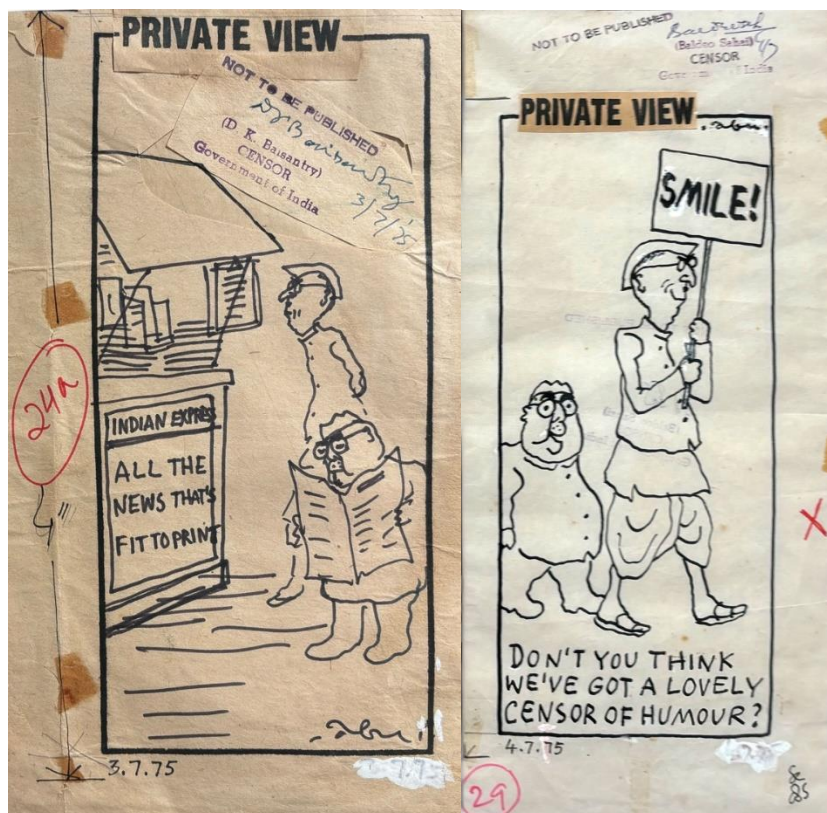


## Inky Trails: The Adventures of Abu Abraham

Pinaki De

(Additional inputs by Siddharth Sivakumar, the Creative Director of Gallery Rasa, Kolkata)

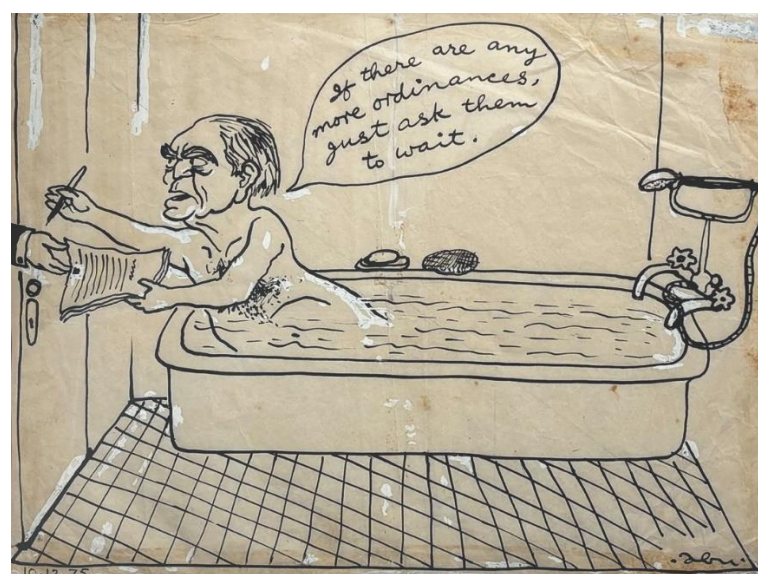
Even the most meticulous students of history will struggle to remember the names of D.K. Baisantry or Baldeo Sahai, both officers at the Press Information Bureau of the Indian Ministry of Information and Broadcasting in 1975. However, they are footnotes in history that changed the course of a nation. Their innocuous signatures could effectively throttle any voice raised against the government of that time. Two such instances are on public display in a comprehensive exhibition commemorating the works and birth centenary of the stalwart Indian cartoonist, Attapurathu Mathew Abraham (1924-2002), at Kolkata's Gallery Rasa, primarily curated from the private collection of his daughters, Ayisha and Janaki Abraham.



