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## **Development of political cartoon in colonial Bengal (1872-1911)**

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### **Abstract**

*This article analyses the emergence of cartoons in colonial Bengal, its political and historical relevance in the cultural history. It was based on the sources that includes periodicals and journals that were prevalent in the colonial Bengal. This visual satire emphasizes an interdisciplinary approach, where historical inquiry and intellectual ideas were connected. This study focusses on several political events that took place between 1872 to 1905. The political cartoonists primary focus was to highlight on different aspects of the political conditions in Bengal. As a visual satire, political cartoons portrayed absurdities of all those strategies imposed by the colonizers. The cartooning culture opened up new avenues for the masses. It aimed to create a rational mind which was capable understanding the nature of the colonial government. Political cartoons created space for fantasy and logical thinking.*

**Keywords:** political cartoons, culture, Bengal, political cartoonists, swadeshi movement.

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### **Introduction:**

The unique idea of representing the political events was through protest art, must have evolved in the western countries. From the very beginning, Anabelle Caracci was associated with caricatures. The concept of cartoons was used in France to reveal the evil character of the rulers. To analyse the visual art, it was essential to have proper information about the political conditions of the particular place. In the European countries, the political cartoonists used to draw cartoons on British India. Even in India, many journals like Hindi Punch, Urdu Punch came into existence. The year 1872 was a turning point in cultural history, marked the beginning of the cartooning culture in Bengal. This cultural development totally depended on technology. The cartoon sketched by the political cartoonists highlighted the domination of the colonizers over its colonies. The European considered themselves as the policy makers of the entire world.

### **Cartoons and colonial motives:**

There was a growing trend among the European officers to introduce new measures in the Bengal presidency. These new components were Evangelism, Utilitarianism and Orientalism. The sole purpose of these new components was to evaluate the political and economic conditions of the natives. Evangelists were concerned about transforming the conservative mindset of the individuals. Utilitarians gave emphasis on science and reason. Orientalists highlighted the classical texts like the Puranas, Arthashastra, Mahabharata, and Ramayana. The political thought of the past enlightened the colonisers to frame their

political strategies. Orientalists explored Indian political and social thought in the colonial period. They found it extremely important to translate the classical texts of the ancient period.<sup>1</sup> The political cartoonist's primary focus was to reflect different aspects of the political condition in Bengal through cartoons. The main cause behind different confrontations was based on the crisis in political and economic spheres.

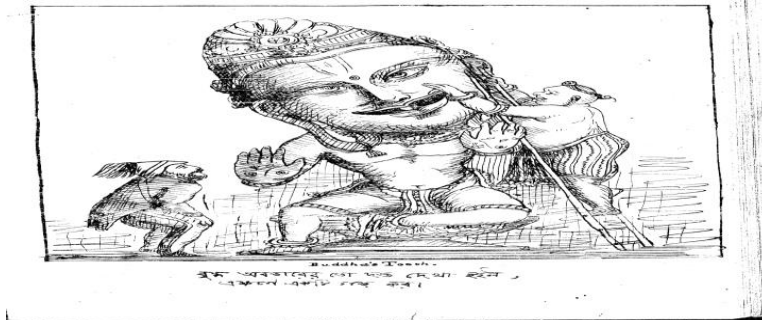


Figure-2.1: Source: Basantak Volume2, 1875.

