

CARTOONS OF THE RAJ

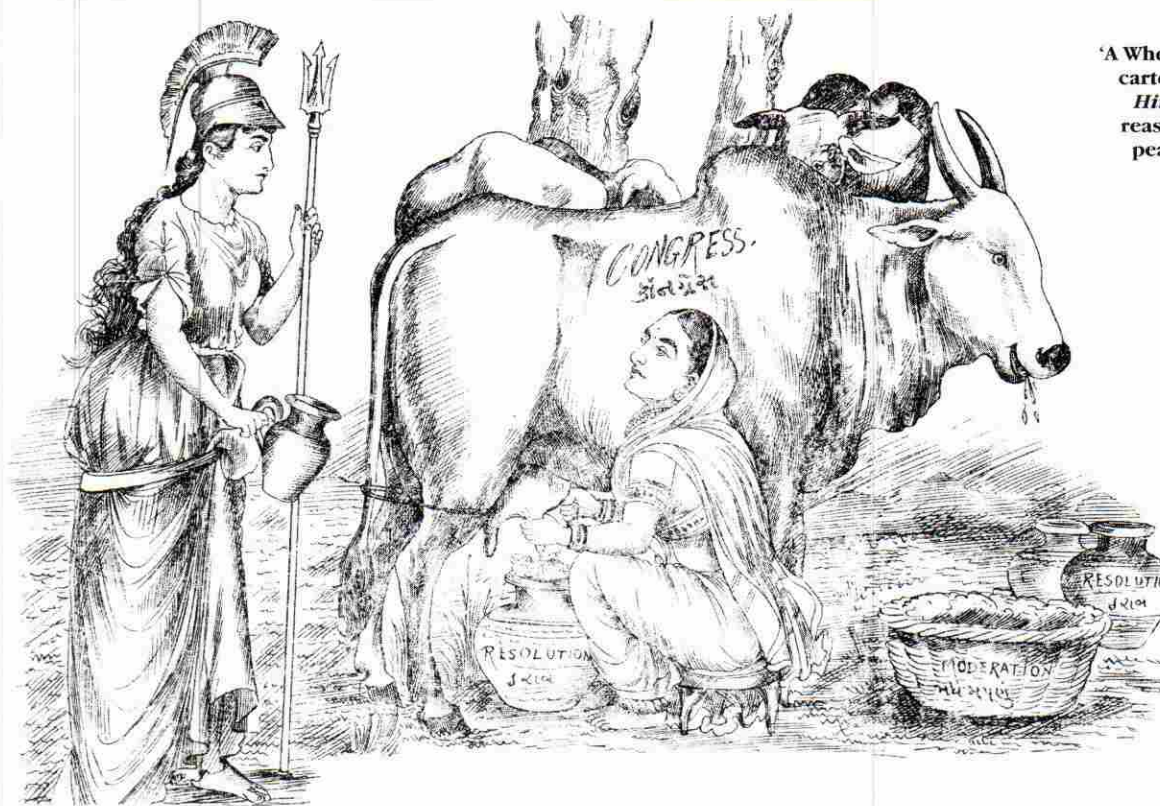
Partha Mitter looks at how tensions and cultural interchange between Indians and Britons are conveyed in the imagery of the colonial period.

One of the first cartoons by an Indian to make a political impact was published in the Bengali newspaper *Sulav Samachar* in the 1870s, highlighting a glaring injustice. Often poorer Indians were assaulted by Europeans, leading to their death. If the case came to court at all, the victim's 'enlarged spleen' was blamed for his death. The cartoon shows a dead coolie with his wife weeping next to him. A European doctor conducts a perfunctory post-mortem while the offender stands nonchalantly smoking a cigar. The cartoon, with its suggestion of collusion between European authorities and the offenders, was one of the seditious pieces that provoked the Raj into imposing vernacular press censorship in 1878.

