

Sketching a Forgotten Cartoonist: Mohanlal Mahto ‘Viyogi’ (1901–1990)

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Abstract

This short paper is an introductory sketch of a cartoonist who is lost in history but found in the archives. His name is Mohanlal Mahto ‘Viyogi’ (1901–1990). The paper begins with a brief biographical note. It then looks into his cartooning practice. It provides a glimpse into the relationship between the cartoonist and his editors, and examines the cultural lineages of his artistic repertoire. The paper focuses on the political cartoons dealing with anti-colonial and reformist politics during the high tide of Gandhian nationalism. It highlights the anomaly of nationalist politics from the cartoonist’s standpoint, and in turn, reconstructs his political views and visions.

Cartoon, which is an indispensable part of a variety of journalistic production in India, from film and fashion to politics and business, is a development less than one and a half centuries old. The cartoon as a literary-artistic genre was introduced and popularized in the late nineteenth century colonial India. It came, firstly, through English language satirical periodicals like the *Punch*, which were published in England, and subsequently by British owned Indian satirical journals. Very soon cartoons became a significant part of not only English as well as vernacular language satirical journals owned by Indians, but also of non-satirical magazines. From the first decade of the twentieth century onwards, cartoons started appearing regularly in most Indian language periodicals – literary or political – and were assigned a fixed space within their pages.¹

¹ Cartoon or for that matter any visual illustration appears relatively late (not before 1880s) in Hindi periodicals. Modern Hindi prose in the nineteenth century was only in its formative stage, attempting to distinguish, define and develop itself against the rich literary tradition of Urdu. Hindi periodicals were also in the nascent stage and lagged far behind their Urdu and Bengali counterparts in terms of appearance and attractiveness of format. Lack of readership, the slow expansion of the Hindi middle class, and the slow growth of the concomitant new literary and political institutional spaces (which were yet to be expanded through the politics of Hindi nationalism), put a great economic constraint on Hindi publicists. The richness of formats like visual illustrations, cartoons etc., which demanded the mobilization of bigger editorial teams and greater financial

Cartoons were also printed and circulated widely in the form of independent booklets and single block prints from the start of the 1920s.² In recent years scholars have turned their attention to the history and culture of cartoon production in colonial India (see Harder & Mittler 2013). While the existing works have begun to illuminate the history of cartoons, there is surprisingly little knowledge about the cartoonists in colonial India, except the famous ones like K. Shankar Pillai or Gaganendranath Tagore (see for example Khanduri 2014; Suderson 2017). If cartoons were published in almost all major vernacular periodicals roughly from the turn of twentieth century (and certainly so in the case with Hindi print about which I am more familiar), there must be many more cartoonists at work. For example, if we look at the initials below the cartoons published between 1920s and 1930s in major Hindi monthlies and weeklies,³ we can easily notice that there were more than half a dozen cartoonists contributing regularly. They signed variously as D. N. Verma, Shiksharathi, Bakshi, Goswami, M. K. Verma, Hakim Muhammad Khan, Mohanlal Mahto Gayawal, Rameshwar Prasad Varma, etc. But we know little about them beyond their initials or names.

This short paper presents an introductory sketch of one such cartoonist who is lost in history but found in the archives. His signature is unmistakably

backing to employ specialist illustrators, remained a rare phenomenon and seem to have started only at the turn of the century. Stray attempts by the editors to draw and publish cartoons began in the 1890s. This situation changed from the early years of twentieth century, as voluntary associations loosely connected with each other and working to establish Hindi libraries in small and big towns of North India had created another public space for the consumption of Hindi journals. Along with a substantial increase in the number of educated middle class Hindus as a result of the spread of the colonial education system, these sections were becoming increasingly aware of their community identity and we find that literary institutions were striving to educate and serve the Hindi nation through periodicals. Furthermore, between 1920 and 1940 the rise of anti-colonial mobilization under middle class leadership in the aftermath of the First World War, there was a massive increase in the number and circulation of periodicals. Publisher-editors could now survive, although with huge difficulty, without official or institutional patronage. They could rely on the subscription of (nationalist) readers and institutions. Not only did periodicals increase in numbers but their circulation figures rose as well.

