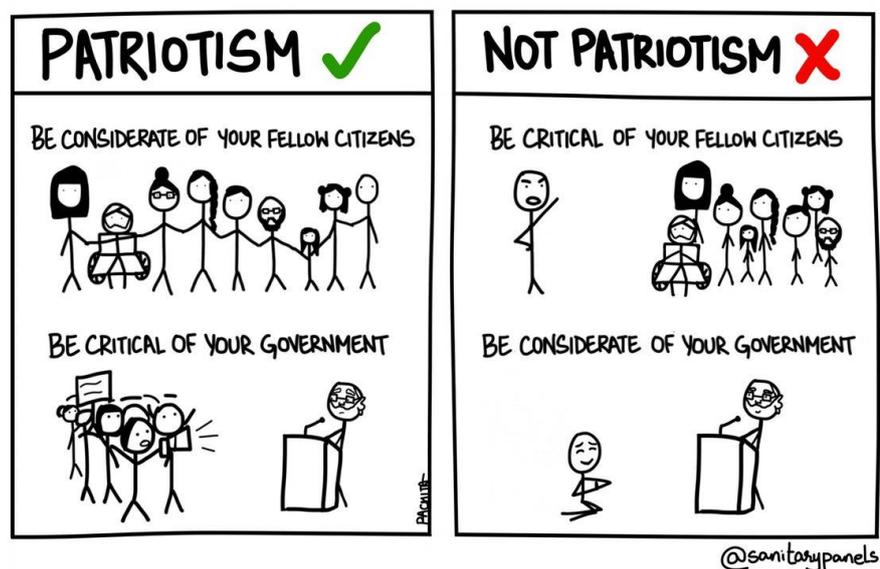

Fig. 2. Rachita Taneja's comic strip on patriotism from the series *Sanitary Panels*. Image courtesy: Instagram, August 15, 2022.

Taneja made this webcomic even more thought-provoking by sharing it on the country's Independence day. [4] However, she has faced a lot of criticism and even legal action. In 2020, Taneja received a notice from the Supreme Court regarding a petition to initiate a contempt of court proceeding over one of her sketches. This was regarding one of her webcomics that showed how a popular television anchor was protected by the ruling party and the Supreme Court, as he was granted bail in an abetment to suicide case. The Attorney General stated that Taneja's webcomic was an "audacious assault and insult to the

institution, but also made a clear implication that the Supreme Court is biased towards the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party." [5] Such examples reveal that the digital realm is not as free and utopic as it appears to be and has its own share of censorship.

In 2018, Taneja even criticized the community standards of Facebook in a webcomic. The artist condemned the way sites like Facebook and Instagram did not take down anti-Dalit and homophobic posts, even though they removed her #metoo post and blocked her profile for three days. [6] It is ironic that even this webcomic was taken down by Facebook and Instagram on November 6, 2018. Taneja identified this as a form of censorship since social media sites were not open to criticism and refused to address their own issues. [7] Nevertheless, this kind of censorship also initiated an equally fierce resistance in the cyberspace. In the 2018 case, Facebook had to republish Taneja's webcomic due to a massive backlash from their users after the ban. Similarly, in 2020, a large group of artists and comics scholars from across the country undertook a signature campaign in support of the artist.

During the Emergency in 1975, when the press encountered the worst kinds of suppression, political cartoons manifested the spirit of dissent and sought to capture the suspension of democracy in the country. In the contemporary era, it is still this form which can present the contemporary milieu in an indomitable and forthright way. However, this visual culture of dissent has now been transposed from the print to the digital medium. The determining reasons for this are the extensive readership and networked solidarity acquired in cyberspace. It reflects the Barthesian concept of "the death of an author" where the reader takes the work beyond the authorship of one artist and shares it widely, making it a part of several communities. [8] In this way, political cartoons of the digital age, as representative of the 'Common Man', have found their own strategy to resist censorship.

Notes

[1] Sanika Athavale, "TLI Exclusive: Satish Acharya: 'Cartoonist Must Be Critical of Government in Power'," *The Logical Indian*, February 29, 2020, https://thelogicalindian.com/exclusive/satish-acharya-cartoonist-19938.

[2] Vibhinna Ideas, "Sorry, No Cartoon!" *CartoonistSatish.Com*, September 5, 2018, https://www.cartoonistsatish.com/sorry-no-cartoon/.

[3] "Mail Today Says Their Integrity Is Inviolable, Calls Satish Acharya's Allegations Baseless," *The News Minute*, May 28, 2021, https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/mail-today-says-their-integrity-inviolable-calls-satish-acharya-s-allegations-baseless-86500.

[4] Rachita Taneja, "A Reminder. Happy Independence Day!" Instagram, August 15, 2022, https://www.instagram.com/p/ChQ8VSePWQG/.

[5] "Contempt Case against Sanitary Panels Creator Attack on Freedom of Speech, Says Artists Collective," *Scroll.in*, December 10, 2020, https://scroll.in/latest/980840/contempt-case-against-sanitary-panels-creator-attack-on-freedom-of-speech-says-artists-collective.

[6] "Facebook Takes Down Sanitary Panels Comic Criticising It, Restores It after Several Hours," *Scroll.in*, November 6, 2018, https://scroll.in/article/901177/facebook-takes-down-sanitary-panels-comic-criticising-it-restores-it-after-several-hours.

[7] Malini Raghu, "Artist Criticises Facebook's Community Standards," *Deccan Herald*, November 15, 2018, https://www.deccanherald.com/metrolife/artist-criticises-facebook-s-702956.html.

[8] Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image, Music, Text*, translated by Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 142-148.

All online links were accessed on September 15, 2022.