Although caricature and parody have occasionally been encountered in Indian art since the ancient period, caricature as a systematic weapon of social criticism began with the popular art of Kalighat which colonial Calcutta gave rise to in the nineteenth century. Modern caricature as a form of journalism was imported from Britain by the British expatriates in India. Their comic drawings were inspired by Rowlandson. However no single humorous publication made a deeper impression in India than the English comic magazine, *Punch*. A riotous procession of its offspring greets us in magazines published in India during the second half of the last century: *Delhi Sketch Book*;

A hypocritical Brahmin (c. 1917) indulging in meat, alcohol and women, instead of devoting his life to pious activities; a portrayal by the Bengali cartoonist and master of his art, Gaganendranath Tagore.





'A Wholesome Diet': an early cartoon that appeared in *Hindi Punch* in 1889, reassuring the Raj of the peaceful intentions of the Congress.

Momus; The Indian Charivari; The Oudh Punch; The Delhi Punch; The Punjab Punch; The Indian Punch; Urdu Punch; Gujarati Punch; Hindi Punch; Parsi Punch and *Purneah Punch* from a remote town in Bengal. Unlike Gillray, Rowlandson and Cruikshank, *Punch*, which had given the word 'cartoon' to the English language, stood for Victorian respectability, a respectability eagerly emulated by the British-owned comic magazines in India. Indeed, the comic magazines, whether in Britain or in India, were an index of imperial mentality.

Although artists like Sir Charles D'Oyly initially poked gentle fun at the Anglo-Indian lifestyle in the early nineteenth century, they soon turned to the Indians as an object of mirth. Interestingly enough, so did the early Indian cartoonists. The significant difference was that while British cartoonists in India viewed the Indian subjects from the lofty heights of moral certainty, Indian cartoonists generally engaged in penetrating self-parody and social comment rather than using the new-found weapon against the Raj. In Bengali cartoons the exposure of social mores attained the ruthless candour of Gillray and Rowlandson. British lack of self-criticism may be explained by the fact that the imperial bureaucracy had ossified into benevolent despotism as the British community, now confined to clubs, cantonments and hill sta-

tions, became more and more racially exclusive. The most brilliant representations of expatriate life were G.P. Atkinson's *Curry and Rice or The Ingredients of Social Life at Our "Station" in India* (1859).

What kept the Britons together was a tacitly shared ideology of the imperial calling which permeated Victorian self-image and threw into bold relief the essential 'otherness' of the colonised. The clearest expression of British attitude was the popular literature of the period glorifying the Empire's civilising mission. If such a mentality informed British attitudes towards the 'Oriental', the Indian further suffered from racial acrimony that attended the uprising of 1857. British public opinion at home and abroad fed on the reported atrocities during the rebellion. The stereotype of Oriental behaviour was aired as much by *Punch* at home as by the British-owned comic magazines in India.

Of the English comic magazines, none was more accomplished than *The Indian Charivari* founded in 1872. Even, wrote the editor

... amongst the private community, Native and European, how often circumstances occur which present themselves in a most ludicrous light. It is our purpose ... of supplying once a fortnight an illustrated paper, reviewing current topics and matters of interest in a light, playful spirit.

In spite of this disclaimer, in the final

analysis what provided the cutting edge of *The Indian Charivari* was racial malice. Caricature thrives on consensus, on a shared culture: 'us' versus 'them'. The joke is shared and so is the hostility. The arresting quality of the comic magazine lay in its witty caricatures of the Bengali character, exploiting the existing views of the Westernised Bengali as a buffoon with touching pretensions to rival the rulers in intellect and culture.