² Several antecedents of cartoon publications can be traced before 1920s. Radhacharan Goswami's journal *Bhārtendu* used to publish cartoons in 1890s. Similarly, Amritlal Chakravarti, the editor of *Hindi-baṅgavāsī*, mentions in his memoir serialised in *Viśāl Bhārat* that his periodical used to publish cartoons targeting Congress politicians. Amritlal Chakravarti, "Ātma-saṁsmaṇ -10", *Viśāl Bhārat*, December, 1935. Cartoons on literary subject matters were regularly published in the initial years of *Sarasvatī* (1902–1903) but then discontinued.

³ I have consulted *Prabhā* (Kanpur 1920), *Mādhurī* (Lucknow, 1924), *Sudhā* (Lucknow, 1927), *Cānd* (Allahabad, 1922), *Matvālā* (Calcutta, 1923), *Hindu Pañc* (Calcutta, 1926), *Sarasvatī* (Allahabad, 1900), *Viśāl Bhārat* (Calcutta, 1926), and *Gaṅgā* (Bhagalpur, 1930).

noticed in the leading Hindi periodicals of 1920s and 1930s. Although he finds mention in the twentieth century literary history as a Hindi writer and poet, he is no longer remembered as a cartoonist. His name is Mohanlal Mahto 'Viyogi' (1901–1990), who signed also as Pandit Mohanlal Mahto Gayawal or as Pandit/Shri Mohanlal Mahto.⁴ We shall first provide a very short biographical note; we shall then look into his cartooning practice. Further we shall dwell upon the relationship between the cartoonist and his editors, and examine the cultural lineages of his artistic repertoire. Needless to say, all of his available cartoons are not practically possible to discuss in this paper. We shall mainly focus on his political cartoons dealing with anti-colonial and reformist politics during the high tide of Gandhian nationalism. This will help us see the anomaly of nationalist politics from the cartoonist's standpoint, and in turn enable us to reconstruct his political views and visions.

Biographical Note

Mohanlal was born in the orthodox family of Gayawal Brahmin, an educationally backward but rich and landed endogamous priestly community, connected with the death ceremony of Hindus. His father, like a typical patriarch in Gayawal household, was a feared strongman in the holy town of Gaya. His mother died when he was very young. An emaciated, motherless boy was not the beloved son of his macho father. An atypical male Gayawal child, Mohanlal preferred reading and art over wrestling and other masculine pursuits. He learned the art of drawing from his step-mother, a Marathi woman who, unlike her Gayawal counterparts, did not observe *parda* and had literary-artistic interests. Mohanlal tells us in his memoir that he could not withstand the company of his father and, by extension, the lumpen brashness and the culture of violence which marked the Gayawal economic and social life. After elementary education in Persian, Hindi, and English at home, he learned Sanskrit for some years with a famous Pandit-scholar of the town. He also went to study in Rabindranath Tagore's *Shanti Niketan* where he learnt Bengali and exposed himself to Bengali literary tradition. Later he learned Pali in close intellectual association with Kashi Prasad Jayaswal, a barrister and nationalist historian, and was introduced to Indian philosophy by Pandit Ramavatar Sharma, a towering intellectual and professor at Patna College. He was part of the circle of young Patna/Bihari Hindi intellectuals like Rambriksha Benipuri, Shivpujan Sahay, Ramdhari Singh Dinkar, Gangasharan Singh and Rahul Sankrityayana.

⁴ Biographic information given below is sourced primarily from Parimalendu, 2007 and Vibhakar, 2018. For ethnographic details on the economic and cultural life of Gayawal Brahmins see Prasad, 1952.

