

THE AUSTERE AND MUTE GLORY OF R.K. LAXMAN'S CARTOONS
AND ILLUSTRATIONS: POSTCOLONIAL READING OF A
HUMORIST'S COMIC ART

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Abstract

Be it Laxman's illustrations for the *Malgudi Days* or be it his Asian Paints commercial mascot, Gattu—Laxman had the means to steer clear of language, which in itself happens to be a unique area in postcolonial perspective. May it be school children playing cricket on the village courtyards, may it be a deserted railway station at Malgudi, may it be the humble and silent Gandhian observer of the post-independence India: the Common Man—Laxman has done well to communicate contradictory undertow of significance via his cartoons and artworks. Now a moral fable, now chalking out the post-colonial moral topography of the urban and suburban times, now emanating a wish to preserve the quietist Indian way of lives—Laxman's illustrations show neither rejection of Westernization nor a celebration of tradition. His portrayal of Common Man—the silent benevolent observer of human interactions—deals with both the cultural times of colonial and post-colonial India as an interface between tradition and hybrid modernity, characterized by comic irony. Beneath the skins of comedy and laughter, there crawls suggestiveness of cultural resistance. A post-independence India in Laxman's comic art is marked by the backdrop of cruelty, decadence, corruption and laziness; but at the same time, his unassumingly sugar-coated illustrations are a commentary on the pre-colonial era, the alleged pre-civilized limbo. We see instinctive emotions and reactions at war in his artworks; we find conscious choices and decisions assuming new postcolonial dimensions in his cartoons.

Keywords: R.K. Laxman, the Common Man, Malgudi Days, cartoons, illustrations, postcolonial theory, pre-independence India, post-independence India, comic art, irony, R.K. Narayan

While writing in a colonial derivative language involves a crucial acquiescence, an illustrator or a cartoonist has a very humble and unique way of registering and recording signs of ideological struggles with his/her pen and ink. Be it R.K. Laxman's illustrations for the *Malgudi Days* or be it his Asian Paints commercial mascot, Gattu—Laxman had the means to steer clear of language, which in itself happens to be a unique trope in postcolonial perspective. Laxman records in his autobiography, *The Tunnel of Time*: “I drew objects that caught my eye outside the window of my room – the dry twigs, leaves and lizard-like creatures crawling about, the servant chopping firewood and, of course, and number of crows in various postures on the rooftops of the buildings opposite (24).

Now a moral fable, now chalking out the post-colonial moral topography of the urban and suburban times, now emanating a wish to preserve the quietist Indian way of lives—Laxman's illustrations show neither rejection of Westernization nor a celebration of tradition. How do Laxman's daily comic strips sandwich the paradoxes and pluralities manifest in both towns and the countryside? How do Laxman's illustrations for *Malgudi Days* use garment and locale as pregnant signifiers? Beneath the skins of comedy and laughter, there crawls suggestiveness of cultural resistance. A post-independence India in Laxman's comic art is marked by the backdrop of cruelty, decadence, corruption and laziness; but at the same time, his unassumingly sugar-coated illustrations are a commentary on the pre-colonial era, the alleged pre-civilized limbo. We see instinctive emotions and reactions at war in his artworks; we find conscious choices and decisions assuming new postcolonial dimensions in his cartoons. Meena Menon in her January, 2015-article for *The Hindu*, "The Uncommon Man: R.K. Laxman (1921-2015)", commemorates Laxman's demise:

“Since childhood I do not remember wanting to do anything else except draw,” R.K. Laxman says in his autobiography, *The Tunnel of Time*. And he has done very little else in over five decades as a cartoonist. From objects that caught his eye as a child outside the window of his room, to “the pretentious dignity of Mrs. Gandhi to the grumpy face of Narasimha Rao.” Famous for his acerbic cartoons lampooning political figures, Laxman at one point said, “What politics is all about today. Blah-blah-blah. The day that stops and the quality of our leaders improve, I will have to retire and go away.” [...] Some of the cartoons out of the 1960s and 1970s would be alive and meaningful if reproduced today without a date. Like the one where a policeman is reporting to his superiors saying, roughly, that there had been looting, rioting, stone-throwing and “then the situation took a turn for the worse” and there was — looting, rioting, stone-throwing. So too, the innumerable cartoons on price rise that he did in the early decades — they would be as alive today as they were then. (Par. 1-3)

