

Before the political cartoonist, there was the Vidusaka: the case for an indigenous comic tradition

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Abstract

Political cartooning was one of many cultural products that colonial rule introduced to India. This British legacy has been used to produce narratives about the nature and history of Indian cartooning. However, these narratives have, invariably, overlooked the distinctly Indian cultural ethos as well as the Indian satirical tradition. This paper proposes an alternative model by positing that in the Indian satirical tradition, the Vidusaka – the comic figure in Sanskrit drama - has been an antecedent to the political cartoonist in terms of social and political roles, as well as in the nature and the purpose of the humour. The paper also locates the principles of caricaturing in precolonial Indian visual arts, and presents the early vernacular cartoons as the point of convergence between the local satirical tradition and the Western format of the political cartoon which laid the foundation for a modern yet specifically Indian sensibility.

Keywords: political cartooning, humour, Vidusaka, performance, Indian aesthetics, colonialism

1. Introduction

As part of their Civilizing Mission, the British implemented an assortment of practices, including the culture of comic magazines. *Punch* was the most influential magazine and became synonymous with the British sense of humour, inspiring a number of indigenous versions. Generations of Indian cartoonists grew up on it, internalizing its form and style. Next

to *Punch*, the legendary cartoonists David Low and Victor Weisz, ‘Vicky’, exerted considerable influence on Indians.

Most Indian cartoonists disavow any Indian tradition and overlook the possibility of a precolonial history to Indian cartooning (Khanduri 2014). Even the venerable R. K. Laxman remarks that “the art of cartooning is alien to the Orient” (1989: 69), and declares that *Punch* is the Indian public’s first exposure to the principles of caricature (Khanduri 2014). To Laxman, the history of Indian cartooning begins with “copying *Punch*, and later, Low” (Khanduri 2014: 162). Cartoonists who concur with this assessment explain their tradition through “imaginary lines of continuity” (Khanduri 2014: 212) that link them with British influences. Their vision overlooks the vernacular *Punches*, which represent the “interactions between a pre-existing and culturally distinct satirical style...and the one introduced through the English press” (Kumar 2013: 81), as well as the precolonial traditions of visual arts that feature elements of caricature and satire. The vernacular cartoons—a combination of derivation and invention from the British form—were effective in articulating the anti-imperialist movement in India. The vernacular *Punches* established the cartoon as “a medium of communication and form of political engagement” (Khanduri 2014: 52) in the Indian public sphere.

The presence of caricature, as a manifestation of *hasya*, the comic rasa¹, in Indian temple art dates back as early as 200 A.D. (Lent 2015). Mughal art portraiture was characterized by a “striking caricature likeness” (MacAulay 1925: 66). The Kalighat paintings, the “cartoon-cum-caricature” (Lent 2015: 15) of nineteenth century Bengal, employed “wilful satire and deliberate caricature” (Khanna 1993: 35). All these point to a tradition of caricature and satire in graphic art in India, which Laxman proclaims as non-existent, although he acknowledges satire in other mediums. Laxman makes reference to the Vidusaka (Original Sanskrit spelling: Vidūṣaka) of Sanskrit drama whose speech “always had something to do with current goings-on in the kingdom” (Laxman 1989: 69). Locating the political cartoon within India’s cultural sphere requires, in addition to identifying the early modes of visual caricature, a look at the presence and role of humour in India’s public and political spaces. It was in ancient Indian theatre that humour legitimized and consolidated its presence (Kumar 2013).

This paper argues that, while Indian cartooning maybe a colonial by-product, it also draws from a distinctly Indian comic tradition. The identification of elements other than the British colonial legacy actually unravels a long tradition of the Vidusaka in Indian society and theatre. A parallel between the Vidusaka and the cartoonist establishes the latter as a modern-day Vidusaka.

2. Vidusaka: clown and critic

Vidusaka, the clown figure in Sanskrit drama, is the chief source of stage laughter, providing diversion and pleasure, which Bharata regards as the aim of dramatic performance (Bhat 1959). The different types of Vidusakas display different personalities and humour that range from mere buffoonery and coarse humour to sparkling wit that plumbs human nature.

Vidusakas evoke laughter through their body, costume and speech. Physical deformity, ugliness, painted faces, outlandish attire etc., are means of creating laughter through appearance. Typically, Vidusakas accompany the hero and provide comic relief through their blundering nature, cowardice, gluttony and pretension. Vidusakas play the crucial role of “enhancing, by contrast, counterpoint, or simple human relief, the general rasa or ‘taste’ of the

¹Rasa, which translates as ‘essence’, ‘juice’ or ‘sap’, is a central concept in Indian aesthetics. It is the aesthetic flavour of an artwork evoked in the audience through the combination of *vibhava* (determinants), *anubhava* (consequents), and *vyabhicarihava* (transitory states).

drama” (Shulman 1985: 156). Their interests and activities are conceived as a low burlesque of the hero’s grand pursuits. They contrast the lofty sentiments of the hero with their corporeal baseness; they reconceptualize the hero’s poetic speech along gastronomical lines, using food-related analogies. This not only accentuates the dominant *rasa* but also bathetically exposes the excess in the hero’s speech.

The rich variety of Vidusakas in Sanskrit drama precludes a general characterization. Among the three types of assistants to the hero—Vidusaka, Vita, and Ceta—the Vidusaka alone is defined as exclusively/ essentially comic, although the others might also contribute to the humour.

Bharata makes a striking distinction between the performer-Vidusaka and the character-Vidusaka (Bhat 1959). His assigned managerial role enables the Vidusaka to transcend the character, and with an author-like quality/ voice, comment on the events of the play with a degree of detachment.

2.1. The Vidusaka meets the cartoonist

The Vidusaka and the cartoonist are united by performance, which is determined by their mediums. The Vidusaka embodies both the creator and the creation by concocting humorous situations in addition to being the butt of ridicule, thereby representing both “a doing and a thing done” (Diamond 1996: 1). These two dimensions of the Vidusaka parallel both the performative aspect of the cartoonist as well as the finished product of the cartoon as an artwork.