British resentment against educated Hindus, especially the Bengali Bhadrak (literally gentlemen class, the term used for the Bengali élite), was deep-seated. The welfare of the Indian peasantry was in accord with Raj paternalism, while the Bhadrak constituted a competitive and disaffected intelligentsia. Queen Victoria's proclamation of 1858 promised equal treatment to all subjects, which prompted the Bengali élite to compete for higher positions in the imperial bureaucracy, the Indian Civil Service (ICS). 'The Baboo Ballads' sneered at such ambition on the part of the Bengali educated. Baboo Hurry Bangsho Jabberjee, a comical Bengali character in a novel published serially in *Punch* demanded that not only the ICS but also the Poet Laureateship be thrown open to Indians. *The Indian Charivari* was especially incensed at the nationalist vernacular papers such as *Hindoo Patriot* and *Amrita Bazar Patrika* which vociferously challenged racial slurs against the Bengalis.



(Left) Baboo Jabberjee: an 1895 *Punch* illustration of the Bengali Bhadrakol parodied in *The Baboo Ballads* by the English, who found the idea of the educated Bengali hard to take, and (right) Lord Curzon 'Propitiating Shri Ganesha' – an adept satirical response from a 1902 edition of *Hindi Punch*.



One of the longest running English-language comic magazines published by an Indian to take up political issues was *Hindi Punch* (1878-1930). Its editor, Barjorji Naorosji, who belonged to the Parsi community in Bombay, supported the moderates in the Indian National Congress founded in 1885. This magazine's favourite personification of India was Panchoba, an Indian version of the figure of Mr Punch, while its drawing style often reflected the English parent magazine. But it also cleverly adapted prints by the universally popular academic painter, Raja Ravi Varma, to make a political point. It depicts Lord Curzon, the *bête noire* of the nationalists, as Sarasvati, the Hindu goddess of learning (after a Varma print), in a 1905 parody of his high-handed treatment of academics at the Simla education conference. Curzon's superior attitude had elicited another cartoon in *Hindi Punch*, this time as Ganesha, the elephant-headed god of good fortune who needs to be propitiated for worldly success.

Lord Curzon, who was largely responsible for the partition of Bengal in 1905, earned universal unpop-

ularity among the intelligentsia whose spokesman was the *Hindi Punch*. However, as the nationalist movement gradually entered a phase of widespread unrest and revolutionary terrorism, the moderate *Hindi Punch* fell out of step with mainstream politics. Nor did it feel inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's *satyagraha* movement, remaining as a relic of the earlier political era as late as the 1930s.

In north India, the pioneering vernacular comic magazine was *The Oudh Punch*, edited by Muhammad Sajjad Husain of Lucknow from 1877. Many of its lithographic cartoons copied from *Punch*, *Fun* and other English magazines focused on political issues of the day. It made an effective use of a *Punch* cartoon on the West Indian Rebellion of 1865, drawing an analogy between the rebellion and nationalist unrest in India. The cartoon, which alluded to student unrest in an engineering college in Bengal, portrayed the Director of Public Instruction in Bengal as John Bull, who had sent down student leaders after a political demonstration. In south India, the leading Tamil literary figure, Subramania

Bharati, published cartoons regularly in the Tamil language weekly, *India*, between 1906-10. As a supporter of the extremist leader Balgangadhar Tilak, he made scathing attacks on government policy.

However, the most effective cartoons were those that made human follies an object of amusement; few were more striking than the ones from Bengal, the earliest of which appeared during the Bengal Renaissance in the late nineteenth century. Satirical papers in Bengal existed before the 1870s, but illustrated ones appeared close on the heels of *The Indian Charivari* (1873). Although Bengali artists learned from it, they were closer to Gillray and Rowlandson than to *Punch*. If they happened to choose the same victims as the English magazine, namely the Bengali Bhadrakol, their purpose was very different. Bengali artists embarked on a savage and yet playful game of self-mockery. Wit and innuendo, used in caricature to expose pretension, are symptoms of heightened individualism. Caricature, a prime device for parodying contemporary manners, gave this lively, self-absorbed milieu a weapon to turn on itself.