Most of them were young anti-colonial nationalists with strong socialist leanings. Alongside trying his hands on cartoons and children's literature, he wrote romantic poetry and short stories with progressive socialist leanings in his literary career between 1920s and 1940s. To cite a few examples, *Ek Tārā* (The Lone Star), is a collection of romantic/mystical (Chāyāvādī) poetry, which finds mention in the canon of Hindi literary history (Viyogī 1927). Similarly, *Raj'kan* (The Dust) published around 1930s is a collection of his stories. The title story is a belles-lettres which celebrates the dust over the jewel. The stories in this collection deal with a variety of issues pertaining to rural lives. They focus on poverty class-caste oppression, infant mortality, childhood and childlessness, social implications of natural calamity, illness and accident, love, sacrifice and rebellion by protagonists belonging to lower as well as upper castes; and stories allegorically illuminating the questions of authorial commitment to progressive literary aesthetics, agenda and sentiments. (Viyogī n.d.).

Later in 1950s he published his historical researches on India in the age of *Jatakas* (Viyogī 1958), a novel on ascendancy of the westernized cultural-moral ethos and decline of traditional virtues of Indianness in India (Viyogī 1957), and a long epic poem on cultural history of India based on the medieval Hindi epic Prithvirāj'rāso (Viyogī 1955). He was one of the rarest Gayawals active with Indian National Congress and was closer to the socialist intellectuals and political leaders of Bihar. After independence, he went on to become the president of Hindi Literary Conference of Bihar, and was also nominated as a Member of Legislative Council (MLC) by the Congress government in Bihar.

The Freelance Cartoonist

In the first decade of the last century the editor, for example Mahavir Prasad Dvivedi, would conceptualize the cartoon and give direction to the artist with elaborate detail. On editor's notice the artist would supply him the cartoon as per the order (see Simh 1951). While editors could still solicit cartoons from editorial artists, from 1920s a cartoonist could draw on his own and supply his art-piece to an editor and journal of his choice. Available letters of Mohanlal provide the impression that he was a freelance cartoonist who also wrote stories, poems, criticism, etc., for Hindi periodicals. To him, making cartoons was also part of the larger nationalist project of filling in the empty treasure of Hindi. He was not an artist employed for doing artwork, illustration, or cartoon as part of an editorial team of any particular journal. He did not draw on editor's demand. Typically, he sketched the cartoons on his own and asked his editors if they were interested in publishing them. On receiving an affirmative reply he sent them with his comments to publish. At least this seems to be the

case in the early part of his career. We, however, do not know the exact amount of remuneration he got for his cartoon. What is certain, as per his letters to his friend and editor Shivpujan Sahay, is that he received payment for his cartoons which he sent through Value Payable Post (VPP).

Following is the excerpt from a long letter, dated 5 Feb 1931, written to Shivpujan Sahay, the editor of *Gaṅgā* (see Shivpujan Sahay Papers):

“Dear brother Shivpujan, [...] Two cartoons are sent in your service. First one is Sanātan Dharma. Mr. pañdā and Mr. mathādhīś of the pantheon are begging for the revival of Sanātan Dharma. The style of begging is worth looking at. Sanātan Dharma himself is standing in between the two. I have written my name beneath the visual, send that for [printing] as well, lest it is missed while its bloc is being made [...] Hope you keep both the visuals for Gaṅgā, will send the story soon.”

Fig. 1: *The patrons of Sanātan Dharma!*
(*Gaṅgā*, March 1931)

Caption: How long will Sanātan Dharma live on its patrons’ hold? If patrons are callous, they are bound to suck their protégée’s blood¹



That the visual was accepted for publication is evident from the fact that it appeared in the March 1931 issue of the literary monthly *Gaṅgā*. The same cartoon was printed with an edited caption which succinctly summarized what the cartoonist Mohanlal wished to communicate through his description of the cartoon. See Figure 1, *Sanātan Dharma* resembles an old emaciated Hindu peasant patriarch and stands sandwiched between a *pañdā* and a *mathādhīś* who look similar to a debauch and cruel landlord and a corrupt priest. They are sitting luxuriously and collecting money to rejuvenate *Sanātan Dharma*. Similarly, in another undated letter Mohanlal described a cartoon to his editor as follows:

“In this cartoon I have tried to show how [the vitals of] cow like Hindu jan'tā (masses/people) are being sucked by the tīrtheś (the priests of pilgrimage centers). On looking at the eyes of the cow you will realize that jan'tā are now paying attention towards [such exploitations]. She no longer is willing to be sucked...”