Performatively, the Vidusaka’s repertoire resembles what Kemnitz calls “cartoons of opinion” and “joke cartoons” (Kemnitz 1973: 83). Cartoons of opinion include political cartoons that address social and political issues, whereas joke cartoons, such as comic strips and gag cartoons, rely on social attitudes and stereotypes. The satirical humour that the political cartoon embodies is “humour with a purpose” (Langdon 1966:766), as opposed to the ‘pure humour’ of comic strips. Vidusaka, unlike the political cartoonist, has elements of both satire and pure humour, the latter being dominant in Sanskrit drama. The Vidusaka’s character is composed of “humorous laughter as well as a critical attitude toward the incongruities of life” (Bhat 1959: 89), which are also significant properties of the political cartoon.

The Vidusaka’s use of Prakrit² for humour ensures communicative reach. Similarly, in cartooning, the directness of communication, achieved through the visuality and the sparseness of the verbal load, makes it popular even among the less literate. The Vidusaka’s speech abounds in metaphors, allusions and analogies, which facilitate the communication of general truths. His inordinate love for food is a chief source of metaphors. In *Abhijñānaśākuntalam*, Madhavya, the Vidusaka, likens the king to “a man who gets tired of good dates and longs for sour tamarind” (Kalidasa 1999: 21), referring to the king’s preference for the forest-dwelling heroine over the women in the palace. This metaphor, which captures not only the stark contrast between the two kinds of women but also obliquely addresses the sexual profligacy of the king, is visually vivid. Indian mythology and the epics have supplied both the cartoonist and the Vidusaka with a rich source of images and allusions that resonate because of the predominance of religion in the cultural space of India.

An interesting point of convergence between the Vidusaka and the cartoonist is the use of ugliness for humour. The cartoonist searches for “the perfect deformity” (Gombrich & Kris 1938³), which enables him/her to penetrate the outward appearance to capture the inner

²Prakrit (from *prakṛta*, meaning ‘natural’) is the group of vernacular dialects that existed in northern and central India. It is the language spoken by the common people as opposed to the prestigious Classical Sanskrit (from *samskrta* meaning ‘purified’) of higher social classes.

³<https://gombricharchive.files.wordpress.com/2011/05/showdoc85.pdf>

essence of the subject in all its baseness. By bringing the “material bodily lower stratum” (Bakhtin 1984: 62) into the representation of authority figures, the cartoons violate the “halo of unimpeachable social privilege and political untouchability” (Haywood 2013: 17). The *Natyasastra* prescribes that “[t]he jester should be dwarfish, should possess big teeth, and be hunch-backed, double-tongued, baldheaded and tawny-eyed” (Bharatamuni 1951: 548). The grotesque appearance and the (sometimes) profane speech transform the Vidusaka into a caricature who, by reproducing the solemn statements of the hero in risible vocabulary, reveals the superfluity of the latter’s emotions. While the Vidusaka’s ‘ugliness’ is primarily literal, that of the cartoon is essentially figurative. Underlying both forms of ugliness, however, is the principle of distortion, which is the basis of caricature.

2.2. The Vidusaka, the fool and the cartoonist

By definition, the cartoonist and the Vidusaka share a sort of ‘fool’s freedom’, which links them with the variants of the clown figure across the world. They are alike in offering uncanny insights and in representing the meeting point between sense and nonsense. Invested with a crucial social function, the clown has been part of societies, both ancient and modern. The clown is associated with subversion and transgression, and the utterance of uncomfortable truths (Bala 2010). Various types of clowns have been known to poke fun at authorities, parody customs and habits, break cultural taboos, etc. They are “antirulers” (Janik 1998: xiv) who offer “disordering perspectives” (Janik 1998: xiv) that challenge conventional wisdom and quash pride and self-righteousness.

The Vidusaka has striking parallels, both formally and functionally, with the Shakespearean Fool and the European Slave. As a dramatic character, the fool “usually stands apart from the main action of the play, having a tendency not to focus but to dissolve events and also to act as an intermediary between the stage and the audience” (Welsford 1961[1935]: 3). Like the slave in European drama, the Vidusaka shares the former’s “defiant otherness” (Nikulin 2014: 118) and is capable of “real dialogical interaction with other characters and spectators” (Nikulin 2014: 113). The managerial role that both of them assume in devising the intrigue suggests their autonomy and true-to-life quality.

The role of Shakespeare’s fools, defined as a “countervailing force against king or rich man, or against power or convention in almost any form” (Ulanov & Ulanov 1980: 7), cannot be a more accurate description of the modern-day cartoonist’s function. The fool’s action of reminding the rulers of the “transience of power” and discouraging their “pursuit of foolish action” (Kets de Vries 1990: 757) through laughter is shared by the Vidusaka and the cartoonist. The fool, the Vidusaka and the cartoonist, though located in different cultural contexts, are united by the freedom to bypass the decorum, propriety and censorship of their societies.

Clowns in the posthuman society are now almost “a picturesque archaism in a drab, colorless world, a nostalgic remembrance of things past” (Zucker 1954: 315), with their social function and semantic implications changing drastically with rationalization and changing definitions of wit (Bala 2010). In this context, it is interesting to note that, in spite of the difference of medium, the cartoonist has remained close to the fool in making deep, uncanny associations with an intuitive sense of humour. More importantly, the social need to “humanize power” (Peterson 2003: 556) by making fun of figures of authority, which the jester fulfilled, is effectively performed by the cartoonist through his/her works.

The Vidusaka’s role as critic and corrective force has prompted Bhat to describe him as the “conscience of the play” (1959: 139). His humour contains “some implied criticism either of life in general or of the faults, follies or pretensions and hypocrisy of the individual” (Godbole 1978: 102). His sardonic humour is at odds with gentle humour, which has “an

element of sympathy” and is more a “matter of temperament” (Godbole 1978: 103) than thought. It demonstrates a “strong desire to react against the common accepted pattern of convention” (Godbole 1978: 103).