The two ‘pocket’ (one-column) cartoons, part of Abu’s acclaimed series titled “Private View”, that were slated to be featured in *The Indian Express* on July 3 and 4, 1975, bear the

signatures of the ‘censors’ Baisantry and Sahai respectively, both of who deemed them unfit for publication. The legend bearing the stamp “not to be published” are like nails on the head of time that cannot be undone. It is significant that both the cartoons take a subtle dig on the censorship of the Press and on free speech during the Emergency years, without being overly aggressive. The one dated July 3, 1975, depicts a newspaper stand with an *Indian Express* poster stating “All the News that’s Fit to Print”. The other dated July 4, 1975, shows Abu’s iconic bespectacled politician duo, one upholding a placard on which the word “Smile” is written. The footer quip in the said cartoon adds “Don’t you think we’ve got a lovely  *censor* of humour?”, exposing the hollowness of the word on the placard.

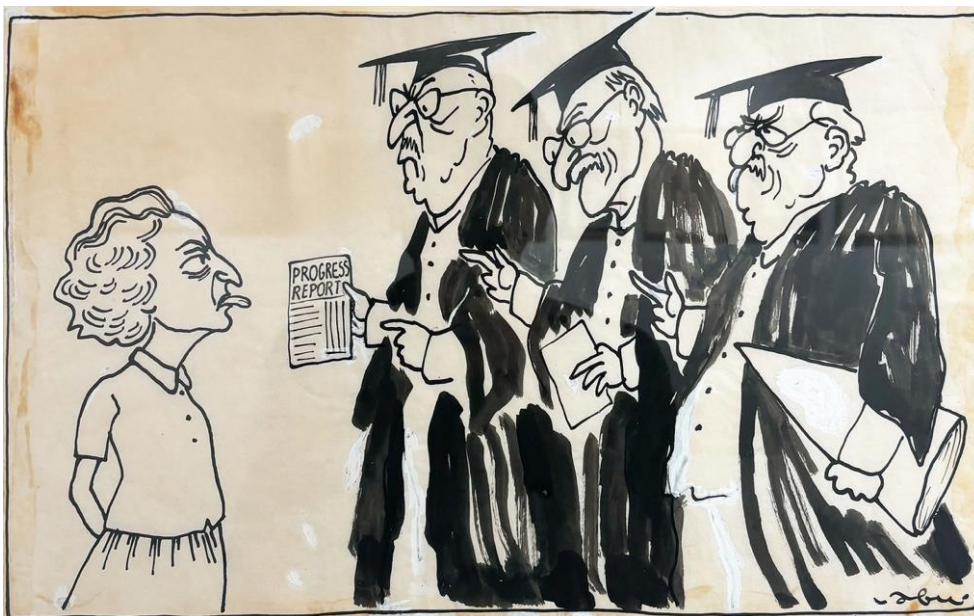
These images are part of a wider range of Abu’s works displayed at the exhibition that take a dig at the imposition of Emergency but also prophetically speak about the edgy present. Among them is a cartoon showing President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed signing an ordinance from his bathtub. This cartoon has been printed and shown many times over, as a chilling reminder of the ease and impunity with which the powerful can change the course of a nation by a single stroke of the pen. One wonders how this image evaded the eyes of the censor. A look at the original artwork also provides a fresh perspective. The date, 10/12/1975, in one corner contextualizes the illustration, while the corrections accentuated with realigned lines and whitened dabs evoke an immediacy which cannot be seen in the printed version. This shows a consummate cartoonist at work—one racing against time to complete the work to be published the next day, another who makes sure that the miniscule tweaks satisfy the artist in him.