To begin with, his early *Malgudi Days*-illustrations were for his older sibling, R. K. Narayan. Thanks to the TV series directed by Shankar Nag that we came to know about the austere glory of Laxman's pen and ink illustration—the illustrations that tell an incredibly wholesome story like R.K. Narayan's. The credibility with which he delivers the locale of the colonial settings is telling. Laxman makes one realize how the juxtaposition of the Europeaness and the Indianness was thriving and growing with complacency in a small growing town such as Malgudi.

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The law and order, the discipline, the superstition and obviously cricket make a very credible outline of a world that was quite far away from the Eurocentric metropolis of the British Raj but at the same time pretty much affected by its halo. One cannot deny that cricket in India is a colonial phenomenon, and in a fictitious small town like Malgudi, it assumes a more suggestive dimension. The children make gully cricket so pivotal—the margins of a small town are attracted and influenced by the so-called British sport for amusement (Fig. 1). To cite Menon from her article, "The Uncommon Man: R.K. Laxman (1921-2015)", once again:

While Narayan worked his way toward becoming India's leading writer, Laxman was busy sketching. "While all this was going on, my own creative urge was driving me in another direction. I used to visit, with sketchpad and pencil in hand, the crowded localities of Mysore like the Town Hall compound, the city square, public parks and the vegetable market in order to sketch people in action, study their faces, their dresses, their postures and other characteristics. My sketch-book was filled with drawings of whatever caught my fancy including the local railway station, weather-beaten houses, ruminating cows, meditative donkeys, schoolchildren, lawyers, passengers at the bus terminus and so on," he writes in the *Frontline* essay, which was titled "O, brother!" (Par. 6)

One can also notice in *Malgudi Days*-illustrations how childhood playthings are not rag dolls, rather toys that have Eurocentric-influence all over itself: a railway engine, a girl wearing frock, a tricycle, picture books. The caretaker lady is also amused by such newness of playthings. But this is not unchecked Westernization. This is the westernization that has crept into the hearts of the wee little children.

Drawing Malgudi was challenging—the railroad station in Malgudi itself became the flagship signifier of the coming alien culture (Fig. 2). We see a railway station that is empty—alien, a halt station only, suffering from wilderness indeed. We know about the co-existence of the

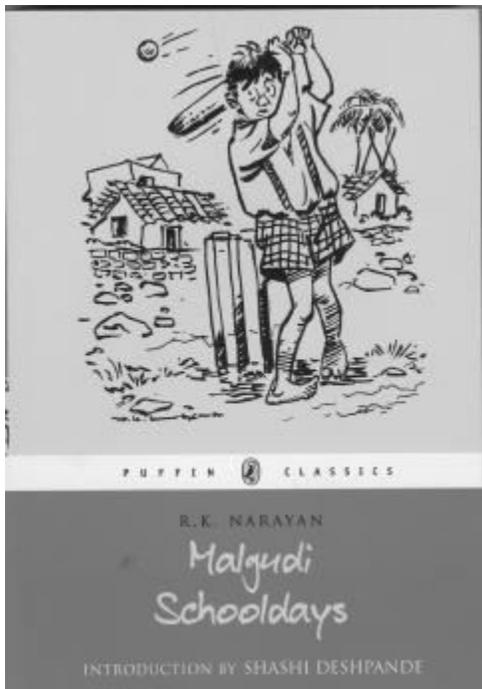


Fig. 1: Cricket in the Cover of *Malgudi Schooldays*. Illustrated by R.K. Laxman.