The cartoonists were heirs to an earlier tradition of literary parodies of the ilk of *Naba Babu Bilas*, *Naba Bibi Bilas*, and above all, Kali Prasanna Sinha's brilliant *Hutam Penchar Naksba*. Significantly, criticism of modern ideas did not emanate from the traditional rural groups but from within the urban élite itself. What

social satire exposed was the ambiguous love-hate relationship that characterised the different strata of the Westernised intelligentsia – an exclusive and yet divided group, divided because traditional signs of status were no longer sacrosanct. Yet, when the cartoonist pilloried his fellow Bengalis he was in fact taking them into his confidence. His victims were often his greatest fans.

The most renowned early comic magazine was *Basantak*, also inspired by *Punch*. An obscenely fat Brahmin – Punch transmogrified no less – leers out of its front cover surrounded by scenes of utter depravity to which Calcutta had sunk. This scurrilous, irreverent organ edited by Prannath Datta (1840-88) lasted only two years. Descended from a leading Kayastha family, Datta preferred to work independently than to join the imperial bureaucracy. *Basantak*'s targets were colonial high officials and their Bengali allies. There was a coarse immediacy to the drawings furnished by his nephew that was ideally suited to Datta's savage invective. Hard-hitting satires included the 'crushing' of Indian handlooms by Manchester textiles, corrupt city fathers and the mismanagement of official famine relief. While English officials force-feed obese candi-

dates, the rest of the population starves.

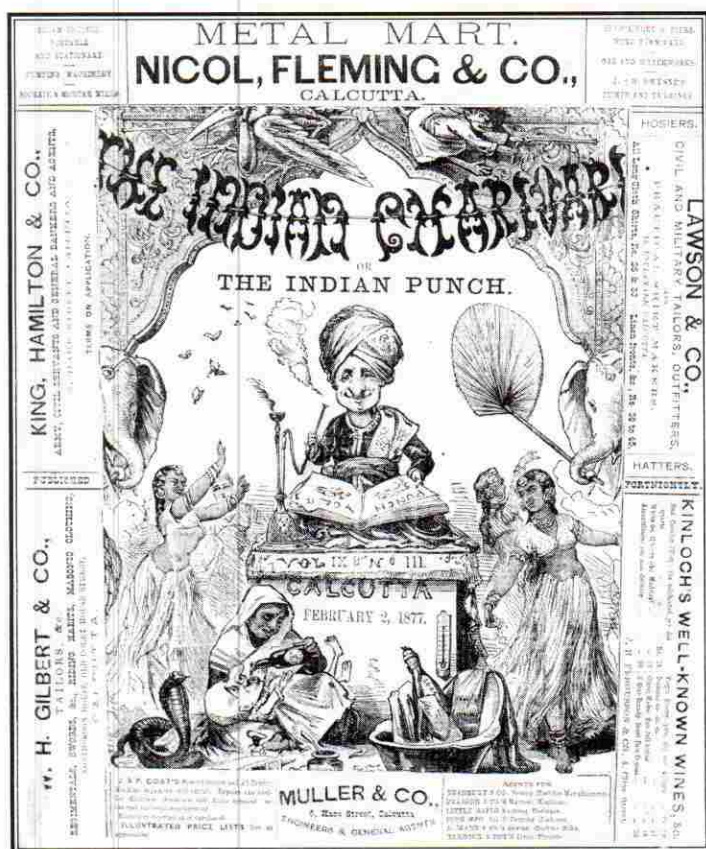
However, as I have indicated, *Basantak* reserved its most lethal barbs for the Westernised élite in satires reminiscent of Kalighat paintings. Datta's victims included the great social reformer Iswarchandra Vidyasagar's 'Society for the Prevention of Obscenity'. The cartoon (c. 1873) purports to celebrate the change that had been wrought by the Society. In Hindu religious iconography, the goddess Kali stands naked with dishevelled hair on the top of her head, Shiva. Thanks to Vidyasagar's efforts, she now covers her breasts in a blouse and wears a modest full length skirt. The supine victim sports a pair of tweed trousers with braces. The satirist disapproved of both what he considered a sense of undue modesty alien to Indian society and the Victorian fashion in clothes prevalent among the upper classes.