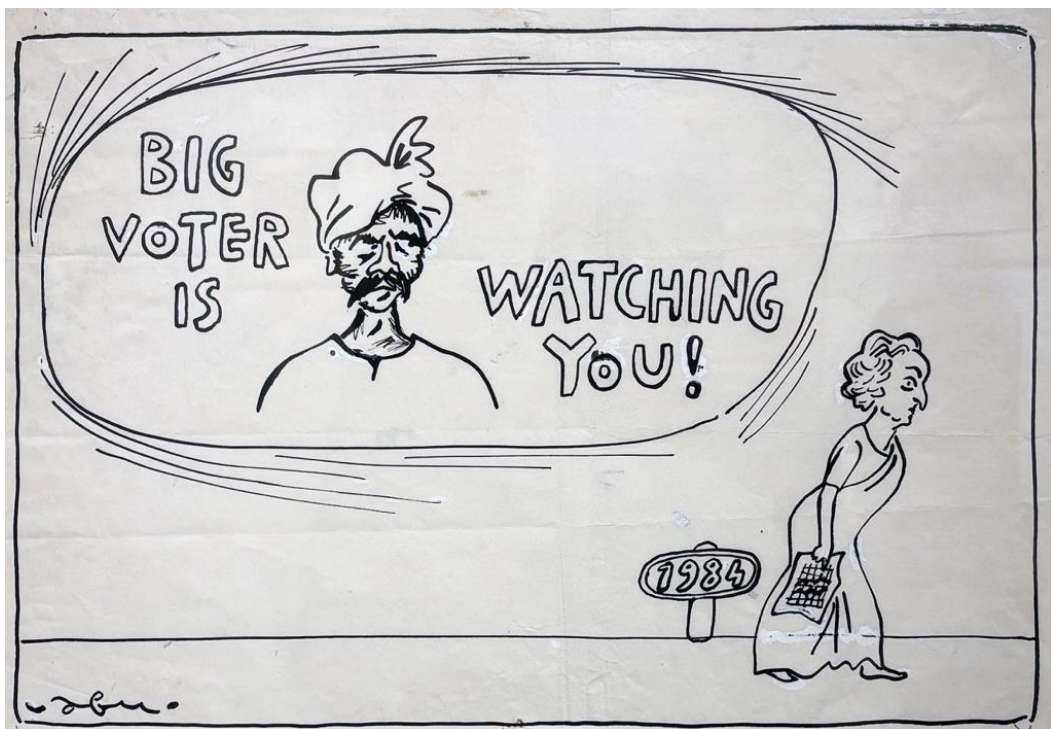


In fact, the exhibition gives a ring-side view of the style of Abu Abraham. In contrast to the even, bold and conservative brushstrokes of his contemporary R.K. Laxman, Abu developed a style which was loose and casual, reminiscent of the famed American cartoonists of *The New Yorker*, James Thurber and Saul Steinberg. In hindsight, Abu's success lies in his ability to dissolve the barrier between politics and the people. Eschewing perspective and extraneous detailing, his drawing style, sketched in pencil and finished with Indian ink using a dip pen and brush, remains instantly recognizable and accessible. This almost childlike ease is also indebted to the inspiration he sought from Egyptian mural paintings and folk art. The will-o-wisp-like unevenness of his lines force readers to concentrate more on the cerebral punch of the cartoon rather than on the craftsmanship of the cartoonist. The thrust is on bringing out a visual quality that will remain etched in the mind.

Abu's portraits of Indira Gandhi are a case in point. Most of his contemporaries dwelled on Mrs Gandhi's distinctive nose. Abu goes beyond the obvious and delves into her gaze, using a few short lines around her eyes to open a window into her inner world. Thereby, he reveals a woman caught in deep contemplation, as she considers reshuffling her cabinet or changing her party symbol. Her expression becomes submissive with a palm reader, anxious after Operation Blue Star (1984), or filled with anticipation as she plays 'Snakes and Ladders' with socialism. Yet, she irreverently sticks out her tongue when confronted by judges presenting her progress report, a cartoon reflecting her government's dangerous encroachment on judicial power in the mid-1980s. Most poignantly, in the presence of Jawaharlal Nehru, she does not look at her father, but at us, seeking to gauge our judgment.