Pyol School and the Albert Mission School in Malgudi; we know about the co-presence of Sir Frederick Lawley's statue and Bharat Natyam in Malgudi: R.K. Laxman could not make away with the mobility, the new social economy, the change taking place in small town Malgudi—although, it was situated far away from the colonial power of cities, far away from the British Raj, and hardly had any European characters. He did underline the traces of Europeanization left on the cartography of Malgudi.

Next part of the discussion is going to be on cartoons of Rasipuram Krishnaswamy Iyer Laxman. Interestingly, viewer identification happens to be the unmatched specialty of cartooning techniques. To echo

Scott McCloud here from his iconic book, *Understanding Comics*: Laxman creates unusually realistic backdrops, and at the same time he has a clear-lined style of pen and ink that historically gives him an advantage for combining iconic characters from everyday life, characters from different walks of life (McCloud 31). Mention

Fig. 2: Railroad Station at Malgudi from *Malgudi Days*. Illustrated by Laxman.

should be made of the fact that Laxman is already using the technique of pictures, images that can be traced back to the time of Norman Conquest and sequential Egyptian paintings—you can mask yourself into a character and then you enter a stimulating world. It is quite far away from a novel, but the impact you derive is of a peculiar familiarity and a unique defamiliarization at the same breath.

Laxman picks up our alley, our home, our office, our sidewalks, our traffic congestion and makes it simply iconic (Fig. 3). That is his gift; that is his strength of cartooning technique. It goes without saying that the humorist who had been providing daily strips for *The Times of India* almost every day from 1950s has, to his credit, a bunch of people interacting in his comic canvases, who will remind one of the people s/he sees around one. This world is not beyond us, it is all around us.

Manifestly, it was assumed that the people from the interlocking villages and small towns remained quite untouched by the Europeanization. They were inhabiting in a pre-colonial past of perhaps wandering holy men, and maybe there were less reactions against the

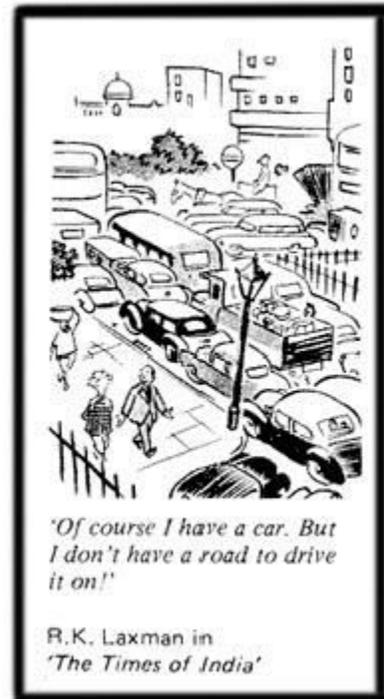


Fig. 3: Common Man and the Traffic in New Delhi and Mumbai. *Times of India*. By Laxman.

post-colonial hybridity; the country folks were presumably innocent of Meenakshi Mukherjee's 'Anxiety of Indianness'—but Laxman tells a more realistic story. They, who live from hand to mouth, too talk about the heralding twenty first century. They too look forward to a mobile and progressive tomorrow.

Hence, here after, one feels tempted to look at the post-

independence India. Now one will see how the Europeanization has taken over our home and abroad. The house, the family and the office become interactive, and the germ of disloyalty and lies stares one at one's face. We have nepotism thriving in our offices, and the so-called civil people today—who are no more civil subjects per se—have found a way to do things in their wonted manner of a truant. Then there is still the Macaulay's downward filtration education system reigning supreme in India. A graduate gatekeeper-on-wait here counsels another graduate how to go about in a walk-in-interview and limit yourself from over-commitment (Fig. 4).

Fig. 4: Counsel of the Graduate Gate-keeper. *Times of India*. Illustrated by R.K. Laxman



You are a graduate, are you? So am I. But don't make the mistake I did! Don't ever say that you are prepared to do any job!