Fig. 2: Sucking Milk or Blood? (Gaṅgā, March 1931)

This cartoon (see Figure 2) was also printed in the same issue of Gaṅgā with an edited caption:

“Keep sucking to the maximum, unaware of the impending tempest.
You will vanish without a trace, in a fraction of a moment.”

Many of his cartoons, like the two shown above, scathingly attacked exploitation of Hindu believers and the pitiable condition of their ‘eternal’ religion by the priestly class which managed powerful religious establishments. It could

not have been a coincidence, but a self-conscious political move by Mohanlal to critique his own community of Gayawal Brahmin priests and the latter's outrageous treatment of the Hindu pilgrims in the holy city of Gaya.

Transcultural Genealogies of Cartoon

Cartoon as an art form was introduced to India and other countries beyond Europe via the nineteenth century English satirical weekly, the *Punch*. The Indian cartoonists developed this art form further drawing simultaneously on the multiple indigenous literary and visual resources and representational repertoire (see Kumar 2013). In his cartooning practice in general Mohanlal too mined the traditional Indian conventions of representing the corrupt socio-religious establishment. Side by side he productively mobilized the language and representational practices of popular nationalism. On the one hand, he invoked the convention of ridiculing and criticizing the figure of a rich, fat, debauch, greedy, dishonest, airhead Brahmin priest, a tradition widely prevalent in Sanskrit, Pali and vernacular literary as well as oral and performative traditions (see Novetzke 2011; Siegel 1987). On the other hand, he unmistakably used the modern political vocabulary which divided the world between the class of exploiters and the mass of exploited, the corrupt incompetent elites unaware of historic forces of transformation and the awakening mass as harbinger of change. The usage of terms like “awakened and angry Hindu masses (*jan'tā*)”, “priests (*tīrtheṣ*) sucking into the vitals of the people”, depiction of the body language of a *pāñdā* as arrogant indigenous landlord-moneylender, etc. was clearly marked by deep socialist overtones. Such representational strategies reinscribed the domain of the traditional and religious with new meanings, and rendered it into overtly political and modern.



Fig. 3: *Loyalty* (*Mādhurī*, July 1926)

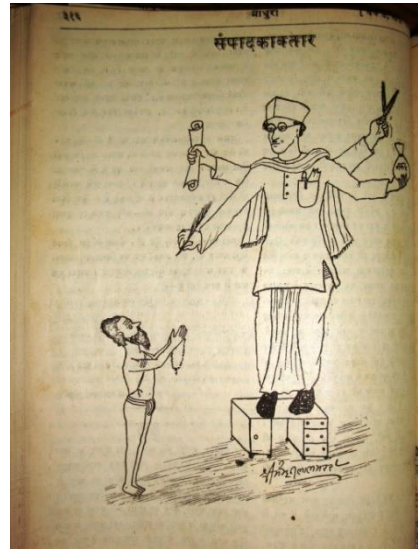


Fig. 4: *Editor-incarnate* (*Mādhurī*, February 1926)

In cases of cartoons on explicitly modern political subjects involving political and literary power, such eclectic borrowing is equally salient. For example, see figure 3 and 4 above. *Loyalty* draws upon the popular classic, the *Ramayana* and refigures it with contemporary colonial politics. Like the legendary monkey-god Hanuman, lord Rama's loyal servant and devotee par excellence, the Indian elite opens his chest to show his master that deep inside his heart resides no one but the lord himself. *Editor-incarnate* likewise, invokes the tale of Lord Vishnu's incarnation. It shows the all powerful editor, like the four-armed Vishnu, in possession of money, editorial snip, pen and paper. His god-like larger than life gaze falls on his awestruck worshipper, a begging Brahmin sage – the writer.