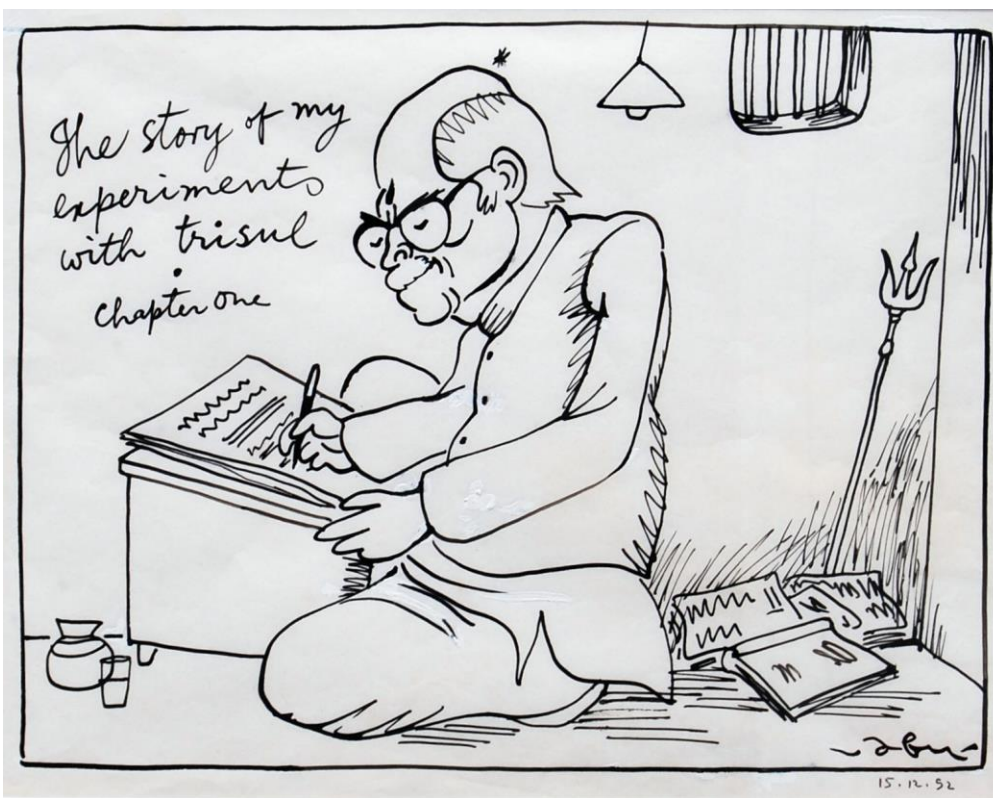
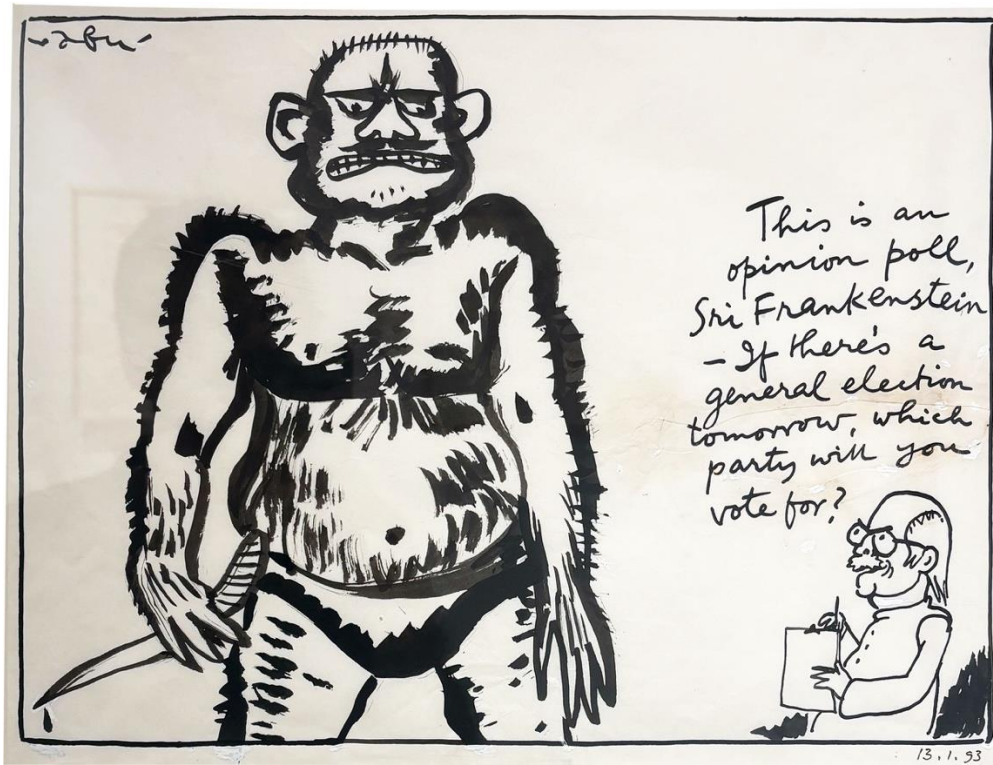




