

Cartoons as a medium to create public opinion

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Cartoons emerged as political statements

There are two types of political cartoons: caricature, which parodies the individual, and allusion, which creates the situation or context into which the individual is placed.

In the modern context, caricature was developed by Leonardo da Vinci. Then in the fifteenth century the Protestant movement in Germany generated the first cartoons as visual propaganda spearheaded by Martin Luther. Luther campaigned against all-powerful Catholic Church that undermined rights of others. Cartoons became very effective because of a high illiteracy rate. The distribution of simple broadsheet posters or illustrated pamphlets throughout population centers proved to be an effective strategy because the images would reach a large amount of people and enjoy the greatest possible amount of comprehension.

As time went on, the German cartoon style was mixed with the Italian caricature. By the eighteenth century, cartoons became a substantial medium of commentary which took serious issues and presented them in a manner which was not only funny, and therefore more socially acceptable, but also designed to affect the viewer's opinion.

In the Indian subcontinent, cartoons were used as political statements as well as humour material from the nineteenth century. During the Pakistan regime, cartoons were again used as a tool against the oppressors again and again. Some of these cartoons are instantly recognizable even today.

The rise of cartoons in Bangladesh

Immediately after the independence there was a boom of cartoons and some daily comic strips—thanks to a group of creative artists including Rafiqunnabi, who is better known as Ranabi. But this boom was short-lived, may be because of the departure of democracy and entry of autocratic regimes and subsequent shrinking of the newspaper industry. Though in 1977, the publication of cartoon magazine Unmad was a landmark of the cartoon culture of the country—the mainstream newspapers were not no longer carrying funny or powerful cartoons. Except for Ranabi's Tokai in weekly Bichitra which acted as a social commentary, there had not been much memorable cartoons to keep a culture alive.

The autocratic rule of the Ershad government in the eighties meantime inspired writing of satires as freedom of expression was gagged. During that time the business of the mainstream newspaper industry itself was not well-founded. Therefore the mainstream newspapers did not play much role in satires or cartoons. The satires came out in various weeklies. The satires were written in the same spirit of political cartoons; they intended to send an anti-government message through humour and fictitious characters resembling the powerful ones. The advantage of such satires was that we all knew what it was about, but the government could not take a legal action as these were legally works of fiction. However satires have to be properly read and understood. The readers must have a certain level of maturity to understand the real meanings of the satire.

In true sense, Bangladesh's media started to grow after 1990 through re-emergence of democracy. With freedom of expression and media restored along side democracy, newspapers began to expand—offering the readers a greater variety of reading materials. The newspapers started to run more critical reports, editorials and commentaries than ever before. This environment was perfect for front page editorial cartoons.

Meanwhile, artist Shishir Bhattacharya who silently brought a new dimension to political cartoons from late eighties and early nineties started creating impacts among the newspaper readers through his front page cartoons in Bhorer Kagoj. In true sense, he single handedly redefined the proper use of cartoons as a tool for editorial positions of a newspaper. The nineties also saw Ranabi's presence in the front page of Janakantha—which added

weight to the new wave of cartoons. Political and humour cartoons were increasingly coming out in other newspapers as well.

But its really after the late nineties and early 2000 that newspapers started using cartoons on widespread basis. Newspapers like Prothom Alo and Jugantar are now publishing weekly satire and humour magazines and most newspapers publish front page cartoons nowadays. Other than sending meaningful messages to the readers, cartoons also make the paper visually look good. Thus this has added to the layout improvement of the print media.

This has become so popular that most newspapers now have their own cartoonist as a permanent contributor or staff. Some newspapers use works of multiple cartoonists and accept contributions from even readers. Thus has created an interactive environment that was non-existent before.

Such a popularity prompted some cartoon exhibitions and even triggered organizations like the Transparency International Bangladesh to hold cartoon competitions which, again, received tremendous response from young aspiring cartoonists.

The impact

In the beginning of this paper, I mentioned how modern cartoons started in the beginning. Cartoons were first used in the fifteenth century Protestant movement in Germany in an social environment where the level of education was low and the church was too powerful.

Cartoons are drawn out messages. They can communicate among people who can not read, or who do not have the time to read in-depth, or who are not very interested to read. And surely the people who read would take notice of it. Cartoons are blended with humour, which people like. A drawn out joke is likely to get more attention than a written joke, because it is helping the reader to visualize how the writer was telling the story.

Again, while dealing with editorial or political cartoons—the subject matter is often very powerful. Like a satire, a cartoon can mock the powerful person, yet slip out of the legal barrier of contempt. This is why, the Protestant Movement used cartoons. The target was against the all powerful church and the objective was to make the mass people aware about the hypocrisy of the church. Was it successful? It was.

Like those 15th century cartoons, our political cartoons are also serving the same purpose. Through cartoons the newspapers are actually making people aware of many anomalies and corruptions. In many cases, the messages of these cartoons are going beyond hard reports in depicting who are involved with corruption.

For instance, in recent years while newspapers could not carry out specific reports about the corruption of certain political bigwigs, they ran cartoons showing these bigwigs taking bribes or doing absurdly wrong things.

If not anything else, some cartoons have at least succeeded in throwing an intellectual punch at powerful persons who still remain untouchable by the law despite their misdeeds. People at least enjoy this kind of “poetic justice”.

In many cases, these cartoons are also confirming a perception. For instance during the stormy political environment of late last year, the cartoons that came out in various newspapers tried to portray exactly what people were thinking on the basis of the hard news. On many occasions cartoons successfully depicted how highest level public offices became puppets of vested interests.

These cartoons also contributed to the spirit of the current wave of anti-corruption drive. Over the years, the front page cartoons in the newspapers—as well as hard reports—have left their marks on the peoples minds.

That the ruling party men and the powerful ones made a mockery out of the country's legal and administrative systems were best expressed through the cartoons. The humourous approach to hitting corruption and political misdeeds make people remember the incidents for a long time.

Cartoon is a successful medium to humorously communicate deep issues. If it is about an issue like corruption or social anomaly, a cartoon has much longer life than most other communication tool.

We now have an emerging group of cartoonists and an ever increasing number of dedicated newspaper cartoon readers. But as cartoons are easy to understand and hard to forget, these can also send messages across other people through posters and visual media.

The younger generation is specially attracted to cartoons for humour and graphic presentation. Cartoonists can play a positive role in enlightening them about values that have eroded otherwise and political and social implications that they are not very interested to read. Cartoonists can effectively stimulate their imaginations to dream of a better Bangladesh.

I believe cartoons will continue to send meaningful messages across our country to help us improve our national convergence.
