



Mahabharata to Malabar: Is Laughter a Man's World?

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Summary: *A retrospective look at the influence of Western imagination, Indian national movement, transformations, and insecurities of the educated Malayali man through the cartoons of Sanjayan (M.R. Nair).*

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On the ancient Sanskrit stage, the character Vidushaka, a kind of jester, would indulge in irreverent asides at deadly serious moments and send the audience into convulsions of laughter. Vidushakas always had something to say on the current goings-on in the kingdom.¹

Drawing on the Mahabharata for inspiration, M.R. Nair (1903-1943), a cartoonist of the early 20th century identified himself as Sanjayan, the divine spectator of the Mahabharata war, narrating the story to Dhritarashtra.² Creating a backstory for himself as a reporter in the Gandharva world, Sanjayan described how he was cursed by the quick-tempered sage Durvasa and sent to the earth as punishment for roaring with laughter when the sage fell. Exiled to a village in Malabar, he was given the ability to laugh at others and be subject to their accusation as his punishment.



Figure 1. Portrait of Sanjayan. Image: *Sanjayan Sampoorna Krithikal*, 1991

Sanjayan's quick-witted and controversial articles sparked a new interest in criticism. The language of laughter was an important vehicle used by satirists like Sanjayan to protest against the new forces and challenges to the 'essential' cultural domains of 'nation.' His eponymous magazine introduced the Punch-style of

cartooning to the Malayali imagination and paved the way for many Malayali satire periodicals. When in Kozhikode, he wrote for *Mathrubhumi* daily, where one of his editorials on the atrocities committed by British troops in Kochi led to a short-term ban on *Mathrubhumi*.

Multiple Influences

Political cartoons arrived late, long after prose and poetry had satirised society and the government. It came here along with the British and appeared a little more than a century ago. The London-based comic-satiric periodical *Punch* (1841-1992) inspired political cartooning in India and inspired a number of local variants. Bombay's weekly Anglo-Gujarati *Hindi Punch* (1889-1931) and Lucknow's weekly Urdu-language *Avadh Punch* (1877-1936) were the longest-running and most successful illustrated comic-satiric publications. The *Hindi Punch* adapted its personification 'Panchoba', an Indian counterpart of 'Mr. Punch' of the London-based *Punch*. Other examples of such journals are the *Delhi Punch*, the *Punjabi Punch*, the *Urdu Punch*, the *Gujarati Punch*, and the *Puneath Punch* (in a remote Bengali town), all in the 1870s and 1880s, and the most renowned, *Basantak* (Calcutta, 1874-1876).

At first, the political cartoonist worked with broad symbols, and cartoons abounded with monsters, angels, tigers, lions, snakes, jackals, and elephants. The bulldog and the lion represented the British, while a dove-eyed suffering angel symbolised Bharat Mata (Mother India). The other creatures in the cartoonist's menagerie variously represented violence, injustice, want, famine, and pestilence according to the needs of the hour, borrowed heavily from numerous ready-made incidents and anecdotes in our mythology and dressed them up to fit the irony in political events.

Sanjayan was so greatly inspired by *Punch's*

¹ 'Freedom to Cartoon, Freedom to Speak: R. K. Laxman'. *Daedalus* 118, no. 4, Another India (Fall, 1989), pp. 68-91

² Abraham, Binumol. "Laughter as Ideology: Sanjayan and Satire in Kerala." *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 77 (2016): 692-96.

cartoon and satirical style that he even imitated some of the key representations of political entities in both *Sanjayan* and *Vishwaroopam*. In this cartoon, for example, the representation of Great Britain as a lion and the USSR as a bear was inspired by the *Punch* representation.



Figure 2. 'As Between Friends', where Britain is a lion watching the Russian bear sit on the Persian cat. Image: *Punch*, December 1911.

The main objectives of the *Punch*-inspired cartoons were to bring out the faults and destructive policies of the British to the knowledge of the Indian readers comically and humorously.



Figure 3. *Sanjayan*'s interpretation of Britain as a lion is similar to *Punch*, while the German Tiger

attacks France during World War II. Image: *Vishwaroopam*, June 1940

Hindu society's caste-system was a popular lampoon theme among early 20th-century cartoonists. The Indian national movement was also one of the important themes of 20th-century cartoon and pictorial journalism. Indian cartoonists glorified the Congress and demonised the colonial administration through their works and revived Indian nationalism among the masses.

The formation of a newly educated middle class in Malayali society, together with the establishment and spread of the printing press and print media created another kind of public space. Together with the socio-political developments in Kerala, like the evolution of Marxist and Liberal ideologies, enabled the growth of humour magazines and eventually cartoons in the state.