2.3. The Vidusaka, the Chakyar and the cartoonist

The traditional performance art of *Kutiyattam* of Kerala has a unique tradition of Vidusakas known as Chakyars. *Kutiyattam* is the only surviving genre of Sanskrit plays. Tolan, the legendary court poet and jester of King Kulasekhara Varman (who is himself the author of such canonical works as *Subhadradhananjaya* and *Tapatisamvarana*), is believed to have reformed the *Kutiyattam* theatre. Major contributions brought by Tolan include, among other things, the foregrounding of the character of the Vidusaka, which made the Chakyar into a crucial and engaging presence in *Kutiyattam*. Under the supervision of Kulasekhara Varman, Tolan introduced Malayalam interpretation and counter verses to the hero’s slokas, and a parody of the four *Purusarthas*⁴.

The activities of the Chakyar include the translation of the Sanskrit and Prakrit verses of other characters into Malayalam, and the commentary on the translated speech. The use of the vernacular enables the Chakyar to have an “obvious and immediate power over the dramatic representation” (Shulman 1985: 176), and highlights the separation between the intra-dramatic function as a character and the metadramatic function of the commentator, thereby establishing an identity that is “partly inside and partly outside the play” (Shulman 1985: 176). The Chakyar is a “link between the time of the story and the time of the audience” (Narayan 2006: 147).

According to Shulman, the Vidusaka’s potential as an “explicit and forceful critic” (Shulman 1985: 174) is most effectively utilized in *Kutiyattam*, where the Chakyar also assumes the role of the *Sutradhara*⁵ and indulges in uninhibited, no-holds-barred satire. The Chakyar is equally at home both ridiculing the *Purusarthas*⁶ and taking jibes at the powerful in the society. The improvisations of the Chakyar are a sign of his autonomy. The political critique of the Chakyar with the license to lampoon while enjoying the immunity from sanctions of public morality makes him functionally analogous to the political cartoonist. Like the cartoonist, the Chakyar revels in giving offence.

In the history of *Kutiyattam*, there is no dearth of stories in which Chakyars confront an authority no less than the royalty itself. Legend has it that Tolan, the archetypal Vidusaka, ridiculed King Kulesekhara Varman for the poor quality of his work through a practical joke (Parameswara Iyer 1953). Dressed up as an Oracle covered in blood, Tolan burst into the court where the king was presenting his new work based on Kalidasa’s *Abhijñānaśākuntalam* before an audience, and exclaimed that he could not bear it anymore. When the king, aghast at the Vidusaka’s behaviour, asked for the reason, Tolan replied that he was the *Abhijñānaśākuntalam* itself, now wounded and deformed by the king’s rendition of its ideas in his work. (As is evident from this, the body of the Vidusaka is, while in performance, a site for metaphor use, impersonation and caricature- properties that make it correspond to a ‘creation’, in addition to the Vidusaka being a ‘creator’.

Stories relating to Chakyars show that the de facto license to mock people irrespective of their ranks has not always exempted them from the wrath of the rulers. The rulers losing their temper at the ridicule of the Chakyar and, in some cases, seeking retribution for the public

⁴ *Purusartha* is a concept in Hinduism that refers to one of the four aims of human life which include *Artha* (Wealth), *Dharma* (Righteousness), *Kama* (Pleasure) and *Moksha* (Liberation).

⁵ *Sutradhara*, which literally means ‘the string holder’ is a function in Sanskrit drama; they combine the roles of the director and stage manager.

ignominy incurred, should be seen as proof of the impact of the Chakyar's satire on the establishment. G Venu narrates the story of a Chakyar who exposed the ruler of Valluvanad for a murder he committed by making oblique reference during his performance (Venu 1988). The enraged ruler sent for the Chakyar, who, sensing danger, fled from the land.

Ammanur Chachu Chakyar, one of the doyens of Kutiyattam, once lampooned the Maharaja of Cochin for abdicating the throne. He chose a verse from the *Ramayana Prabhandha* spoken by Ravana in a derogatory tone challenging the scruples of Rama and mocking his exile from his kingdom. These remarks showed striking parallels with the recent activities of the Maharaja that tarnished his name, and his abdication of the throne. While explaining the latter part, the Chakyar turned to the Maharaj and asked him, pretending to be Ravana asking Rama: "Did you abdicate the throne of your own will? Or, were you dethroned? To save your face you will, of course, say that you gave up throne voluntarily. But that is not the truth. You were really ousted from the throne. Why? Because of your unkindly and undignified actions" (Venu 1988: 19). This made the Maharaja livid with rage, as rumours were already rife that he had abdicated the throne not willingly but was forced to do so because of his unbecoming actions. Through a messenger, he ordered the Chakyar to appear before him the next day. However, the next day, the Chakyar was greeted by a Maharaja, who had undergone a change of heart and who, instead of chastising the Chakyar, praised him for the genius of his performance.

Most of the subversive potential of the Chakyar derives from the fact that, like the political cartoon, he has direct access to and is significantly appreciated by the general public. As the target of the ridicule usually lacks, in the case of the political cartoon, "the capacity to answer...with a counter-cartoon" (Navasky 2013: 43) and in the case of Kutiyattam, a counter-performance of satire, their frustration at not being able to give a fitting reply increases and they resort to violence to overcome their shame. As the above examples show, at the site of the Kutiyattam performance, the confrontation with the authority can take place literally, where even pointing fingers at the authority can happen in the literal sense.

The Chakyar's use of situations and events from the puranas as templates to present contemporary issues is strikingly parallel to the cartoonist's use of the same. The ability to remain contemporary and, thus, socially relevant sets the Chakyar apart from his more popular counterpart, the Vidusaka in the traditional Sanskrit drama. The Chakyar's use of the vernacular, Malayalam, immediately connects with the audience so much so that the wall between the world and the stage collapses.

The Vidusaka is first and foremost a companion of the king/ hero. He is licensed to treat the king as an equal- at least while exercising his professional role. The Vidusaka and the king often address each other as friend (*vayasya*) (Kuiper 1979) which, all things considered, indicates the existence of a performance space that aims for the "redistribution of power" (Siegel 1989: 58). In *Kutiyattam*, the Vidusaka is the "representative of the very voice of the spectators" (Jain 1992: 54); he represents a democratic space within an otherwise indifferent and temporally nonrepresentative artform and registers the vox populi in his speech. Similarly, in the case of the newspaper, the cartoon is a space for opinionated content in the midst of an overwhelming atmosphere of journalistic objectivity. The Vidusaka-like opinion of the cartoonist is not the opinion of the majority, but one that is based on his/her own sense of right and wrong which he/she offers to the public as the "acceptable common good" (Edwards 2014: 115). The Chakyar addresses issues like "corrupt bureaucracy, decadent society, declining educational values, debauchery in the court, nepotism" (Shrimali 2018: 27), etc. which are the same concerns that jolt the cartoonist into action.