The colonial officers took advantage of the internal rivalries between different religious groups. Cartoons proclaimed the popularity of Buddha's bodily relics. Buddhists tried their level best to protect the bodily relics, such as hair and teeth from the Brahmins and colonisers. The colonial officers, along with the Brahmins, were keen about destroying these objects of worship. There were constant contradictions between the secular principles of the Buddhists and the religious principles of Brahmanism. In Figure 2.1, one person was seen climbing the ladder in order to fulfil the demands of the British. The main interest of the Brahmins was in Buddha's tooth because they wanted to maintain their position in the political and social spheres. In this case, colonisers supported the nefarious wishes of the Brahmins. The Englishman in the picture was taking advantage of the inconsistency between the Brahmin and the Buddhist. The association of the Brahmins with the colonisers had a strong political connection. They were hopeful about the fact that it would enable them to establish their political hold in Bengal by rejecting secular strategies of Buddhism. They understood that the Brahmins were the most prestigious social class in the Bengal society. Colonisers knew the value of Buddha's Tooth, which compelled them to snatch it from the Indians. The Buddha's Tooth gave the colonisers the divine right to stay in this land. From the religious point of view, colonisers obtained rightful authority to rule over this alien land.

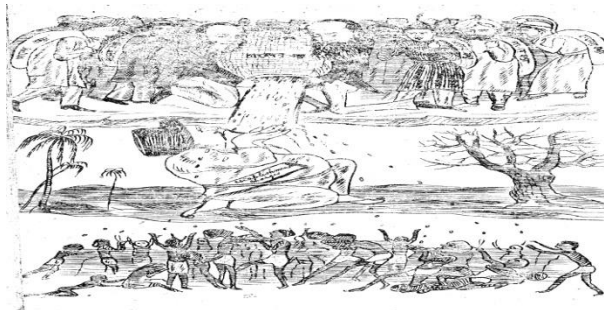


Figure 2.2: Source Basantak Volume-I From Hitesranjan Sanyal Archive, Kolkata  
After securing their positions in Bengal, colonisers decided to set up new political strategies for the classes and masses. The overall structure of the society in colonial Bengal was highlighted with the help of different cartoons. In the above-mentioned cartoon, (2.2)

society was divided into three stages. The upper level was dominated by the colonial officers. The middle level gave emphasis on the role played by the intermediaries. The lower level projected the sufferings of the lower order of the society. These differences gave birth to discriminations and contradictions in the social structure. The intermediaries were considered as the receiver of all the benefits in the society. The rules and regulations of the colonial officers were meant only for the lower section of the society. They seldom receive any sorts of benefits from the colonial officers. The benefits did not percolate down to the masses. They were totally deprived of the basic necessities of life. These grievances forced the masses to revolt against the colonial authority, thus resulting in plenty of regional rebellions.

### Cartoons and the Revolt of 1857:

The political and military strategies of the colonisers affected the religious sentiments of the masses. The anti-British sentiments compelled the young *sepoys* to take up arms against the colonial masters. In Bengal, Mangal Pandey fired at the European Sergeant Major. But his attempt was unsuccessful.<sup>2</sup> Thereafter, he was punished for taking action against the European officials. The incident led to fear among the colonisers. Many of the *sepoys* were arrested for their bold actions. The police commissioner took strict action against the use of ammunitions. Europeans needed to protect themselves against the sudden attack of the *sepoys*. Europeans were forced to leave their houses in order to protect themselves from the indigenous *sepoys*. There was huge unrest in Dacca, Chittagong and Jessore. The British troops were sent from Calcutta to Dacca, Mymensingh and Chittagong to rescue the Europeans.

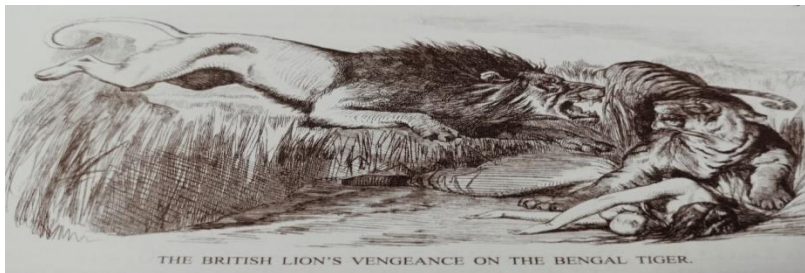


Fig: 2.3 Punch, August 22, 1857.