There are allegations and brimming corruptions not only in capitalist politics but also in small industries, offices—the power play is always visible in Laxman's daily cartoons. And there is also the threat of a union strike looming—something a small industry may always be afraid of. Computers get infected with virus and economy takes a dive—from the chart on the manager's office to a snack-stand on the sidewalks—the post-independence India is based on capitalism, technology, computing and managerial algorithms. The effect of Westernization is snaking across the advertisements—the gendered role of the sensational, the spectacle, the female body politics (Fig. 5).

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Objectification and commodification of the female body draped in westernized revealing garments may well be used as an all-purpose ad: for washing machines, for cars, for lipsticks, for skin care products. And also the Anxiety of Indianness is still surging up through student and union and cabinet agitations against English as an official language.

The Common Man, who needs no introduction, has been Laxman's iconic uniqueness. He is non-violent, and he is silent. Laxman as a humorist and a comic artist gives you your icon for Everyman, an icon of universal identification and simplicity—the main causes of our childhood fascination with cartoons. Common Man assumed the vacuum into which one's social identity and political awareness are manifested. Amruta Byatnal in her 2011-*The Hindu* article "The Common Man is Still at Work" covering Laxman's 90th birthday writes,

The Hindu had the opportunity to peek into the maestro's latest sketchbook, and the common man still rules his world. A sketch drawn on October 3 shows the iconic Common Man upset with Lord Ganesha and turning away from him, an indication perhaps of the tough times that the common man has to endure and a complaint to the Lord of Success for not doing enough. "His observations are still as sharp as ever. I make sure he reads the newspaper and listens to news," Mrs. Laxman said.

"He does not do any political sketch anymore, but I am sure he would have loved to comment on the anticorruption movement," Mrs. Laxman had told this correspondent in an earlier interview. (Par. 7-8)

He looks at the wannabe cricketer, young and gullible, who plays cricket so that he can attract ad agencies to invite him to pose for toothpaste, shaving cream and soft drinks commercials. This here is more a phenomenon of commercialization than that of *Malgudi Schoolday's* cricket—which was merely a postcolonial phenomenon. Common Man watches people talk about bribes and corruption—otherwise how would you provide for your family, pay for child's school, transport, dress and what not! Mohul Ghosh in his January 30th, 2015-web article, "9 Hard-Hitting Cartoons By R.K. Laxman Which Ignited India" for *Talk.in* speaks highly of the Common Man:

India's most renowned cartoonist, illustrator and humorist, R.K. Laxman expired on January 26th, 2015. He was best known for his



This is an all-purpose ad, Sir. It can be used for washing machines, lipsticks, ice-cream, cars, skin care products, etc. etc....

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daily cartoon strip: ‘You Said It’, where he depicted a Common Man experiencing India, and sharing his thoughts and opinions on the burning issue which affected all Indians. In 1988, during when *Times of India* completed 150 years in India, the Indian Postal Service featured The Common Man, which made him a household name all over the nation. (Par. 1-2)

Common Man is present throughout the sixty years of post-independence political upheavals of morals and polyvalent ambiguities running amuck. Notice his garments—he does not dress like a Tom, Dick and Harry. He does not wear a pair of pants; rather, he sticks to his Gandhian Swadeshi garments. The values that he upholds remind one of the pre-independence civil rights movements and non-cooperation movements. *The Hindu* published a column on January 27th, 2015, "India will Miss the Genius: President", in which both late Laxman and his evergreen The Common Man were celebrated by the Maharashtra Governor:

Maharashtra Governor ChVidyasagar Rao described the legendary cartoonist as the most powerful representative of the common man who articulated the viewpoints of “the silent millions.” Mr. Laxman was the “most effective commentator on issues of national and international importance to have dominated the news space for such a long time,” Mr. Rao said in a statement here. “[Laxman] understood the joys and sorrows of the common man and articulated the viewpoints of the silent millions of India for more than five decades through his eloquent cartoons,” he said. (Par. 9-10)