The Chakyar is a storyteller who uses improvisation to "keep the old epics relevant for today's listeners: weaving in side stories, jokes, comments, news stories and proverbs" (Spagnoli 2007: 18). An equally, if not more, popular satirical artform in Kerala, the *Thullal*,

was invented by the 18th century poet Kunchan Nambiar as an alternative to the Chakyar's art, which nevertheless shared many of its features. Abu finds in Kunchan Nambiar the qualities of an ideal cartoonist and adds that "if he had been able to draw, he would have made an excellent cartoonist" (Abraham 1995: 61). *Thullal*, which features the performance of a single actor, involves the recitation and enactment of a story in verse form. The stories, taken from mythology and the epics, are transplanted into the setting of Kerala, thereby making the characters and events a stand-in for the contemporary society.

The cartoon also performs the function of storytelling, although within the limited dimensions of the isolated frames. Each cartoon represents a dramatic situation that suggests tension and dynamism as opposed to the static representation in realistic portraiture (Paulson 2007). It contains a narrative which is the creative response to an event. The storytelling invokes the past to interpret the present with implications for the future. The cartoonist's narrative, based on an objective reality, transforms real persons into characters through exaggeration or simplification/ minimization of their physical features and demeanour.

3. Performing humour: similarities and differences

3.1. Topicality

A cartoon's chief concern is the present. As a snapshot of contemporary society, topicality and timeliness underline the cartoon's ephemerality. Similarly, the performance of the Vidusaka is aimed at a contemporary audience. His commentary comprises the critique of social structures, fads and public sentiments, along with observations on universal topics such as love, desire, duty, etc. His embeddedness in time partly accounts for why some of the humour fails to find resonance with the latter-day audience.

Functionally, the Vidusaka contains aspects of both the cartoonist and the cartoon, or more precisely the caricature. Like a cartoonist, he subjects the rulers and the society to his ridicule. On the other hand, he himself bears the traits of caricature, being a parody of the Brahmin caste, which enjoys exclusive privileges in the society. The appearance and the character traits of the Vidusaka form the aspect of the cartoon whereas the verbal humour- the product of his intellect- that of the cartoonist.

3.2. Language

Both the Vidusaka and the cartoonist adroitly deploy verbal humour as well as referential humour. The former is chiefly manifested in the form of *ślesa* or a pun, which has the "capacity to undermine social and political stability and transgress the boundaries of moral propriety" (Bronner 2010: 255). In *Mrichchhakatika*, the Vidusaka plays on the double entendre of *sneha*- 'oil' and 'affection'- in order to indirectly warn the hero of how his absence of wealth would lead to his rejection by the courtesan, his love interest: "Ah! Those torches of ours have now become void of *sneha* (oil), like courtesans who, slighting penniless lovers, lose their *Sneha* (affection) for them" (Sudraka 1924: 65).

The Vidusaka's speech is often epigrammatic in style, which lends to his statements the appearance of universal truths. While the cartoonist shares the domains of verbal and visual humour with the Vidusaka, he/she has to compensate for the lack of physical humour by implying dynamicity through lines that suggest movement and speed.

The cartoonist, like the Vidusaka, is seldom bound by clear lines of propriety in critiquing the private lives and scandalous deeds of politicians. Like the Vidusaka, who introduces the hero and delineates his characteristics, the cartoonist takes part in the creation of narratives, glorifying—or vilifying as the case might be—political figures. Such characterization enables

the readers to form a coherent image of public figures which the newspaper is constrained to factually report.

Caricaturing is a process of “fool making” (Streicher 1965: 2). Essentially, the principles underlying satire and caricature are the same, so much so that “what in literature is satire, in pictorial art is caricature” (Streicher 1967: 431). In the graphic medium, the caricaturist focuses on the exaggeration of the distinct physical features of a person, through which he/she communicates the understanding of the true nature of that person. Cartoons, which might be value-neutral (Streicher 1967) as opposed to caricatures which are “definitely negative” (Streicher 1967: 431), use “tabs of identity” (Low 1935: 18) such as Hitler’s forelock and toothbrush moustache. Cartoons produce “‘phantom’ versions of political leaders, authority figures and celebrities” (Haywood 2013: 57), in an alternative reality which is nevertheless anchored in the real world.

In the absence of the discursive reasoning and argumentation present in writing, the cartoonist is forced to work rather intuitively through the “condensation of...complex meanings into a single configuration, a ‘striking image’” (Streicher 1967: 440). The cartoonist’s use of metaphors and allusions in order to illuminate a point in a brief and striking way, is explained by this demand. The communication of the cartoon and the Vidusaka is made effective through the use of symbolic analogies made between persons and living and non-living things. These analogies work by “simplifying the polemics through appeal to a higher order” (Dewey 2007: 11).

Gombrich’s position that the “cartoonist merely secures what language has prepared” (Gombrich 1963: 128) suggests that the cartoon is an extension of the verbal medium. Therefore, in the cartoonist, a further stage of the Vidusaka’s verbal humour is reached. The language of the Vidusaka and that of the cartoonist is overly metaphorical. Metaphors help to bring “different associations, more dramatic connotations” (Donoghue 2014: 2) to the audience. The modern-day cartoonist is required to make his/her presentation condensed and precise for quick uptake by the busy public (Gombrich 1960). The same requirement has a bearing on the performance of the Vidusaka, whose onstage antics are predicated on the instantaneous cognition of the audience.

The cartoon’s space within the topography of the newspaper is “an oasis of visual anarchy in the neat rows of the print” (Rowson, n.d.). The cartoonist belongs to “a different, unquantifiable, almost irrational medium” (Rowson, n.d.) and like the Vidusaka within the play, has a semi-detached position that permits certain deviancy. The dissidence, characteristic of the cartoonist’s art, can manifest even to the extent of expressing, say, a satirical point of view diametrically opposed to the editorial line.