The events of 1857 attracted the attention of the indigenous cartoonists as well as foreign cartoonists. Tenniel sketched a cartoon which was published in *Punch*.<sup>3</sup> The title of the cartoon is the British Lion's Vengeance on the Bengal Tiger. This picture (2.3) denoted a conflict between lion and tiger. The inner meaning of the cartoon denoted the political rift between colonial masters and Indians. Lion was used to represent the power of the colonial authority over tiger (Bengal). Even the tiger was powerful animal but it did not have the tenacity to protest against the colonial power. It seems that tiger was holding a woman and child in her grip. They were seen in a wretched condition. The main intention of the colonisers were depicted through lion. The colonial masters wanted to proclaim themselves as the protector of Bengal. Their political strategies intended to protect the common people from the grip of the tiger. Lion wanted to snatch away all the responsibilities from the uncivilized tiger. In the revolt of 1857, uncivilized ones attacked the houses of the Europeans. They disrupted the telegraph wires, railroads, barracks and courts. The civilized ones should use force against these uncivilized ones.

### Cartoons and Nationalism:

The educated middle class became familiar with the advanced political ideas like cultural nationalism, militant nationalism and internationalism. New ideas and thoughts created major changes in the political and economic sectors. The new political ideas led to the development of political associations mainly in the presidencies of Bengal, Madras and Bombay. In Bengal, prominent political organizations were Landholders Society, Bengal British India Society, British Indian Association, Indian League and Indian Association.<sup>4</sup> The intellectuals of the political organizations started their operations from 1838. These political associations were not at all satisfied with the political and economic strategies of the colonial government. This compelled the representatives to organize political campaigns against the colonial administration. These campaigns were restricted to pamphlets, articles and petitions.

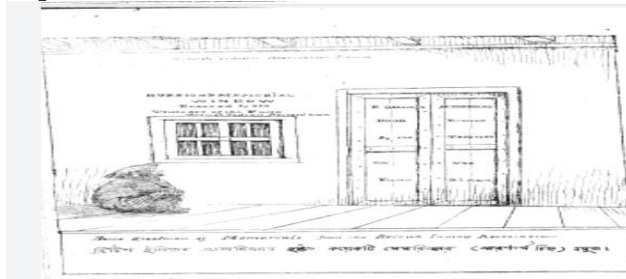


Fig: 2.4 Basantak- volume 1, 1876.

The British Indian Association wanted to make legislative, Executive and Judiciary totally independent from each other and to decrease the salaries of the European officers enjoying higher authority. From this cartoon, (2.4) it seems that masses remained aloof from this particular association. As all the door and windows of this association were closed. None of the members of the British Indian Association entertained the grievances of the masses. This political organization gave emphasis on the problems of the zamindars. The nature of the British Indian Association was completely different from the Indian Association. The problems of the peasants were looked after by the members of Indian Association.<sup>5</sup> It organized public meetings for the peasants in order to discuss about the Rent Act which was passed in 1881. But situation was becoming very complex as there were too many organizations in different parts of India, and they all were having their separate agenda. These political organizations in the presidency towns wanted to set up a common platform for the entire country. The second Indian National Conference was arranged by the members of the Indian Association. This conference united the members of the political organizations from different provinces. These intellectuals endeavored to prepare a suitable ground for organizing Indian National Congress. The British officers expected that this body could stop all the protest movements which became regular affair in colonial India. Mr. Hume along with the other officers predicted that Indian National Congress could solve all the growing problems in the provinces.<sup>6</sup>

In the initial stage, Indian National Congress restricted themselves only to political issues. The Indian National Congress was caught in a web created by bourgeoisie, industrialists, merchants, moneylenders, zamindars and landholders.<sup>7</sup> Through this pamphlet, the protagonists of the Congress took the initiative to spread the new political ideas in the districts. Moderates believed that colonisers were powerful enough to remove



Bengal. Through various strategies, the British authority was keen about plundering as much as possible from the colonies.