Sanjayan: The Magazine



Figure 4: Cover of *Sanjayan* magazine, June 1936, Image: *Sanjayan*, 1936

The cover design (Figure 4) of the

eponymous *Sanjayan* magazine in 1936, reworked the next year, by M. Bhaskaran, emerged from an artist-editor collaboration. This marked a unique experiment in Malayalam magazines, though it lasted only four years. It shows Sanjayan observing the world from the top of a cliff, giving the character a larger-than-life persona as it observes and opines the events of the world. In his essay, ‘Sanjayan and I’, the origin of the cover is described as an accidental idea rather than a premeditated persona.

Socio-political ideals of Sanjayan

Sanjayan was a writer who engaged with different styles, from mythology to Western Romanticism, and from social issues, like workers' rights, to local concerns, like the resurgence of Dravidian ideology. Sanjayan characterised ideas like socialism, about everyone having an equal chance, and Marxism, a way of thinking about society, as bad ideas and called them the ‘communist plague’! He criticised socialists, ridiculed their protests, agitations, and their sensibilities to social problems, and sarcastically pointed out that they secretly believed in God even though they pretended to be all about logic and science.

Medically diagnosing socialist ideology as a "Communist Plague", a societal illness, Sanjayan assigns laziness, unruly behaviour, and the uncritical use of the term "bourgeoisie" (referencing the wealthy) as symptoms of this affliction. He argues that this "plague" negatively influences students and young people, transforming them into self-absorbed burdens on their families and society. The call for revolution is identified as a Russian mental illness, the causes of which are unemployment, ignorance, greed, and anti-humane approaches. Identifying the symptoms and causes of this illness, he advises students to keep their distance from this ideology. Sanjayan uses the epithet ‘socialist/Russian bear’ inspired from the Punch iconography, to caricature socialism, the inhuman and uncommitted

nature of leaders. The bear represents the wild and barbaric subjugation undertaken by socialism.

However, Sanjayan’s later writings were serious critiques against practical communism, especially its radical approach, and concerns about the ‘liberation of women’ and the ‘revolutionary mode’ of agitations and strikes. His blatant misogyny is not restricted to his essays but is also present in his cartoons.



Figure 5. The satire on evolution of women’s fashion uses Western images. Image: *Vishwaroopam*, 1937.

Protracted peasant struggles during the first half of the 20th century and the Malabar socialist party’s steps towards addressing grievances against *jenmis* were instances for Sanjayan to provide scathing attacks against socialists and their violence-triggering agitations. The problem he identifies in socialism is not the conception of equal sharing of wealth but with people’s affinity for radicalism inspired by the Stalinist approach to revolution and its association with terror and dictatorship.³ Essays like “The Watchman of the Proletariat”, “The Story of Monkeys and Leaders”, and the play “Comrades’ Blunder” are examples of sarcasm against socialist policies and the leaders. In the article titled “New Words”, he calls the discussions and meetings conducted by the socialists a “brawl” rather than a political session, indicating the word is more suitable to the socio-political predicament of the socialists.

³ Abraham, Binumol. “Laughter as Ideology: Sanjayan and Satire in Kerala.” *Proceedings of the Indian History*

Congress 77 (2016): 692–96.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/26552698>.

This satire draws attention to the growing domination of radical politics and the decline of Gandhian ideologies. A concern most evident in the “Rationalist”, where he claims that rationalists and atheists question even simple sums like $2+2 = 4$ to prove their point. Here satire becomes an effective medium to evoke specific viewpoints in the emerging cultural-ideological struggle.

Representation of Global Politics

Sanjayan’s cartoons reflect his opinions and his reporting of World War II criticises the war, the fascist forces, and the declining power of Britain as a global power. While caricaturing the events, he employs the Punch-style of representing leaders as vicious creatures. Mussolini and Hitler are represented as the symbols of vices. This can be seen in instances where both the dictators are represented as animals or even children in a way to depict the lack of humanity and rationality in their ideology.



Figure 6. Hitler and Mussolini as wild beasts. Image: *Sanjayan*, March 1940

While this whimsical representation is similar to the *Punch* comics, Sanjayan also depicts Hitler as a diabolical force of evil.

In Figure 7, *The Butcher of Europe*, Hitler is shown as a priest who worships the God of Death willing to murder any who comes near him. These depictions of Hitler and Mussolini from whimsical creatures to grotesque forces of evil were also present in cartoons from other parts of the subcontinent.



Figure 7. *The Butcher of Europe*. Image: *Vishwaroopam*, December 1940

Homeground: Reflecting on Kerala

Sanjayan often used global happenings to criticise the people in power in Madras state and the Kingdoms of Cochin and Travancore. When it came to the context of Kerala, he targeted government officials like the Diwans of Cochin and Travancore. C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer, the Diwan of Travancore, who is notorious for his tyrannical rule, was targeted by Sanjayan and often compared to Hitler and Churchill as shown in the cartoon in Figure 8.