The satire of political cartoons is different from the humour of comic strips: it is the response to a topic, and, being context-dependent, is not self-explanatory (Lewis 2008). The satire of the Vidusaka, on the other hand, is mainly a response to the events within the play and hence, self-contained. This is not to deny the implicit suggestions he makes during the performance in front of a contemporary audience. However, the Vidusaka as a historical figure is functionally closer to the cartoonist, and as in the performance of *Kutiyattam*, is functionally closer to the cartoon’s satire.

The Vidusaka acts as a mirror – providing to the hero not the real image of a plain mirror but the distorted image of the funhouse mirror. Watching himself thus reflected in metaphorical language, the hero is able to see his blemishes. In *Abhijñānaśākuntalam*, when the king remarks that listening to his praise sung by the court poets has taken his mind off the weariness caused by his office, the Vidusaka asks, “Does a bull forget that he is tired when you call him the leader of the herd?” (Kalidasa 1999: 52), thus addressing the king’s vanity. The king responds with an understanding smile.

3.3. The carnivalesque

As the name suggests, the Vidusaka is a “spoiler for fun” (Bhat 1959:14). Through his “incongruous blend of wit and folly” (Shulman 1985: 162) the Vidusaka spoils the hero’s illusions and brings him “from enchantment to the commonplace, from poetic fancy to common sense” (Shulman 1985: 164). In the second act of *Abhijñānaśākuntalam*, the Vidusaka thrashes the mango blossoms with his staff (an action that is meant to be funny) to rid the king of the romantic stupor caused by their fragrance. The cartoonist, similarly, exposes the illusions and propaganda of political leaders, as when Hitler’s delusions of the invincible Fuhrer were countered by cartoons from all parts of Europe, which presented him as an incompetent fool, a raving maniac, or the Grim Reaper (Husband 2016). Thus, one may conclude that the Vidusaka and the cartoonist are alike in the carnivalesque approach to authority figures.

3.4. Proximity to authority figures

Now, let us consider two examples from Indian cartooning that evoke the relation between the Vidusaka and the hero in Sanskrit drama. No Indian cartoonist has been as often associated with a single political leader as Shankar was with Nehru. Their rare dynamic has parallels with the association between the hero-Vidusaka duo of Sanskrit drama as well as the king and the court jester. Shankar never took his critique of the Prime Minister to the point of lampoon, although it might have generated an impression to the contrary, which enabled Nehru to make the famous appeal, ‘Don’t Spare Me, Shankar’. Shankar’s critique of other political figures was, however, not always benign.

During the Emergency, Abu Abraham, who had earlier been a supporter of Indira Gandhi but later became disillusioned with her policies, enjoyed relatively greater freedom than his contemporaries. The cartoonist himself acknowledged the fact that he “was allowed to carry on so freely” (qtd. in Freedman 2009). Abu once famously confronted the Minister of Information and Broadcasting in a press conference to declare press censorship: “But why stop the spread of humour?” (Dua, 20 July 2008). His action, at least in the case of *The Indian Express*, where Abu worked, made the ministry reconsider their stance on cartoons. This action reveals an almost compelling urge to listen to the voice of dissidence, which was manifested in ancient times in the king’s companionship with the Vidusaka. H. K. Dua identifies Abu’s humour as subversive yet non-confrontational (Dua, 20 July 2008), which makes his cartoons identifiable with the Vidusaka’s approach.

3.5. Shared imaginary

The function of the Vidusaka is constrained by the demands of the play’s theme, which is, usually, the romantic relationship between the lead characters. In the *Abhijñānaśākuntalam*, the king takes the Vidusaka along with him even on the hunt and keeps his company through most of the plot. But how the Vidusaka would have reacted to an affair or policy of the state is absent from the play since the plot does not warrant it. Given that the character of Vidusaka is inspired from the court jester of the past, it can be tenably inferred that the social role of the court jester informs the Vidusaka’s own role in society.

The tales of Tenali Rama, which celebrate the court jester of Krishnadevaraya of the Vijayanagara Kingdom, point to the “folk perception of the jester as a comic hero engaged on behalf of the unprivileged common man” (Shulman 1985: 186). The deeds of the jester which generated such narratives also served as windows through which the public caught glimpses of the intricacies of the court, where decisions about governance were formulated. This is not unlike the cartoonist’s role in a society, though the cartoonist works independently—as part of

a separate institution—from the powers that be, who form his/her target. The court jester and the cartoonist are united by the function of their respective professions in which offence is legitimized.

The Vidusaka and the cartoonist usually address a community of people who share the same socio-political conditions, symbols and values. Their humour is ‘collective,’ since it is dependent on the “collective identification” (Ratuva 2001: 120) among its audience. The political cartoon marks a new stage in the development of a historical process of “creating collective conscience by people without access to bureaucratic or other institutionalized forms of political muscle” (Anderson 1990: 163); the Vidusaka, as the organizer of ‘collective conscience’, is the archetypal forerunner to the political cartoonist in the Indian society. Benedict Anderson’s estimation of the role of *punakawan*, the clown in the Indonesian *wayang* shadow puppet theatre- that it embodies “a complex net of intimacies, dependencies, and solidarities” (Anderson 1990: 175) on the side of the subordinate and the ruled, held together by the iconography of the comic figure- is equally applicable to the Vidusaka. The cartoonist’s affinity with the Vidusaka also includes the shared symbolism of having the “opponent aspect” (Anderson 1990: 162) in the interpretation of political power in the interest of the general public.

3.6. Mediumistic commonalities

In spite of their different mediums, the cartoonist and the Vidusaka share a common performative dimension. Sushmita Chatterjee classifies the performative aspects of the cartoon into those of the “drawing itself” (Chatterjee 2007: 304), which includes the nature of the material used, the issues handled in the cartoon, the inspiration behind the cartoon, etc, and those of the “drawing out” (Chatterjee 2007: 304), which refers to the effect of the cartoon and the discourse it generates.

