

## R K Laxman — An Epitaph by Chetan Datta Poduri

### Introduction

A cartoon is a visual delight eliciting in majority of the cases an instant guffaw. As per the celebrity Indian cartoonist and the protagonist of this article, RK Laxman, Indians have learnt the art of cartooning from the British, and eventually ended up overtaking them as *Punch* and *Tidbits* closed shop (Laxman, 1989). Despite this credit must be given to father-in-law of Tutankhamen of Egypt (around 1360 BC) for depicting the perhaps first identifiable political cartoon (Lacity and Rudramuniyaiah, 2009). However, among cartoonists who are truly Indian, pioneering credit must be given to Shankar Pillai of *The Hindustan Times*. Ever since a number of cartoonists made their mark in the Indian cartoon scenario, with Laxman dominating the scene in the last half of the previous century.

Indians grew up on a staple diet of certain cartoon characters and their antics from 1940s to literally till date. These include, among others, Umesh Rao's *Air India Maharajah* (1946) (Sinha, 2015), Laxman's iconic *Common Man* of the 'You Said It' fame (1951) (Puri, 2015), Asian Paints' *Gattu* (1954 - 2002) (Rodrigues, 2002), Sylvester daCunha's *Amul moppet* (1966) (Varma, 2011) and Subhash Tendle's *Goodlass Nerolac Goody* – the smiling tiger (1972) (Donde, 2006).

In the present article, we will discuss Laxman's cartoons. Other cartoonists and their characters some other day...

### Cartoons of Laxman

One book bound to be in the collection of every avid Indian reader is either the one titled 'Laugh with Laxman' or 'You said it'. In fact, these books have multiple volumes of approximately 150 pages each. There is hardly any running text with each page being devoted to one cartoon and in some cases a descriptive caption beneath. In reality, at one point of time in the Indian society, it became a fad to gift books of Laxman's cartoons either 'You said it' or 'Laugh with Laxman'. Perhaps even today these books form unprejudiced first gifts to some family with which people intend to bond.

Rasipuram Krishnaswamy Laxman (1924 – 2015) drew majority of his cartoons for the popular news daily, *The Times of India* (ToI). Usually, in Indian newspapers, the editorial and the daily cartoon complement each other (Dhar, 2004). Laxman, apart from complementing the Editorial, also had an independent cartoon (involving the common man) at the bottom right hand corner of the first page of ToI which became all the rage of this nation.

Among the cartoons, other than RK Laxmans', another cartoon that elicited a similar if not equal response from the public is the *Amul Moppet*. However, it is typically used in advertisements. This honour of an independent cartoon on the first page is said to have been originally accorded to Laxman among the Indian cartoonists. Subsequently, this aspect of having at least two cartoons in the news dailies (one for the editorial and the other in the front page) became a norm with all dailies irrespective of the language they are published in.

All cartoons of RK Laxman, irrespective of when they were drawn or published in the print media, fall into two categories: those that contain the 'unsaid' common man, and those without him. Cartoons containing the common man are titled 'You said it' wherein the common man is found never to have uttered a word. Hence, my choice of the word 'Unsaid' which is a synonym for silent. Cartoons without the common man are published as a collection of numerous volumes under the title 'Laugh with Laxman'.

### **Mr. & Mrs. Common Man**

The cartoons that contain the common man depict vulnerability felt by every individual as events beyond ones' control unfold. This person, as per Laxman, symbolizes millions having a permanent look of confusion (Laxman, 1989). Volumes have been written both by Laxman and others about the evolution of this common man. These cartoons mostly, if not only, satirize socio-economicpolitical situation as on the day the cartoon appears. Nevertheless, these cartoons can be considered as the timeless snapshots of contemporary Indian history. Laxman once wrote that pre-independent India cartoons were mostly 'propaganda posters' celebrating the British either as Bull dog or as Lion or as John Bull. In these cartoons Indians were shown as dove-eyed suffering angels and India as Bharat Mata (Laxman, 1989).

This common man of RK Laxman always wears a characteristic check-shirt and a dhoti. He is bespectacled moustachioed with whisps of hair above his ears. We

deduce from the cartoons that he is married. The wife apparently is vociferous, plump and domineering giving the impression that the common man is hen-pecked. Mrs Common Man has an opinion on various socio-economic-political aspects, which she expresses resonantly (Sampat, 2007). This domestication of various current events is perhaps one hallmark of Indian cartoons if not a characteristic feature of Laxman's cartoons. By this domestication, Mr & Mrs Common Man perhaps echoes the sentiments of every Indian.

The cartoons that do not contain this common man are also hilarious and are best classified as their sarcasm on all aspects of human life and do not concentrate on a specific subject or topic.

### **Laxman Trivia**

Laxman's cartoons are commemorated by at least two statues of the common man – one each in Worli, Mumbai and in Symbiosis Institute, Pune. Also, a commemorative postage stamp was issued in 1988 by Indian Postal service (CSG-Info, 2015).

Laxman is a much-married man. Incidentally, both his wives are named Kamala, one of whom is a bharatnatyam dancer and the other an author. Through his second wife, Laxman has a son by name Srinivas who worked for some time in ToI. Recipient of various national and international awards, Laxman died at the age of 91 in Pune. During the early stages of his career, RK Laxman was a colleague of Bal Thackeray, the founder of Shiv Sena, at The Free Press Journal in Mumbai. Incidentally, Bal Thackeray was also a cartoonist prior to founding Shiv Sena (The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica, 2015). Laxman received an honorary doctorate from the University of Mysore in 2004 (Anonymous, 2015).

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