The peasant section of the masses faced serious exploitation from the colonizers as well as from the elite section of the society. Peasants were constantly humiliated and exploited by the landlords. Most of the time cultivators were forced to grow indigo as it provided huge amount of profit for the British government. Apart from Indigo, the peasants cultivated other cash crops like tobacco, sugarcane, jute. There was always a contradictions between cultivators and landlords.



Figure: 2.7 Source- www. Cartoonpattor.in

Revolts became common in different parts of colonial Bengal. The popular peasant revolts in Eastern India were Sanyasi revolt, Kol uprising, Santhal rebellion, Faraizi and Wahabi movement. Shailo Chakroborty sketched a cartoon on wahabi movement. A wahabi is shown in action with a dagger. Another one was an Englishman who was totally surprised to witness the activity of wahabi. The candle in the cartoon depicts that wahabis were trying to bring light in the rural areas. They understood that main creator of the dark world were the colonisers. Thus, this wahabi was challenging the colonial authority. Wahabis formed a group whose sole concern was to spread anti-British attitude in the rural areas.<sup>11</sup>

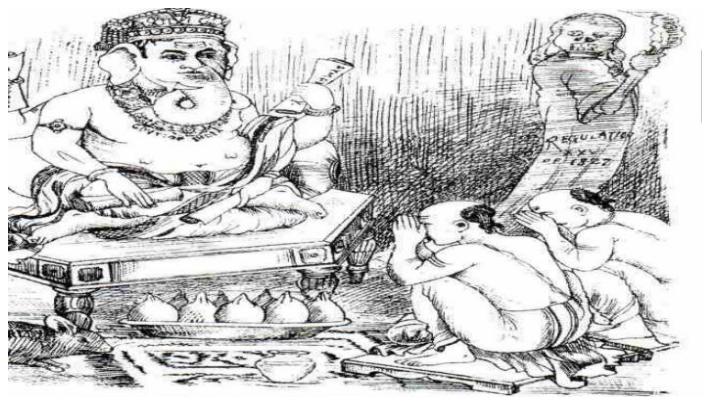


Fig 2.8 Hindi Punch, 1902.

Extremists shaped their strategies against the government of Lord Curzon. Some cartoons on Lord Curzon's government were published in *Hindi Punch* in 1902. His political acts such as Calcutta Municipal Amendment Act, Indian University Act, and official Secrets Amendment Act curtailed the power of the educated Bengalis.<sup>12</sup> As they were responsible

for writing political pamphlets. This cartoon (2.8) depicted Lord Curzon as Lord Ganesha. He needs to be worshipped by all the communities. This means that common people were forced to follow his rules and regulations. In this picture, it seems that two Hindu *pundits* were offering sweets to Lord Curzon. They were trying to appease Lord Curzon.

Sir Stafford Northcote decided to partition Bengal in order to make the administration much more systematic. Later on, Andrew Fraser floated the idea of partition. This plan was supported and implemented by Lord Curzon. The sole concern of the colonisers was to maintain administrative efficiency in Bengal. Through this partition of Bengal, they actually wanted to break the unity of the Bengalis. Lord Curzon was apprehensive about the Bengalis and Marathas as they were powerful enough to create obstruction for the colonisers.



Source- Hasan, Mushirul. *Wit and Humour in Colonial North India*. New Delhi: Niyogi Books, 2009.

The picture (2.9) shows that Lord Curzon supported the idea developed by Andrew Fraser. He was cutting the pumpkin into numerous slices. Bengal was represented in the form of pumpkin. The cut portion of the pumpkin displayed his desire to partition Bengal. This decision was taken to do away with the unity that was present in Bengal. This cruel decision of Lord Curzon was not supported by the common people. Lord Curzon however wanted to reorder the boundaries of Bengal by ignoring the sentiments of the common people.