The Vidusaka’s humour is expressed through gestures, words, and costume and make-up, technically known in dramaturgy as *angika*, *vacika* and *aharya*, respectively. The gestures, coupled with the distinct appearance, sets him as antithetical to the rest of the characters. His stylized and exaggerated movements “in keeping with the rhythm and the musical time(*tala*)” (Bhat 1959: 151) create a unique idiom for the communication of humour. The *angika* or the use of gestures, by itself, is capable of expressing the whimsicality, incontinency, levity, and, above all, the liberty that the Vidusaka embodies.

This performative element has a parallel in the medium of cartooning, in the form of the artist’s strokes. Not only do the strokes/ lines distance themselves from the naturalistic drawing, which emphasizes verisimilitude, they also produce the “illusion of life which can do without any illusion of reality” (Gombrich 1960: 269). Since the humour generally depends on the creator’s intended meaning, the cartoonist puts to optimum use the “knowledge of physiognomies and human expression” (Gombrich 1960: 272) while drawing figures in order to lower the chance of ambiguity.

The laughter through words is produced by the Vidusaka’s adherence to the script of the play, improvisation being largely absent from his speech. The collaboration between the script and its delivery by the Vidusaka is mirrored in the combination of text and visual in the cartoon. In cartoons, the words could either be attributed to a figure in the frame or in the form of the disembodied/ impersonal comment from the cartoonist, or be absent altogether. One of the ways in which the cartoonist concretizes his/her presence is through the creation of narrator figures, such as R. K. Laxman’s ‘Common Man’, who function like a ventriloquist’s dummy in the work.

In the wake of the success of Laxman’s character, Indian cartooning witnessed a plethora of such figures appearing in pocket cartoons: T. Samuel’s ‘Babuji’, and ‘Kalu and Meena’, O.

V. Vijayan's nameless peasant and his son, Enver Ahmed's 'Chowkidar', Jagjeet Rana's 'Tota Babu', E. P. Unny's 'Newspaper Boy', etc. are examples of such figures. Whether the figure directly comments on a situation or remains a silent witness like Laxman's 'Common Man', it unmistakably occupies the position of the observer, and even in the case of the undecidability of the speaker, the collaboration between the text and the figure in the performance creates a persona similar to that of the Vidusaka.

According to Medhurst and DeSousa, the three forms of disposition of political cartoons are contrast, commentary, and contradiction. They are actualized in the cartoon through the elements of style which include the "use of lines of various thicknesses, size of characters and objects, exaggeration of physical features, positioning of images and their connection with the text- whether in balloon or caption- etc." (Ali 2013: 620). Due to the spatial constraints of the single frame, the most frequent form of arrangement is that of contrast.

Contrast depends upon a "clash of forms, both visual and textual within the frame" (Medhurst & DeSousa 1981: 205). It also constitutes a principle of the Vidusaka's rhetoric. In addition to the contrast (both literal and figurative) made through appearance and gestures, the Vidusaka's verbal rhetoric is also distinguished by its propensity for the technique. In fact, each verbal statement of the Vidusaka forms a unit comparable to the single frame of the cartoon, the metaphor or contrast making a mental image in the audience's mind. In the second act of Kalidasa's *Mālavikāgnimitram*, for example, the Vidusaka contrasts the king's articulation of his affliction of love with the pangs of hunger in his own stomach, which, he says, is burning like a cooking pot in the food market.

Commentary, the second form of disposition, "implies or reflects a cultural/ political truism" (Medhurst and DeSousa 1981: 205) rather than a tension between ideas. It is an opinion which poses as the 'truth' without the obligation to always produce humour. For that matter, the cartoon is not always obliged to be funny, either. The Vidusaka offers commentary on social as well as personal (vis- a-vis the characters) levels.

Contradiction is principally similar to contrast but differs in how "it invites not attention but condemnation" (Medhurst and DeSousa 1981: 205). The Vidusaka, who is a companion and therefore pledged to be loyal to the king/hero, does not bring condemnation to his master but only to the lowly and the dissolute, in whose case (since they are unambiguously portrayed as iniquitous) the need for contradiction barely arises.

3.7. The cartoonist as the Vidusaka

How the cartoonist performatively resembles the Vidusaka will now be examined with an example. The cartoon by R. K. Laxman, published circa 1970, is a jibe at Indira Gandhi's misplaced confidence about her public approval. The cartoon builds, as in the drama, a narrative- although one shortened to a single event. The cartoonist assembles the characters and directs the action like a *sutradhara*, a typical Vidusaka function in drama. The cartoon offers a counternarrative by taking the literal sense of Mrs. Gandhi's statement and, by flipping the intended meaning, produces the contrary import. The march of people on the right represents the general mood of the country according to the cartoonist; the expressions of the people and the raised placards suggest that they are a discontented lot clamouring for their rights.

In the twilight zone between the fictional and the real, the Prime Minister and her cohorts are shown escaping from the advancing crowd. Like the exaggerated gestures that add humour to the Vidusaka's movement, the flight of the figures is representationally exaggerated with their feet off the ground. The cartoonist, like the Vidusaka, spoils the illusion of the ruler. Here, the contrast between the smile on Mrs. Gandhi's face and the worried frowns of her associates indicates the difference in their appraisal of the popular sentiment. The smile on

Mrs. Gandhi's face could be interpreted as naïve confidence about her achievements, and an inability to read the 'signs'.



Figure 1: Cartoon by R. K. Laxman

3.8. The cartoonist as Vidusaka: an experiment with metaphor

The following experiment demonstrates the Vidusaka's figurative utterances (from three classical plays) in the visual format of single-frame cartoons (caricature being the fundamental criterion). These cartoons are drawn by one of the authors exclusively as experiments with metaphor. The choice of remarks about the hero (who, in all three cases, is the king) is deliberate and serves a cautionary purpose (not unlike the political cartoon). For this experiment, the tenor and vehicle of each metaphor have been fused into a single image, as is the usual practice in political cartooning. The fictional characters are represented as if they were real persons, by imagining their 'tabs of identity' and superimposing them onto the image of the vehicle. Captions could be made out of these words; this, however, is not attempted here. Instead, the words have been given alongside the drawing to serve the context.

