



Over five decades, avid readers of The Times of India eagerly anticipated a comic strip, “You Said It”, featuring the character of ‘The Common Man’ clad in a distinctive checked coat, neat dhoti, and tufts of upturned hair. This daily strip was created by Rasipuram Krishnaswami Iyer Laxman, widely recognised as R. K. Laxman, a political satirist, cartoonist, illustrator, animator, and humorist. He skillfully depicted the nuances of life in India in tabloids and newspapers, highlighting social issues and politics through cartoons full of perceptiveness, irony, and wit. The R. K. Laxman Foundation was established in his honour by his daughter-in-law, Usha Laxman, to promote art, education, equality and sustainability among the younger generations.

R. K. Laxman was born on 24th October 1921 in Mysore and was the youngest of six sons. In his biography, *The Tunnel of Time*, he admits that even at a very young age, all he wanted to do was draw. He was incredibly passionate about sketching, not letting a single day pass without putting his pencil on paper (Laxman 1998, 9). He gradually grew prominent in the art world, beginning with publishing his cartoons in *Koravanji*, a popular Kannada magazine and winning an award for the pencil sketches of his nephew (Menon 2015). He studied economics, philosophy and politics at Maharaja College in Mysore. While studying, he worked with multiple newspapers, illustrating his brother, R. K. Narayan’s stories in *The Hindu* and drawing political cartoons in the *Swatantra*, published by the veteran journalist and Gandhian Khasa Subba Rao (Laxman 2014). He also worked with Gemini Studios for six months as an animator (Ramnarayan 2015).



Having finished his education, he boarded the train to New Delhi, the capital of the world’s biggest democracy. However, he was rejected by the *Hindustan Times* due to his age and inexperience, and the newspaper company advised him to work for a few years in provincial papers. In search of prospects, he travelled to Mumbai, where he met R. K. Karanjia, founder of the *Blitz*, who gave him a job on the spot upon seeing a simple cartoon he drew. R. K. Laxman developed his famous character, *Tantri*, the magician at *Blitz* (Roysam 2016).

His first full-time job as a cartoonist was at the *Free Press Journal*, where he worked alongside Bal Thackeray, forming a friendship which would outlast Thackeray’s political campaigns and Laxman’s political satire (Byatnal 2017). However, an argument with the owner of the *Free Press Journal* led him to make his historic move to the *Times of India* in 1951, where he would work for the rest of his career. He drew comic strips for a children’s magazine and the *Illustrated Weekly of India*. He had to work his way up from the *Times* tabloid to the front pages, where he would reign supreme for decades as the chief political cartoonist (Menon 2015). For 68 years, six days a week, he spent six hours in his cabin producing daily cartoons for the *Times* (Unny 2023). Unfortunately, a stroke in 2003 paralysed his left side, but he only took a brief hiatus from the drawing board, returning to it for another seven years (Dharker 2015).



His work marked his canny ability to capture the broad Indian experience in incredibly intimate ways. His work was always conscientious, humorous and never pretentious, a nod to the reality of life. Even as he captured the pitfalls and stumbles of a new nation, he imbued each pocket cartoon with such solidarity that the Common Man became both a comic scapegoat and a symbol of commiseration (Sanyal 2015). In Laxman's words, he was a silent spectator to the marching of time, a witness to every unfolding event but confined to the margins (Banerjee 2019). The Common Man was so prolific that it inspired a TV show titled R. K. Laxman ki Duniya (Shah 2011). Throughout Laxman's career at the Times, he drew over 9,000 political cartoons, in addition to the 7,000 socio-political cartoons for "You Said It". He caricatured over five 500 political leaders in the Illustrated Weekly alongside several film personalities for Filmfare (Banerjee 2019).

Besides his work for the Times group, he has created calendars for the State Bank of India, illustrated catalogues for Air India and matchboxes for Wimco. He has written novels, short stories, travelogues and an autobiography (Laxman 2014). In his personal life, he was endlessly fascinated with the common crow. He considered them more beautiful, courageous, and multifaceted than any other bird. He painted hundreds of crows (Ramnarayan 2015). The classical measured brushstroke in R. K. Laxman's work reflects British Cartoonist David Low's influence on him (Choudhury 2020). He was overjoyed when Low visited him at the Times office (Roysam 2016).

R. K. Laxman's story is one of resilience, of relentless pursuit of excellence despite setbacks. In the late 1930s, the Sir JJ School of Art refused to admit the illustrator because his skill required refinement. Decades later, the art institution erected a memorial dedicated to him there. Laxman won many recognitions throughout his illustrious life, such as the Padma Bhushan in 1973, the Ramon Magsaysay Award for excellence in journalism in 1984 and a Padma Vibhushan in 2005. (Niyogi et al. 2015) In 2004, the University of Mysore conferred an honorary doctorate to him. (Aravind 2015) Through his work, he has chronicled the history of India almost since its inception in pocket-sized cartoons that reflected the woes and joys of the citizens. The late historian, journalist and novelist Khushwant Singh said that the day Laxman's cartoons stop appearing on the front pages, Indians who start their day with a smile will have nothing left to smile about. The great cartoonist passed away at 94 years old on 26th January 2015, leaving behind a memoir of Indian social life through illustrations.







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