Passive Resistance meant that extremists refused to work under the supervision of the colonial government. Extremists were involved in organizing campaign for famines and epidemics. They even tried to spread the swadeshi message through jattras, patriotic songs and nationalistic songs. The national form of education exerted emphasis on the use of vernacular language in the curriculum. Many national schools came up in Orissa, Nadia, Calcutta, Burdwan, Hoogly, Dacca. These national schools received support from nationalists like Kaliprasanna Dasgupta, Pulin Behari Das, Satishchandra Mukherjee and many others.

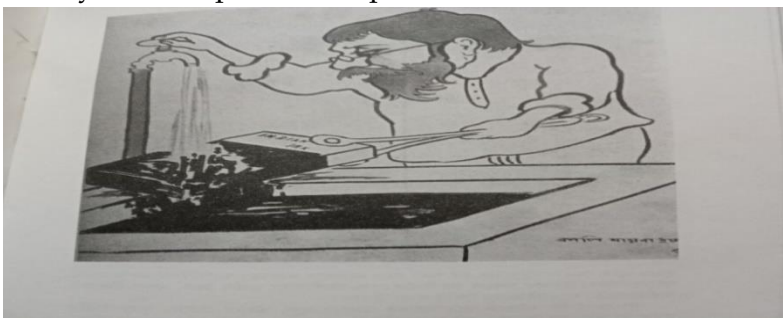
Another group that came out from the extremists was known as revolutionary groups. Their sole idea was to challenge the colonial administration. During the anti-partition movement, revolutionaries took the initiative to set up new revolutionary schools for the students. Under the initiative of Aurobindo Ghosh, revolutionaries decided to take action against the colonial masters. Some of the revolutionaries circulated the revolutionary

pamphlets in different parts of Bengal.<sup>13</sup> These pamphlets gave new spirit to the young generation.

In Eastern India, entrepreneur like Digambara Mitra became successful after collaborating with the colonisers. In the late nineteenth Century, some Bengali families became involved in small- scale business. In the melas, swadeshi crafts were displayed in order to increase the popularity of indigenous crafts. Extremists were much more inclined towards constructive work and self-reliance.<sup>14</sup> They showed their love and respect towards traditional Hindu religion.

The constructive swadeshi increased the strength of indigenous industry in Bengal.<sup>15</sup> By the help of various pamphlets, the extremists wanted to spread the message of self- help in the industrial and educational sectors. The sole concern of the *swadeshi samaj* was to resolve the disputes in the rural areas. Most prominent scientists like Prafullah Chandra Ray, Nilratan Circar, Ambicacharan Ukil and Biprodas Pal Chaudhuri showed their devotion towards indigenous industrial development. The colonial government had made the indigenous industry totally paralyzed. Even the vernacular newspapers, jattras and plays supported the concept of swadeshi enterprises. Revolutionaries were manufacturing bombs in order to kill European officers.<sup>16</sup>

The swadeshi market gave immense scope to entrepreneurs, merchants, artisans, scientists and engineers. The constructive swadeshi became successful only when foreign products were boycotted. The secret society like Sanjibani was enthusiastic enough to set up match workshop. From the very beginning, Surrendranath Bannerjee, Anandamohan Bose and Narendranath Sen supported the Bengal National Chamber of Commerce. The technical education increased the scope of swadeshi enterprises.<sup>17</sup> These enterprises relied mainly on modern techniques and equipments. The volunteers of the swadeshi movement established swadeshi banks and insurance companies. Many societies and associations such as Society for the Development of Indian Industries and Association for the Advancement of Science and Industrial Education of India gave full support to the Technical education in Bengal.<sup>18</sup> These associations provided funds for the young generation so that they can set up new enterprises in the districts.



Source- Chaudhuri, Sukanto. Calcutta: *The living City: Volume-1: The Past*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995.