The first 'cartoon' presents the king's self-consuming longing for his beloved. Like a cartoonist, the Vidusaka points out the pitfalls of the situation. The imagery reminds the king that he is out of his senses, and that his pursuit is precarious, given the unattainability of his wish. In the second 'cartoon', the Vidusaka uses an unlikely metaphor to depict the king's feelings for his love interest that hints at the carnality of his desires. However, the ridicule in this instance is directed primarily at the king's indecision, which is indeed a defect in the ruler. In the third example, the king commands the Vidusaka to pacify an irascible queen against his will. Although expressed as a playful remark, the Vidusaka reminds the king that to him, others are expendable. This case testifies to the Vidusaka's ability to customize the choice of metaphors; given that the king in the play is passionate about hunting, the metaphor should sensitize him to the obvious self-interestedness of his action. The experiment thus shows that the Vidusaka's satirical use of metaphors works in a similar way to political cartooning; if these metaphors were to be visually represented, they would (hypothetically) qualify as political cartoons.



Figure 2. “Well! Well! You embrace this exquisite beauty in your quicksilver chase, only as the Chataka follows the mirage” (Kalidasa1851: 21).



Figure 3. “...You’re like a vulture wheeling round the slaughterhouse hungry for raw meat—but too timid to approach” (Kalidasa1971: 84).



Figure 4. “But, Man, you are using another fellow’s fingers to grab a bear’s tail-feathers with” (Kalidasa1999: 53).

4. Political cartooning and the Indian ethos

The influence of the Indian tradition of art and humour was most palpable in early Indian cartoons—before the Indian cartoonist gained mastery of the Western form to create a new sensibility. These early cartoons represent the transition of the Indian satirical tradition into a new medium; they were populated by the symbols, motifs and perspectives of the tradition,

not the least representative of which was the figure of the Vidusaka. The cartoons found easy acceptance within the society even as they filled the void created by the Vidusaka's disappearance. The audience, who were already familiar with the figurative language of the Vidusaka, found it easy to process the symbols of the cartoon.

4.1. Punch meets desi Punch

The reach of *Punch* in India was huge. The magazine had a widespread reader base among educated Indians. Through personal and library subscriptions, the British cartoons reached the Indian public and were in turn copied and appropriated by colonial cartoonists. The aspect of appropriation offers a distinct perspective on the history of Indian political cartooning as a “multi-directional flow of images, imagination and people” (Khanduri 2014: 6), countering the Eurocentric narrative that presents the colony as a passive recipient of modern cultural forms. The vernacular cartoons embarked on a crusade against imperial policies, exposing their duplicity and meanness through humour and critique. The vernacular cartoonists modelled their imperial criticism on Thomas Rowlandson, James Gilray, James Moffat et al, who in the eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century debunked the Empire's ‘Civilizing Mission’ through their engravings. By adopting the rebellious and grotesque style of these cartoonists rather than the gentle and modest style of their own contemporaries, early Indian cartoonists were clearly exercising their choice.

The impertinence of the vernacular *Punches* unsettled the British rulers, who enforced surveillance and censorship. Although British editors had dismissed the quality of the vernacular *Punches* as unremarkable, the colonial state was enthusiastic about keeping close tabs on the content of the magazine, which confirms the cartoons' ability to “talk back and expose the duality in the colonial authorities' liberal sense of humor” (Khanduri 2014: 48). The use of the British *Punch* as a template for the expression of Indian ethos, Khanduri argues, is not simply a “derivative form of a colonial modernity” but also a “tactical and tactile sensibility for subverting colonial politics” (Khanduri 2014: 54).

The way visual language migrates to assume new meanings in the changed cultural context illustrates the audience's critical engagement with pictorial information (Mitter 2013). The reinvention of *Punch* as the *desi Punch*, to meet political and ideological demands, and the striking link between region and style, prompt Khanduri to ask two questions: “Is there an “Indian” cartooning? Can there be a distinct Hindi cartooning?” (2014: 23). The possible explanation for the Indianness of the cartoons is given by a “dual movement” (Khanduri 2014: 234)- the fusion of styles-West and East, old and new; elements of caricature and parody, not unknown to Indian art, that were abundantly employed in them. These cartoons represent the “dialogic interactions between the received source...and the local satirical tradition” (Mitter 2013:59). The use of images from myths and folktales to present contemporary events was an ingenious method to obscure the seditious content (Freedman 2009).

The figure of the British Mr. Punch had several Indian variations. The Indian Punch retained the physical deformity of Mr. Punch, with the turban replacing the hat, the overall effect of which was strangely evocative of the typical appearance of the Vidusaka in Sanskrit drama. This similarity was not limited to appearance alone. Khanduri identifies the Indian Punch as a fusion of the tradition of Vidusakas, performing the dual function of the clown and the commentator (Khanduri 2014). Laxman considers the role of the cartoonist as essentially the same as that of the jester: i.e., “to exercise his right to criticize, ridicule, find fault with, and demolish the establishment and political leaders” (Laxman 2000: v).

4.2. The Indian ethos

The Vidusaka, who is synonymous with Indian comic tradition, although invisible in the socio-cultural sphere at the time of the cartoons, continues his legacy in the public imagination. Proof of this lies in *Basantak*, a Bengali illustrated comic magazine whose title references the clown or the Vidusaka (Mitter 1994). The appearance of the narrator—Basantak, a grotesque fat Brahmin—is reminiscent of the Vidusaka figure. Similarly, the satirical magazine that featured the first cartoon in Malayalam was titled *Vidooshakan*, conceptualizing itself as the reincarnation of the tradition of Vidusaka in print format.

According to E. P. Unny, the cartoon is a “form that freezes mime and movement into a stinging visual” (2006: 276). As far as India is concerned, the cartoon is relatable to its folk and classical traditions of satire. In his preface to *Laughing Matters*, Lee Siegel argues that modern Indian cartoons suggest a “revitalization of [the] ancient comic tradition” (1989: xii) of India. Comedy offers a lens which inverts the ‘normal’ and the stately, and the appreciation of the comic *rasa* requires “a savouring of bad taste” (Siegel 1989: 9). The logic and aesthetics of comedy and by extension, the Vidusaka, demands a different set of parameters. Comedy belongs to a “world of incongruity and indecorum” (Siegel 1989:28) of which the Vidusaka is the flagbearer.