A new dimension of irony and hilarity had broken out—here ministers occupy children’s’ playgrounds for holding their cabinet meetings. Here Non-Resident Indian pays India a visit and claims to love this country—the myth and ideals this country offers. One Common Man is trying to fight against the raging corruption and fraudulent capitalism in his mute glory. Even after years of its official independence, Common Man bewails the rising poverty in our country. The villages are still under a bad government—neither drought-hit nor flood-hit, but still resigned into a pre-colonial limbo. Aditi Malhotra in her article for online *Wall Street Journal India*, "R.K. Laxman: The Common Man’s Cartoonist Remembered", talks illustratively about the Common Man:

Mr. Laxman’s Common Man sported a quintessentially Indian look—dressed in a dhoti with a small tuft of hair – the gentle man, more often than not, wore a bewildered look as he gazed through his rounded spectacles at the trappings of power, rapid modernization and the vagaries of Indian politics. In “The Tunnel of Time,” his autobiography which was published in 1988, Mr. Laxman described the Common Man as a “silent spectator.” “The bespectacled Common Man in his checked coat had walked into my cartoon spontaneously, as if I had no hand in his creation,” he wrote. (Par. 4-6)

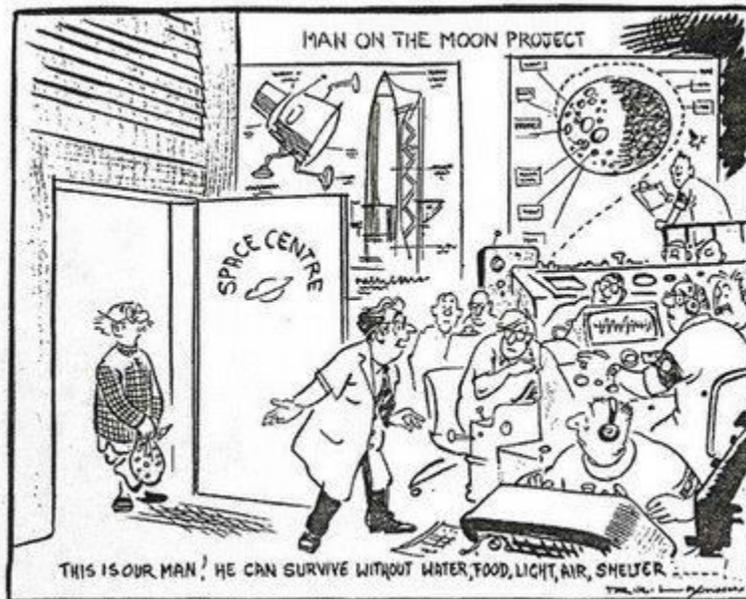
Science and technology that bear the mark of flagship westernization have a baffling presence in this developing country—a technology convention is going on, and Common Man finds himself listening to the empty words of a minister in a blatant load shedding (Fig. 6). He has made Common Man a mascot for all those deprived legions of denizens who may

Fig. 6: Empty words of a minister in a load-shedding. *Times of India*. By R.K. Laxman. go without food, shelter and water—the constitutional basic rights being a sham for any common man (Fig. 7).

Fig. 7: Common Man and the Man on Moon Project, India. *Times of India*. By R.K. Laxman.

To conclude, one is tempted to echo what Krishna Sen, in her inimitable manner, said about postcolonialism in R.K. Narayan. Laxman is neither rejecting Westernization nor celebrating tradition (Sen 111). He is ably trying to negotiate the contradictions embedded in post-colonial predicament today. Laxman's comic irony is austere because it mediates between pre-colonial tradition and Eurocentric modernity. His comic art is indeed persuasive—his exaggeration, his labeling, his symbolism, his analogy, and what not. The sandwiching of humour and the realist German pen and ink technique both contribute to the breadth and depth of

the connotations of his comic art. His caricatures and illustrations will always prevail as a pendant, a necklace to the whole corpus of Empire Writing Back.



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