In this figure above, (fig 2.10) the connection between technical education and swadeshi enterprises were shown through this cartoon. One of the most important modern Industry which received huge popularity in swadeshi days was Bengal Chemical Pharmaceutical works Limited. It supplied indigenous drugs and perfumes to the distributors and doctors. The ink which was made by P.C Ray was also a symbol of unity. This ink of unity was

responsible for instigating development in social aspects, political aspects, cultural aspects and in technological spheres. Ink was responsible for creating a feeling of oneness and thus pioneering a development in swadeshi enterprises. These enterprises led to constant competitions between the Indians and foreign companies. Mohini Mills, Calcutta Weaving Company and Tripura Company wanted to set up weaving schools in order to increase the production of textiles.

The idea of swadeshi and boycott were propagated through some nationalist newspapers like *Bande Mataram* and *Yugantar*.<sup>19</sup> The main problem was economic degradation in colonial Bengal. The extremists wanted to connect the nationalistic sentiments with the sentiments of the common people. It was considered as a symbol of unity in colonial Bengal. Even Women donated their small savings to *swadeshi Bandhav Samiti*. They boycotted foreign bangles and foreign cosmetics and became accustomed to indigenous products. Mukunda Das, Aswini Kumar Dutta decided to sing swadeshi songs in village dialect. Women used to sing swadeshi songs in every household. The radical political ideas were generally passed through songs and plays.

The main concern of the samitis were to promote self-reliance in the social spheres as well as economic spheres. Bengal Landholder Association supported the need of the swadeshi enterprises. Rabindranath Tagore supported *atmashakti* which means he gave full support to the swadeshi movement.<sup>20</sup> He claimed that development should begin right from the village level and through village reconstruction. The concept of swadeshi has the power to solve all the problem of unemployment and illiteracy. He claimed that nationalists should focus on welfare work rather than on political agitations. These welfare programme created a sense of national consciousness among the people.

Tagore took the initiative to set up indigenous industries, agriculture and indigenous crafts, national education, dispensaries, drainage, irrigation, model firms and cooperative *swadeshi samaj* in the rural areas.<sup>21</sup> In the villages, volunteers were asked to supervise that the families should use only swadeshi goods. Anushulan Samiti imparted military training to the volunteers.<sup>22</sup> Many Samitis provided proper physical training to the young generation. Even the students took the initiative to set up Shivaji festivals, Birastami festivals and Pratapaditya festivals in the district villages.<sup>23</sup>

The policies of Curzon created a negative impact on common people. As the new successor, Lord Minto predicted that entire situation could alter their position in British India. He introduced new policies in order to regain the support from the masses. Lord Minto received huge support from Morley in restructuring the nature of the British administration. Viceroy decided to give a small share to the nationalists in the executive councils. Even Morley claimed that the political reforms should fulfill the demands of the western educated class. But Minto was not satisfied by these proposals of Morley because this might create more complexities among other communities. They decided to incorporate elective principle under the Indian Council Act of 1909. After a lot of discussion, colonial authority decided to set up executive council in Bengal. Both of them reframed the entire structure of the legislative councils by adding non-officials into it. There were 3 ex-officio member and 24 nominated members in the Bengal Legislative Councils.<sup>24</sup> In the Eastern Bengal, there were total 41 members which included one ex-officio member, 22 nominated members and 18 elected members.<sup>25</sup> Even these political reforms were not accepted by the public. Lord Crewe, Lord Hardinge rectified their

mistakes by reuniting Bengal. Thus, on 1<sup>st</sup> April 1912, Bengal was finally reunified and it was no longer considered as the capital of colonial India.<sup>26</sup>

### **Conclusion:**

Primarily, the colonial cartoonists drew cartoons in order to focus on the political issues that were taking place in Bengal. The satirical journals caricatured the actions of the colonial officials and some political figures. These cultural artifacts were indeed beneficial for highlighting the political events. The idea that cartoons constituted of a diverse, confrontational strategies, mirroring the political conditions in colonial Bengal. The political cartoons produced by cartoonists created new dimensions in the visual culture. Swadeshi Movement provided new energy to the political cartoonists as they created an independent world for themselves. The history of cartoon was very challenging as it promoted space for satires, art and political realities in colonial Bengal.

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

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