In this cartoon, the appearances and attires of both Winston and Churchill are interchanged to show that there is hardly any difference between both leaders. Hindu society’s caste-system was a popular lampoon theme among early 20th-century cartoonists. Sanjayan reflects these larger issues in the local context where the movements to revoke the ban on lower

castes entering temple grounds were widespread.



Figure 8. CP and Churchill exchange dresses. Image: *Sanjayan*, 1941

In the cartoon in Figure 9, we see caste as a monster wreaking havoc. He used his periodicals to comment on the socio-political issues occurring in Kerala by correlating the same to the issues happening in India and around the world. He also navigated the political currents in the country that occurred at the same time as these changes in Kerala. In that sense, he developed an affinity towards Gandhi and supported Congress in the freedom movement.



Figure 9. Caste as a Ferocious Monster. Image: *Sanjayan*, March 1938.

Gandhi as an Antidote

The Indian national movement was one of the important themes of 20th-century cartoons and pictorial journalism. Indian cartoonists, including Sanjayan, glorified the Congress and demonised the colonial administration. Hence, they spread the ideas of Indian nationalism among the readers with the motive of mobilising them for the freedom movement. By supporting Congress and Gandhi, Sanjayan paints Gandhism as the antidote to undo the changes brought by the socialists.



Figure 10. Gandhi worshipping the horizon. Image: *Vishwaroopam*, July 1940

As seen in Figure 10, Gandhi was a beacon of hope that India needed to gain freedom. His Satyagraha for truth gave the momentum India needed to continue the freedom movement. Sanjayan creates dichotomies between Gandhian and Socialist ideologies. According to him, Gandhian ideology is rooted in spiritualism whereas Socialism is devilish. Instead of Gandhi's policy of non-violence and truth, Socialism is targeted for giving importance to violence and revolution. Gandhian methods are humane and holistic but Socialist practices are barbaric, brutish, and ferocious.

Gandhiji and his ideals as a virtuous symbol of non-violent struggle can be seen in Figure 11, where Satyagraha is a creeper planted by Gandhiji which, despite British attempts to uproot, grows into a dense forest they are not able to control. Painting Gandhism as an antithesis to the way Socialism is practised in Russia, he targets Socialists for creating class conflicts and separatism among the

people.



Figure 11. Satyagraha spreading like a creeper, Image: *Vishwaroopam*, 1938.

While the principle of non-violence was being sacrificed, the quality of truth became silenced by Socialism. He also cautions Congress leaders against the spread of radical policies of Socialist communism which is deviant from the essential spiritual culture of 'nation.' Congress nationalism and the mode of agitations being rooted in Gandhian principles of non-violence and truth have inspired Sanjayan so much that with great patriotic fervour, he advises the students not to be influenced by Socialist ideas and revolution.

It has been observed that Sanjayan's laughter is not neutral, but partisan on many occasions and loses its vitality. This can also

mean that Sanjayan's writings on Socialism are sarcastic rather than humorous. Sanjayan's support for nationalism is evident in his adoption of nationalist imagery, the most significant being Bharat Mata.

Bharat Mata and Changing Women

Bharat Mata was and remains a significant element of Indian nationalist iconography in both press and literature. She is represented as the mother goddess figure who is venerated by the nationalist leaders and they are often represented as the children of Bharat Mata, who are entitled to fight for her honour. Associating spiritual qualities with women was the usual literary and pictorial practice during nationalist reformism.

In Figure 12, Bharat Mata, thus, is not only the mother figure to the nationalist leaders, but also to the citizens of the nation. This can be seen as an instance where Sanjayan expresses his nationalistic fervour by adopting its symbol. This situation seemed ironic often as he venerated the sacrosanct representation of Bharat Mata in various instances while berating the women around him for choosing to liberate themselves from the clutches of patriarchy.

Sanjayan attacked the "modern" and "educated" women who had become uncouth due to their education. According to critics like him, educated women acquired such traits due to their exposure to the so-called "modern education" and the influence of Western culture.



Figure 12. Bharat Mata comes to the rescue of her boy scout son. Image: *Sanjayan Sampoorna Krithikal*, 1991

In Figure 13 from 27 August 1931, when the two girls go to school in his cartoon, Sanjayan insinuates that the girls enjoyed being commented upon and that is the only motive for going to school. It should be noted that these traits are mostly exhibited by those women who appear in the cartoons holding books. However, the boys and their act of staring at the girls gets no attention or comment as if he considers it quite normal.