Cartooning Indian Nationalists and Gandhi

Mohanlal made cartoons on all kinds of topical issues, literary and religious to social and political. Needless to say, he drew cartoons attacking British imperialism and its exploitation of India. For example see figure 5 below.

An Indian, represented as a barely clothed frail man resembling a Brahmin beggar who is standing on the map of India, is shown as lifting on his shoulders the burden of a fat European who is carrying gigantic war ships. Taking cue from the title it is suggested that the Indians are nothing but the victims of the hunter, i.e. British imperialism, and his expeditions. The empire, arguably, sustained itself by piggybacking and exploiting its colony's human and material resources. Beyond delivering strong political message, this cartoon is also innovative in its representation of India. It is obvious that the Indian map has acquired a degree of familiarity amidst the print reading public. Its tiny size is no hindrance to its representation. Yet, what is strikingly different is that the cartography of *Bharatmata* (Mother India) is neither imposing nor iconic like a goddess. It is a flattened and crushed landscape holding her son perishing under the burden of imperialism. The flattened and crushed cartography of *Bharatmata* seems to be Mohanlal's artistic innovation. He uses it in many of his cartoons including the next one given below.

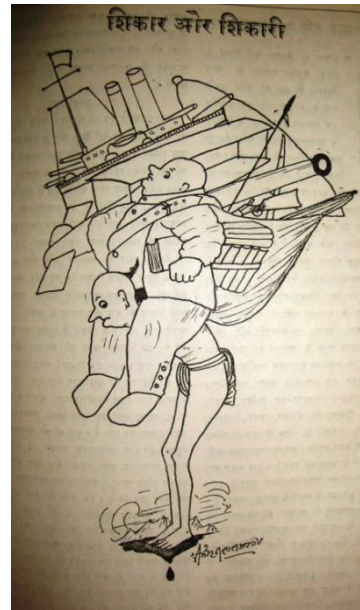


Fig. 3: *The Hunter and the Prey*
(*Mādhurī*, March 1926)

Mohanlal's political cartoons attacked not only British colonialism and Indian loyalists as seen in figure 5 and 3 above, but took to task even the Indian nationalists, especially those who were purportedly compromised and not radical enough in their opposition to the alien government. They were, arguably, working inside the colonial political institutions for petty political gains. They were, in the cartoonist's eyes, hungry for power and money. As a militant nationalist he lampooned constitutionalists, the Swarajists as well as the new breed of corrupt congressmen.

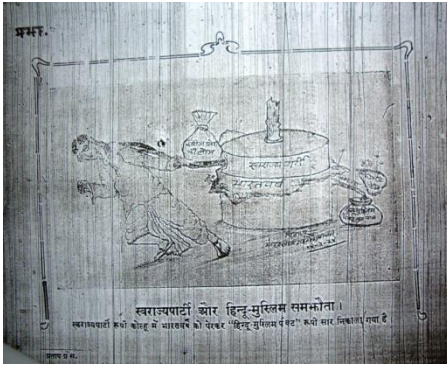


Fig. 4: Swaraj Party and Hindu-Muslim Pact (*Prabhā*, April 1924)

Caption: After crushing India in the oil pressing machine of Swaraj Party, the extract has come out in the form of “the Hindu-Muslim Pact”



Fig. 5: Untitled (*Gaṅgā*, November-December 1934)

Caption: In 1919 – While running around I wish to die
 In 1929 – While going to prison I wish to die
 In 1934 – While protecting Harijan-fund I wish to – He He He