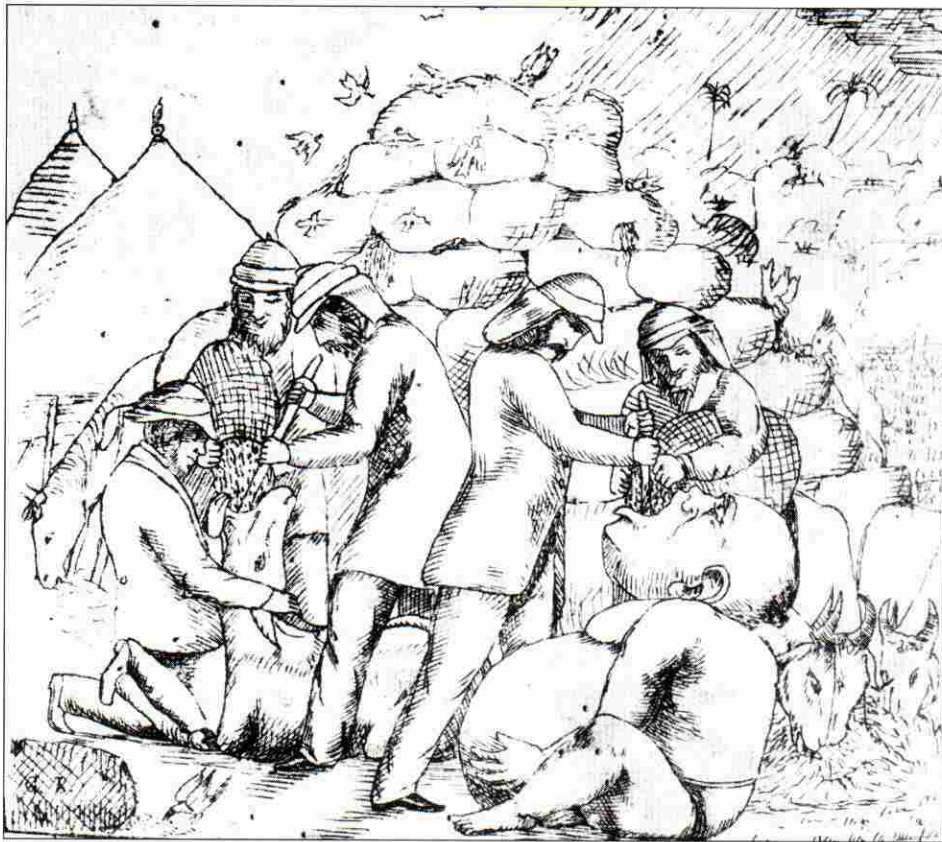
Two modern innovations, print technology and the process of mechanical reproduction, turned Bengal into a society dominated by the visual image. Pictorial journalism became an indispensable part of literary culture. The Bengali educated enjoyed a rich harvest of illustrated magazines, thanks to the brilliant

entrepreneur, Ramananda Chatterjee, whose *Prabasi* became a model of publishing early this century. The use of high quality illustrations and graphic art in Bengali monthly magazines such as *Bharat Barsha*, *Manasi o Marinabani* and *Masik Basumati*, greatly expanded opportunities for the aspiring cartoonist and many responded to it with alacrity. The most popular Bengali cartoons, however, were social and not political. The stock characters – hypocritical zamindar, henpecked husband, pompous academic, obsequious clerk, illiterate Brahmin – were the cartoonists' favourites. Characteristic behaviour and typical cultural situations, such as the plump head clerk returning from the bazaar with his favourite fish or the thin school-teacher with stick-like arms and legs were well captured in drawing after drawing.