Figure 13. Girls going to school secretly enjoying boys' commenting on them, 1931. Image: *Sanjayan*, 1931

In his essay titled “Women Don’t Have Freedom’, he sees the movement as a hoax and claims that men are suffering from the scrutiny of their boss and his wives and are unable to form an opinion of their own. He blames the mothers of the girls who refused to attend school and vehemently denies the existence of internalised misogyny. He uses the example of mythological female characters like Sita and Kaikeyi to prove his point that there is no gain to the patriarchal society from the women’s liberation movement. In this way, he denies the systemic oppression and even quotes verses from the Manusmriti to prove his point.

Hence, Sanjayan is a hypocrite despite claiming to be an idealist. For, while on the one hand, he is open to the emergence of various transitions in society as well as in the media, on the other, he exhibits a regressive tendency towards educating and uplifting all sections of society. Thus, Sanjayan believed in patriarchal sensibilities to prevent them from seeing the larger picture in that sense. In a way, he feared the emergence of feminist movements and the liberation of women would lead to the weakening and emasculation of men in society. It is also important to note that this

internalised misogyny reflected in Sanjayan’s articles and cartoons was not an isolated act of mockery, but had continued in cartoon trends till date where women were vilified, objectified, and targeted as pawns for humour by cartoonists.

Despite conveying polarising ideals and controversial views, Sanjayan was able to appeal to his readers, leading to the popularity of his periodicals. While talking about the world, Sanjayan also remembers to joke about the mundanity around him.

Representation of Daily Life

While Sanjayan used his humour to reflect his views on the ongoing socio-political conditions of the world, he also used it to showcase the small yet significant changes happening in society. These ranged from people’s shock at changing traditions to the silent bystander as a complacent figure in social change. In a way, these cartoons can be seen as an attempt by Sanjayan to reflect and connect to his readers and how the readers played a significant role in the proliferation of ideas and themes discussed in the magazines.



Figure 14. Different emotions! The cartoon draws attention to the difference between reactions of women and men. Image: *Sanjayan*, January 1938

For example, Figure 14 underscores the privileged role of the ‘the reader’ as a viewer empowered to observe society from a vantage point from above. The class of readers endowed with ‘perception’ and

placed on a higher pedestal were identified as writers, thinkers, politicians, reformers, and publishers who actively contributed to the enlightenment of a reading class that exclaimed at themselves. Hence, the readers are shown as emotional specimens reacting to the scandalous content published by Sanjayan.

Sanjayan also expanded his readership by providing content for children in the form of cartoons and stories under the title “For Children” or “The Children’s Section”, an example is Figure 15.

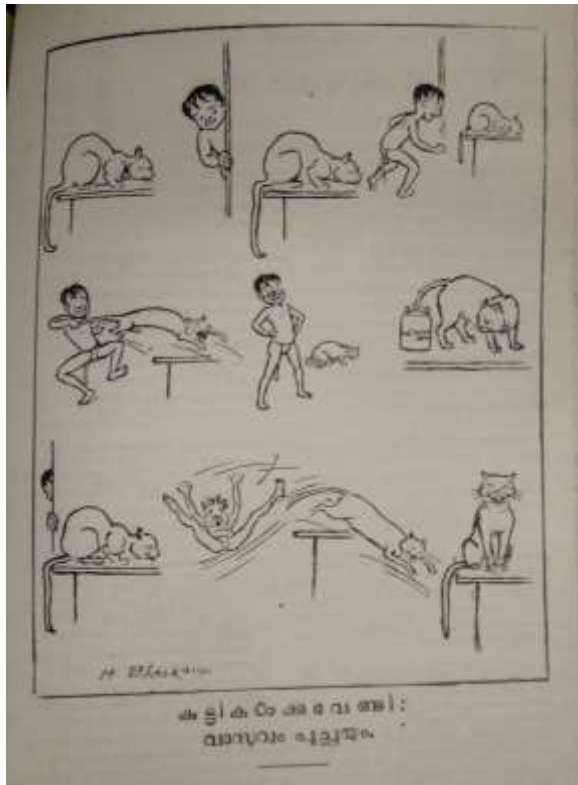


Figure 15. Kid and Cat, Image: *Sanjayan*, 1937

Sanjayan uses his humour to observe the effects of different mediums on society by capturing the reactions of different audiences.

Conclusion

As one of the pioneers of satire in early twentieth-century Kerala, Sanjayan’s humour connected and polarised society when everything was in transition due to the turbulent political situation. Sanjayan’s coverage of the turmoil caused by the World Wars was unique and his reinterpretation of the Punch-style of cartooning opened the audience to a different world of satire which it would master in the coming decades.

On another level, his cartoons can be read as a good example of male anxiety regarding the emancipation of women. The anxiety that women would grow in strength, take over their places, and even replace them seems to be something the cartoonist shared with his readers.

While his ideals seem flawed and do not stand the test of time, it is also important to note that his views depict the kind of humour that was present among middle-class men of Kerala who were adapting to the changing social reality of Kerala.

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