An understanding of the Indian philosophy of art would reveal that it is well-suited to explain the principles of the political cartoon. This might suggest that though the cartoon, as a practice, was an imported cultural product, its underlying principles were in no way alien to Indian tradition. Indian art is characterized by its “anti-*anukrti* [imitation]bias” (Dave-Mukherji 2016: 74). Unlike most Western art forms, ‘naturalism’ has not been a major hallmark of Indian arts. The art forms, which underplay the quality of similitude, are oriented towards symbolic representation, which creates a parallel sign system (Dave-Mukherji 2016). Such representation contains a performative dimension and demands an audience’s familiarity with the “cultural codes of resemblance” (Dave-Mukherji 2016: 77).

The aesthetics is founded on a distinctly Indian way of communication, which “avoided logical and discursive language and made use of analogies and metaphors” (Dissanayake 1988: 43). A major concept of such communication is known as *sadharanikarana*, translated as transpersonalisation (Patnaik 2016), ‘universalisation’ or ‘generalisation’. *Sadharanikarana*’s function is to “emphasize commonality of human experience and to reveal both personal and communal truth” (Lloyd 2015: 97).

The concept of *sadharanikarana* is capable of explaining not only the function and ontological specifications of political cartoons but also how social and cultural factors determine its appreciation. The process of *sadharanikarana* that takes place through the cartoons demands of the readers their “innate tendencies and memory of earlier perceptions (*vāsanās* and *saṃskāras*)” (Patnaik 2016: 45). The cartoon’s appeal is directed at both the reason and the intuitive perception of the readers who form interpretative associations based on cultural memory. Hence, through *sadharanikarana*, news disseminates in the simplified form of the cartoon even to the less literate.

Broadly speaking, the cartoon and the Sanskrit drama are focused on the edification of the audience, rather than being vehicles of mere entertainment or the transmission of facts. This objective is to be found in their choice to recreate reality rather than imitate it. Both mediums have a propensity for figurativeness and stylisation.

5. Conclusion

The influence of the native tradition of art and humour on Indian cartooning has remained largely unacknowledged. Invoking the British legacy alone does not fully account for Indian

cartoon practice. By placing the cartoon within the Indian sociocultural milieu, one comprehends the cartoonist's Vidusaka-like role in the community. The paper recognizes this and attempts to conceive the genealogy of the Indian cartoonist by linking him/her with the comic figure of the Vidusaka in Sanskrit drama and its variants. The paper theorizes the Vidusaka's comic performance in order to set up a comparison with the corresponding elements in the cartoonist's art.

In Sanskrit drama, the Vidusaka represents a comic inversion of the normal within the play. His deviancy is manifested in his grotesque and outlandish appearance, the choice of the vernacular Prakrit, the comically exaggerated bearing and mannerisms- all of which serve as a medium for the communication of humour. The chief medium of performance for the cartoonist is his/her exaggerated lines/ strokes that caricature public figures. In this regard, the cartoonist continues the Vidusaka's deflationary performance. They are alike in their choric function achieved through a patently figurative language with the stock of metaphors and symbols.

The comradely association with the king limits the Vidusaka in Sanskrit drama to a playful criticism of authority. The local variant in *Kutiyattam*, on the other hand, takes the combativeness and trenchancy to a higher level by being vigorously offensive. The comic retellings of myths and epics with contemporary characters by the Chakyar and his counterpart in *thullal* have parallels with the cartoonist's use of the same as templates for resonant interpretations of contemporary events. Their engagement with the contemporary lends ephemerality to their performance.

The Vidusaka's primary function within the plot is to spoil the illusion of the hero (who is mostly a king) and rein him in through the corrective power of laughter. The cartoonist, free from patronage and obligation to political authority, performs the double function of correction and condemnation. The paper identifies how the pair of the king and the Vidusaka reappears in the form of the ruler and the cartoonist.

This paper analyses the nature of the performance of the cartoonist and the Vidusaka by identifying the corresponding elements between the two; it reads the political cartoon in the light of the Vidusaka's performance, and vice versa. The experiment of transforming a select category of figurative utterances by the Vidusaka into the format of the single panel cartoon suggests that their operation and purpose are identical to the use of metaphors and symbols by the cartoonist.

Indian cartoonists since Shankar have admired and emulated the styles of Western cartoonists even as they failed to recognize the contribution of the early Indian cartoons and the vernacular *Punches* that brought a uniquely Indian sensibility inspired by native art and nationalistic fervour into cartooning. These early cartoons and comic magazines affirm India's distinct comic tradition by reproducing its modes, patterns and motifs in their new configurations. Even prior to the introduction of the artform of cartooning by the British, caricature had been part of India's visual art in such forms as the *Kalighat* paintings.

Although dismissed by later cartoonists as lacking in refinement, early Indian cartoons displayed a robust form of irreverence, not least aided by the indigenous style and vocabulary which vexed the colonial authority into subjecting them to constant surveillance. When the narrator figure of Mr. Punch was culturally appropriated, the Indian versions bore an unmistakable resemblance to the Vidusaka. Later on, the narrator figures that appear in pocket cartoons- not unique to but conspicuously in high numbers in Indian cartooning- are functionally analogous to the Vidusaka.

The paper suggests that the principles of communication of the cartoon is compatible with the Indian concept of *sadharanikarana* or universalisation, and that the non-representationalism and symbolism of Indian art have helped the cartoon to gain easy acceptance into the cultural fabric of the Indian society.

As it turns out, the theory of the Vidusaka offers a model that explains not only the peculiarities of the Indian cartoonist, but also the nature and function of cartoonists in general. The Vidusaka represents, by a broad definition, the creative individual who stands at the interface of the society and delivers satirical commentary on its events; he counteracts the self-aggrandizing narratives of those in power and serves as the outlet for the voice of the people. The cartoonist, who fits this description in the modern society, can be regarded as a Vidusaka of the age.

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