

Lightening the mood

A MMA, write about cartoons next time," said my budding lawyer son Rudra. The suggestion told me much about his reading preferences. Cartoons have become such an integral part of our lives. We automatically search for them in the morning papers and have our favourites. They are a powerful medium, commenting on politicians and politics where respectable scribes fear to tread. And they are the means to reach the young — sometimes



CREATIONS
Nanditha Krishna

the only medium! The world is such a grim place that we need something to start the day with a smile, and this is the role of the cartoon.

We broke our teeth on Mickey Mouse, Tom and Jerry and Little Lulu. Dennis the Menace was our first love. Those were the days when there was no TV with a full time cartoon channel, and the cinema was a rare treat. Books and comics were our chief sources of entertainment. Comics could also be serious business, although that did not quite fit the description of comics as "funnies". We followed the adventures of the Phantom and his dog, appropriately named Devil, in the jungles of Africa.

Mandrake the Magician was another who got out of impossible situations through sleight of hand tricks. Superman was better known through syndicated columns than through his films. In our teens, Archie and his pals introduced us to American culture that, we believed, was hamburgers and dating!

It took my generation a long time to discover that there was another and better U.S. There were all those post-war comics of Battler Briton and Dogfight Dixon and their daring escapades on land and air. Tintin gave us lessons in

geography as he explored the world with his friends, while Asterix and his friends expanded our knowledge of Roman history.

Phantom, Mandrake, Superman, Battler Briton and the rest were role models and heroes. But there was also a blatant racism. Phantom was white — kind to his dog, the natives and the wild animals, but taller, braver, stronger and a distinct cut above the rest. He also fell in love with only beautiful white women. I never came across a beautiful black woman. The image that came through of the Africans was very uncomplimentary and, unfortunately, shaped our early images of that already-misunderstood continent.

We also short-circuited many classics by reading the comic version first. I always hated the morbidity of the Bronte sisters, so I first read the comics and then the originals (a must in those pre-VCR lending library days), knowing which were the morbid sections that should be skipped. We were discouraged from reading comics. There was always the fear — quite justified, too — that comics would discourage us from reading books. So our access to comics was restricted to newspapers and magazines.

As we grew older, we started following R K Laxman's You Said It, drawn, to quote the cartoonist, "in an inspired mood of mischievous abandon". He made tantalizing and witty statements about politics and politicians and deserves the credit for making the Congress topiwalla a figure of fun and hypocrisy. In a case of life imitating art, his "common man", present in every situation, was to find a human avatar in L K Advani, who has an uncanny resemblance to Laxman's oppressed figure. Did it help bring the



YOU SAID IT
by R.K. Laxman

BJP to power? I would not be surprised!

How appropriate that, recently, someone thought it fit to immortalize Laxman's common man with a statue. Growing up in Bombay, I loved Mario's cartoons, which were a take off on life in Bombay — politicians, businessmen, glamorous film stars, dabbawallas, secretaries and all the ingredients that went to make up the steaming cauldron that was Bombay. And he managed to put his finger on all that we loved about our wonderful city. Abu Abraham was, in my opinion, highly over-rated. I never found his cartoons witty.

A brilliant but unknown cartoonist was S K (Bobby) Kooka, formerly of Air India. He created the Maharaja, Air India's mascot, who sold a lot of the airline's seats, and who, with the collaboration of M/s J. Walter Thompson's illustrators, was the subject of many witty cartoons and advertisements.

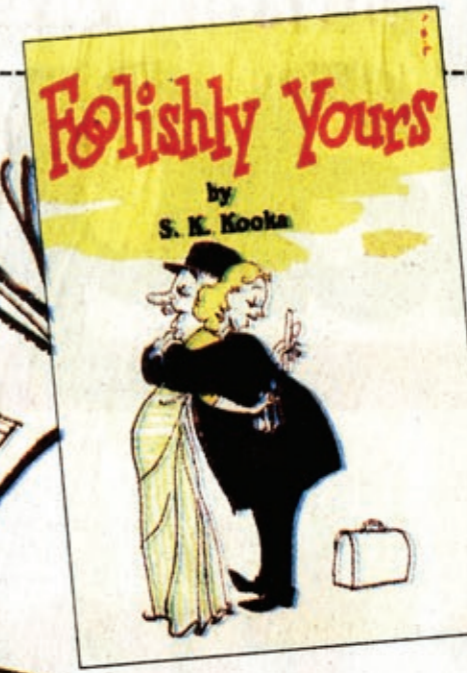
Kooka then went on to create the Amul ads, which are still the best and the funniest among contemporary Indian ads. But his cartoons were never signed. Among contemporary cartoons, I enjoy the Wisecrack in my daily City Express — I have even blown up one on weight control in the hope that it will inspire me! Living in Chennai, I miss the pure

fun of Mario and the subtle humour of Laxman. A cartoon must be funny — even the Oxford dictionary defines the cartoon as "a humorous drawing".