It is also important to note how Abu's illustration style evolved over the years, with his early work from the 1950s being very different from the signature look his cartoons later came to be known for. His initial approach was more elaborate and planned, in contrast with the fluidity and spontaneity that came with experience. He began his career by sketching cartoons

for *Blitz* magazine and the political journal *Bharat*. Here, his artistry began to take shape, blending a journalist's keen eye with a satirist's biting wit. As a young reporter, he closely observed the class divisions in society and realized that the Press often ended up preserving the status quo instead of challenging it. His cartooning breakthrough came in 1950, when Shankar Pillai asked him to come to New Delhi to draw for his periodical *Shankar's Weekly*. During this stint, a serendipitous encounter with the British cartoonist, Fred Joss, took Abu to London in 1953, where his talent flourished on the pages of *Punch*, *Everybody's*, *London Opinion* and the *Daily Sketch*. A brief period at *The Tribune* helped him hone his skills further before he joined *The Observer* in 1956 as its inaugural political cartoonist. A few of Abu's works from his London years can be seen at the exhibition. They carry the signature of "Abraham" and evoke the charm of Mario Miranda's renowned pub and restaurant scenes. Later on, at the behest of the editor who thought the name Abraham would give a pro-Jewish slant to his Israel- Palestine cartoons, the artist switched to the "Abu" signature. Abu's tenure at *The Observer* and later at *The Guardian* was marked by his wide-ranging commentary. His travels took him to the far corners of the world, from the refugee camps of Palestine to the nightclubs of Cuba, where he spent time with the likes of Fidel Castro. Each line he drew was imbued with the stories of the people he met, offering a poignant insight into their lives and struggles.

After returning to India, Abu published with *The Indian Express* from 1969 to 1981. The cartoons from this period reflect an acid humour he used to address issues he had strong opinions about. They are more like arguments wrapped in humour, rather than attempts at mere amusement. Abu's views and wit were often directed against the entrenched political status quo, which emerged as a concoction of routine defections, sycophantic behaviour, hypocrisy, verbose but hollow claims of achievement, parochialism, and sectarian tendencies. The critique of the ascent of Hindutva politics in the 1990s under L.K. Advani marked another phase in Abu's work, as he engaged with the changing landscape of the country with unwavering candour. One cartoon depicts Advani looking at a Frankenstein-like figure representing Opinion Poll, an idea which rings true even today. Abu drew Advani much as he did Sanjay Gandhi, over a decade apart, yet in a similar vein. Both figures are portrayed as Valmiki composing the *Ramayana*—each writing only the first chapter of their ideological stances. These illustrations served as a foreboding of the turmoil to come, with the text subtly invoking the spirit of Mahatma Gandhi.



In a way, the figure of Gandhi becomes a metaphor for Abu. Gandhi acts as the conscience of a nation which has lost its way. An iconic cartoon (missing from the exhibition) depicts the leader as an elephant while the present-day politicians 'blindly' try to feel his different parts, unable to make sense of the whole. However, the displays include two stunning works, one





appeal and relevance of these works is located somewhere in the subversive zeal of the cartoonist, who was willing to walk the extra mile for his art. As Abu once said, “But if you are for the status quo, what is the point in drawing?”

*The World through Abu's Eyes* was on at Gallery Rasa, Kolkata from June 29 to July 21, 2024.

Pinaki De is an award-winning graphic illustrator and designer, who has worked extensively on comics theory.