From 1917, one of the most popular cartoonists, Jatin Sen, featured regularly in the leading monthlies, *Manasi o Marmabani* and *Bharat Barsha*. Sen's penetrating observation of Bengali physiognomic types, blending individual idiosyncrasies with national peculiarities, was unmatched for the period. A student at the Calcutta government art school, Sen turned to cartoons, graphic art

Punch drunk: the British-owned comic magazine *The Indian Charivari* acknowledges its debt to English *Punch* and to Indian stereotype, with a cover complete with dusky Oriental maidens, while (right) 'Rebellion Had Bad Luck' – a protest against government intervention in education from an 1881 issue of *Oudh Punch* is a deliberate reworking of a cartoon in the English parent magazine of the British treatment of Irish nationalists.





(Left) 'The 23rd special dispatch from the Famine Districts' illustrates the sharp wit of *Basantak*, the short-lived satirical organ of the 1870s, in highlighting British mismanagement of famine relief.

and images for cinema hoardings after failing to make headway in nationalist Oriental art. A chance meeting with a literary genius, Rajsekhar Bose, gave Sen an opportunity to produce prize-winning graphic work for Bose's chemical firm. Soon Sen joined Bose's literary circle, while his cartoons became the inspiration for Bose's own brilliant satirical works, *Gaddalika* (1924), *Kajjali* (1927) and *Ilanumaner Swapna* (1927). These remain some of the

most inventive parodies of Bengali life, with their keen eye for the ridiculous in social behaviour. To the Bengalis, Sen's witty sketches became inextricably linked with Bose's text.

Sen and other Bengali cartoonists loved to dwell on the affectations of educated young men – their exotic coiffure, outlandish sartorial fashions, and partiality to gold-rimmed pince-nez and other spectacles *à la mode*. The cartoonists juxtaposed

two types of Bengali youth: the rugged, salt-of-the-earth masculine young man and the languid, *fin-de-siècle*, Oscar Wilde type. The second read poetry, spent his time on personal grooming, and fainted at the sight of anti-aesthetic unpleasantness. The loss of manliness in the colonial era weighed heavily on the Bengali mind, just as it regarded the emancipated woman with unmitigated horror. Nowhere were the cartoonists more brilliant than in their portrayals of dominating, domineering women. The ambivalence of Bhadrakalok society is first seen in the art of Kalighat, with its images of viragos (wives or mistresses) trampling masochistic *babus*. Women as a burden or a disruptive force was a constant refrain of cartoons – the old man as a slave to his young wife, the graduate hampered by an illiterate spouse with whom he could not make intellectual conversation, and so on.

The movement for the improvement of women's conditions gathered force in the nineteenth century. Suttee was abolished in 1829-30, but there remained other disabilities, such as a low literacy rate and infant marriage. The first women to be emancipated became the butt of the cartoonist's pen in *Basantak*, for instance, which played on men's subliminal fears. Once women were educated, they would desert hearth and

No smoke without fire: *Basantak*'s response to steps towards female emancipation (symbolised below by the literate, role-reversing woman) reflects male anxieties about the emasculating consequences of this.



The Westernised élite elicited *Basantak*'s severest ire, as with this jibe at Vidyasagar's Society for the Prevention of Obscenity, showing the normally naked goddess Kali in prudish Victorian garb.



husband for the glamour of the outside world. The nationalist, who supported women's education, expected her not to demand equal rights with men but to be an inspiring mother.

A widespread anxiety pervaded in a society where reforms had only scratched the surface, where child marriage and the dowry were still part of everyday life. The great poet Rabindranath Tagore observed:

One group of people deny that there is any need for women's education, because men suffer many disadvantages when women receive education. An educated wife is no longer devoted to her husband, she forgets her duties and spends her time reading and in similar activities.

Basantak made chillingly clear the consequence of marrying an educated woman: the wife relaxes in an armchair with a novel while the poor husband tries to light the coal oven in the kitchen. As smoke enters the room, the wife engrossed in the book, says in irritation, 'Can't you close the kitchen door while lighting the fire?' (c. 1873).