Our newspapers still contain US-syndicated comic strips: Phantom, Beetle Bailey, Dennis the Menace, Henry, Archie, Tin Tin, Asterix, The Flintstones, Scooby Doo, Captain Planet, Spiderman and so on. There are a few Indian features too: Chacha Chaudhuri, Supandi and Shikari Shambhu are the better known.

Two cartoon strips I don't enjoy are the Lockhorns and Bringing up Father. They are about dysfunctional couples and families, with a strong undercurrent of sexism — there are more jokes against the wives than the husbands. Leroy Lockhorn is designed to evoke sympathy for the husband whose wife is a poor cook, ageing and unattractive, never mind that he is pot-bellied, balding and addicted to alcohol and pretty young things.

Maggie, in Bringing up Father, throws her weight around in her bid to control her husband Jiggs. Don't let your wife get out of hand, is the message. Is this a good lesson for young people? An occasional joke is okay, but this daily diet of jokes-about-women can mould young minds differently.



Some of our magazines report snippets of information illustrated by cartoons. But many of our cartoonists evoke laughter by making fun of the figure, not the situation. Jayalalthaa is given several extra layers of fat, Narasimha Rao's pouting lip practically falls off his face, Sonia Gandhi's face looks longer and very horsy, Vajpayee's face is made into a perfect square, and so on.

This is not a cartoon — merely an exaggeration of the least attractive part of their anatomies, particularly the face. There is hardly any take off on the ridiculous things they say or do — these are reported in full seriousness. Cartoons require wit and creativity, a rare combination that must be a part of the cartoonist and cannot be acquired.

Cartoons play a very important role in today's world, whether they are intended to do so or not. In the days of royalty, there were court jesters who could cross the line and say, in the form of a joke, something that would have cost the head of a more senior and important court functionary. The jesters were wise, intelligent and quick-witted, and very involved in the political machinations of the kings and their rivals.

With the passing of kings and

courtiers, the lacuna has been filled by the cartoonist. The ridiculous sayings and doings of our political class are held up for public ridicule by the cartoonist, who reduces to irrelevancy a potentially dangerous action, or punctures a hole in somebody's bloated self-esteem. To quote R K Laxman, "Dharna, crossing the floor, toppling the government, student power, coalition governments, three-language formula, and a score of others, seem very much as if they are invented purely for the benefit of the cartoonist. If there is a grain of truth in this I wish to express my grateful thanks to the rulers as well as to the ruled."

The cartoon developed its popularity in Punch, which made fun of the British political world and establishment. Punch was a compendium of wit and humour, with cartoons by all-time greats such as Ronald Searle, David Langdon, Anton, Emmett, Starke, Fougasse, Nicolas Bentley, Douglas Low, and others. Articles that were extremely witty, exaggeratedly polite, and yet full of innuendos and sarcastic take-offs on contemporary politics and politicians supported the cartoons.

We Indians have produced great works of humour. The Panchatantra, Hitopadesha, Kathasaritsagara and the Jataka tales are full of fun, wit and sarcasm, even if they do contain a moral at the end of the story. They make excellent copy for cartoons, and many an enterprising publisher has taken advantage of this to bring them out as comics.

Somewhere along the line, we lost our sense of humour. Khushwant Singh says that Indians lack a sense of humour, at least we don't know how to laugh at ourselves. I disagree - Hindi films are always making fun of South Indians as comic figures speaking Hindi with a funny accent. If not the South Indian, the Marwari or Gujarati Baniya is the source of fun. I don't find such situations funny, but nobody objects: in fact, many Hindi films are produced in the South and/or financed by Marwaris and Gujaratis. But our contemporary humour is slapstick. We laugh at people, not with them. I have not touched on the subject of cartoon or animated films. They form a genre of their own.

The printed cartoon, particularly political and social cartoons, must be warm, witty and wise, like the jesters of yore, who, even while they cracked a joke or sang a funny ditty, slipped in a wise comment born of their native shrewdness, making many of them the kings' most important advisors. Which takes me back to Laxman, Mario and the Amul ads. They are witty and fun. Long live the cartoon!

The author is Director, The C P Ramaswami Aiyar Foundation, Chennai