Figure 6 attacks the Swaraj Party, which wished to participate in the colonial political institution to voice the nationalist political opinion in the legislative assembly. Such cartoons projected the Swaraj Party leaders as those deviating from the ideals of self-less dedication to the cause of uncompromising anti-colonial nationalism. Ironically, the Swaraj party leaders or the Congressmen who were in favour of participation in colonial representational bodies in gen-

eral, the cartoon highlighted, were working hard to enjoy the power of those electoral bodies, that too for monetary benefits! The cartoon lampooned the fact that even after working so hard and crushing [the rising tide of] anti-colonial Indian nationalism what has come out in the end is a “useless” *Hindu-Muslim Pact* and the financial allure of entry into the Councils.⁵ Similarly, figure 7 chastised the fall of the congressmen and rampant financial corruption in the rank and file. While the typical congressman wished to be the indefatigable gentleman spreading nationalist messages across the nation in 1919 and was more than willing to take the risk of being imprisoned by the colonial government for anti-colonial activities as self-sacrificing Gandhian, in 1934 he has acquired opportunist proportions. He is now a slothful congress leader amassing wealth from the funds collected for nationalist reconstruction programmes. He is now fat and happy to be the treasurer of the funds collected for *Harijan*/untouchable welfare.

The cartoonist Mohanlal, however, was also not uncritical of Mahatma Gandhi and his politics. At times Gandhi enters into his cartoons, either as a saintly contrast to corrupt congress rank and file or he is portrayed as a lone figure chanting his noble message against such odds. See for example figure 8. The captions are self-explanatory.



Fig. 6: *Earner and Consumer* (Gaṅgā, November-December 1934.)

Caption: Gandhi the Earner is lean and thin like dry ginger, and the donation-devourer’s belly is spreading endlessly

⁵ The Bengali nationalist leader Chittaranjan Das was instrumental in the making of the Pact in 1923. It was a compromise between Hindu and Muslim politicians in Bengal with regard to distribution of power in local bodies on the basis of the formula of separate electorate for each community. According to the pact, the majority/Muslims would have got 60% and the minority/Hindus 40% of the seats. This could have led to Muslim leaders in power in 16 districts and Hindus in 9 districts. This pact was never implemented due to fierce opposition within and outside Congress by the Hindu leaders. See Ray (1983: 310–316).



Fig. 7: Mahatma Gandhi (Gaṅgā, November-December 1934)

Caption:

Now I shall only chant the name of lord Rama.

I'll be in service of untouchables, shall not insist on going to jail.

Now I shall only chant the name of lord Rama.

However, it appears that Mohanlal, like many of his other male upper caste nationalist/socialist comrades, seems to be critical of Gandhi; he was particularly critical of Gandhi's take on the socio-religious question. He did not quite appreciate the Gandhian programme of rural reconstruction, especially his organization called *Harijan Sevak Sangha* (Society for the service of 'untouchables'/people of god) for two interrelated reasons. One, he found in it a diversion from the popular militant anti-colonial struggle. Two, instead of waging anti-imperialist agitation, leaders were mired in corruption and slothfulness. See, for example, figure 9 above. It depicts Gandhi as a *vaishnava* devotee ecstatically engrossed with the 'religious' question of untouchability and thus, it is insinuated, turning away from the political question of freedom and anti-colonial agitation. The language of the caption, *brajhasha*, is also suggestively emblematic. Gandhi is singing in the language of medieval *Bhakti* poetry!

Mohanlal was not only skeptical of Gandhi's social programme but he was not very enthusiastic about the prospect of Hindu-Muslim unity as evinced by Gandhi and the Congress either. As per his own understanding the cartoonist laid bare the problems underlying the implementation of such an agenda. Two examples will suffice. See figures 10 and 11.