Jatin Sen and his contemporary, Benoy Ghosh, portrayed liberated women in various guises, playing on men's fears of emasculation. In 'Women's Revolt', a young lady is dressed in men's clothes. In another cartoon, the wife is going for a spin with her gentlemen friend. Unlike the 'unfashionable' husband, she wears fashionable dark glasses and her gentlemen friend sports a monocle and drives the latest model convertible. She instructs her husband to give the baby a bottle while she is out. Since he is not endowed by nature to breastfeed, the husband laments, he has no choice but to give it a bottle.

The most sensitive area was employment: highly placed women as judges, police superintendents and office executives would all threaten a man's world, as drawings of puny clerks working under powerful women bosses suggest. The cigar-smoking lady represented the final collapse of man's domain.

The erosion of social values under the impact of Westernisation remained the favourite topic of Bengali caricature. But no one matched the unsentimental eye of Gaganendranath Tagore, who raised cartoons to the level of high art. A nephew of Rabindranath, Gaganendranath's trenchant lithographs began appearing from 1917 onwards in *Birup Bajra* (Play of Opposites), *Adbhut*

Lok (Realm of the Absurd) and *Naba Hullod* (Reform Screams). As the writer Nirad C. Chaudhuri observes, 'the only expression in art ever given to Hindu liberalism [was] ... a set of lithographs after drawings by Gaganendranath Tagore ... The cartoons would not suffer by comparison with those of Daumier'.

Gaganendranath produced some sharply observed political cartoons, but by far his most original ones were social satires. If he drew with the economy of Kalighat, his ferocity also bore an uncanny resemblance to expressionist cartoons published in *Simplicissimus*, the German paper

while taking graft and keeping whores; Bengali officials masquerading as black sahibs; the long-suffering wife of the babu who visits the *demi-monde*.

Gaganendranath's lithographs were the culmination of the time-honoured tradition of self-parody in Bengal. With these cartoons the artist was engaging in a familiar game, the game that highlighted the internal battle between different sections of the Bhadrakalok society on cultural identity – modern or traditional, Eastern or Western? Gaganendranath Tagore stood last in the line of such critics of Bengali society.



Young dandies in an illustration to Rajsejhar Bose's *Gaddalika* by Jatin Sen. Sen's partnership with literary satirist Bose, and his acute observations of Bengali types, the fads of the young in particular, made him one of India's most popular cartoonists earlier this century.

founded in 1896. Both German and Indian cartoons are recognisable by their strong lines, grotesque figures and faces and use of broad flat surfaces. From their styles it seems likely that they ultimately drew inspiration from the technique of Japanese prints. It is known that Gaganendranath admired Japanese art.

The brunt of Gaganendranath's satire was borne by Westernised Indians, whom he mocked for trying to be more English than the English. His bloated figures have a savage intensity, dwelling on what he saw as hypocrisy, cant and double standards of Bengali society: the Brahmin paying lip service to the sacred scriptures

FOR FURTHER READING:

Partha Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India: Occidental orientations* (Cambridge University Press, 1994); T. Guha-Thakurta, *The Making of a New 'Indian' art: Artists, Aesthetics and Nationalism in Bengal, c.1850-1920* (Cambridge University Press, 1992); A.R. Venkatachalapathy, 'Lampooning the Raj, Subramania Bharati and the Cartoon in Tamil Journalism, 1906-1910', *ICCTR [Indian Council for Communication Training and Research] Journal*, vol. V, Nos. 1-2; M. Horn, *The World Encyclopedia of Cartoons* (New York, 1980); A.J. Greenberger, *The British Image of India* (London, 1969); G.N. Curzon, *Lord Curzon in India* (London, 1906); C. Bolt, *Victorian Attitudes to Race* (London, 1979); Sumit Sarker, *Modern India* (London, 1989); W.G. Archer, *Kalighat Paintings* (London, 1971).

Partha Mitter is Reader in Art History at the University of Sussex and author of *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India* (Cambridge University Press, 1994).