Fig. 8: How is unity possible? (Prabhā, October 1924)

Mohanlal believed that the public controversy over the issues of cow-slaughter, śuddhi (purification and [re]conversion of Muslims into the fold of Hinduism), etc., had wedged a deep cleavage and an atmosphere of mutual suspicion amongst the two communities. Unless they were addressed adequately and resolved, the goal of unity would remain merely an exercise in political verbosity. Figure 10 is especially illustrative of the fact that Hindu (represented as a Brahman) and Muslim (represented as a butcher) hearts are pierced with each other's dagger (namely, cow-slaughter and shuddhi). They are looking in the sky, suggestively unwilling to come closer to each other. Yet the Hindu [Congress] leaders are pushing the two communities into an embrace. Mohanlal did not fail to subtly underline his deep seated suspicion that the attempt of unity is basically a sign of Hindu initiative, not of the Muslim leaders. Figure 10 shows clearly that a Hindu leader, who resembles none other than the Bengali leader Chittaranjan Das, is pushing the Muslim towards unity.



Fig. 11 Hindu Muslim unity and the Muslim leaders (Prabha, September 1924)

Caption: In Delhi, before the riots + In Delhi, after the riots

The suspicion is clearly and boldly voiced in the cartoon Hindu-Muslim Unity and Muslim leaders. The reason behind the failure of Hindu-Muslim unity and the communal enmity and riots, according to this cartoon, lay in the fact that the Muslim leaders were not sincere and impartial. Figure 11 clearly castigates the Indian Muslim leaders of Khilafat movement (signified by Turkish fez) as unscrupulous. They were sleeping or turning a deaf ear to the cry of Hindus who were being killed by the Muslim rioters in their backyard. After the riot they are speaking aloud for the cause of unity. In short, the cartoonist was suspicious of the intentions of Muslim leaders who spoke for communal harmony.

Conclusion

A sneak peek into the scattered artistic oeuvre of the cartoonist Mohanlal has allowed us only a partial reconstruction of his cultural-political ideas during 1920s and 1930s. It is fair to conclude that his cultural and political imagination was conspicuously anti-colonial and militantly non-cooperationist. His nationalism was deeply informed by upper caste Hindu perspective. Following and reaffirming the representational conventions of his times, he figuratively visualized (the self of) India nation and Hindu community as the Brahmin man. Mohanlal's nationalism was also suspicious of Muslims, their political sincerity and commitment to composite nationalism. It was, moreover, skeptical of a Gandhian politics, which strove for socio-religious reform and put a premium of self-purification on the high caste Hindus through programmes like social uplift and religious equality of 'untouchables' in the Hindu religious order (Nagraj 2010). Although he was in favour of religious reform and targeted the older religious aristocracy, he perceived Gandhian social programmes at best secondary or digression from the course of political struggle. This is not to suggest that he was in favour of caste discrimination as such. His collection of stories *Rajkan*, referred to earlier, gives the impression that some of his stories boldly captured the phenomenon of caste-class atrocities in rural society. Unlike many of his friends and contemporaries, Mohanlal, however, did not write or sketched cartoons around "the women's question and patriarchal oppression" during 1920s and 1930s. Women characters enter into his short stories as impoverished/ childless parent or mother. Problems of infant mortality and childhood run through many of his stories.⁶ We shall refrain from making fur-

⁶ Interestingly, he wrote a dystopian novel *Nayā yug: nayā mānav* (New era: new human) in 1957 which celebrated the vanishing tribe of caring, obedient, educated, sexually reticent, homely woman as ideal and representative of the good old Indian tradition. It demonized the westernized Indian women as sexually lascivious morally degenerated

ther assertions on the cartoonist Mohanlal's ideas in relation to Indian nationalism, its political agenda and social programme, etc., during the 1920s and 1930s. For it is beyond the scope of such a short essay to comment on his entire oeuvre. A more comprehensive intellectual biography will have to take into account all his later works: literary, journalistic and historical writings alongside private papers spanning the changing historical contexts of more than six decades of the twentieth century.

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and hankering after money and conspicuous consumption representing the new, ascending and modern culture.

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