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## POSTERS AT THE ARCH: A TRADITION OF PROTEST, CONSCIENCE, AND HUMOUR IN ODISHA'S RAILWAY COLONY

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### ABSTRACT

*This narrative explores the unique and largely forgotten tradition of 'posters' within the Anglo-Indian community of Odisha – a creative practice that blended humour, protest and communal conscience in equal measure. Emerging in a pre-digital age, these anonymously drawn and handwritten posters served as sharp, witty commentaries on local behaviours, relationships, and social dynamics. Positioned prominently on the arch of the Sacred Heart Church or its adjoining walls, they became both a source of amusement and a mirror reflecting the values – and contradictions – of a tightly knit society. At the heart of this tradition was an anonymous figure affectionately known as the "Poster Man," whose clever illustrations and well-timed captions gently called out gossip, age-gap romances, and questionable conduct, all while maintaining a tone of mischief rather than malice.*

*Drawing on oral history interviews with senior members of the community, this study documents how these posters – recalled through detailed anecdotes – functioned as a form of satire, subtle protest, and moral reflection. While they occasionally provoked discomfort or embarrassment, they also sparked dialogue, fostered introspection, and reinforced communal bonds. This work is not only a nostalgic account of a colourful chapter in local history, but also a tribute to the Anglo-Indian community's resilience, creativity, and capacity for self-critique. Ultimately, it serves as a meditation on how small acts of anonymous dissent can engage a community's conscience and leave lasting cultural imprints.*

### KEYWORDS

*Anglo-Indian community; oral history; satire; social protest; memory; Odisha; poster tradition; cultural heritage; humour and dissent; community identity.*

## INTRODUCTION

In the tapestry of Anglo-Indian life, in Odisha, where colonial legacies and traditional values intertwined, there existed a unique form of communication, a form that was as mischievous as it was insightful. This tradition, now largely forgotten, was embodied in the mysterious 'posters' that appeared without warning, often in the quiet hours of the early morning, pinned to the walls of public spaces like the church archway. These posters, drawn with a mixture of wit and audacity, served as both playful jabs and sharp commentaries on the social mores of the day.

The tradition of 'posters' was one of the more whimsical, and now largely forgotten, aspects of Anglo-Indian community life in Odisha. These hand-crafted bits of satire weren't just for laughs; they became a clever way for the community to hold up a mirror to itself, revealing the unspoken truths and subtle social dynamics of life in the railway colony. Mischievous yet light-hearted, the posters captured a kind of humour that could only thrive in close-knit circles where people knew each other well enough to tease without offense. What made them truly special was the blend of charm and communal intimacy they carried, offering a delightful glimpse into a world where wit, warmth, and a shared sense of fun brought everyone just a little closer.

This piece takes a look back at that time, recounting the playful yet poignant moments when these posters brought both laughter and discomfort, pride and embarrassment, but always a sense of shared understanding. At their core, the posters were never meant to hurt; they were a protest wrapped in humour, a reflection of a society that valued both respect and irreverence in equal measure. Through the telling of these stories, we attempt to step into the world of community life, where laughter was both a release and a reminder of the conscience that guided it. These tales aren't just about the targets of these pranks, they are about the culture that embraced them, the boundaries they questioned and the collective spirit they defined.

## METHODOLOGY

This study draws on oral history and ethnographic approaches to document and analyse a unique community memory surrounding the so-called 'poster era' within the Anglo-Indian community in Odisha. The research is rooted in the personal connections and lived experiences of the first author, an Anglo-Indian, who had long been aware

of the tradition through anecdotes shared at family gatherings. These initial impressions were supplemented by references that began resurfacing in community conversations and house meetings, which piqued the authors' interest and prompted systematic inquiry.

The primary objective of this study was to document, preserve, and share the vibrant yet often overlooked heritage and informal practices of the Anglo-Indian community, particularly those linked to the Sacred Heart Church (Catholic) in Odisha, one of the oldest churches in the region (established circa 1872). According to oral accounts, the posters began appearing around 1979, and the tradition was at its peak between 1981 and 1986, and faded by the early 1990s. Their unpredictable and anonymous appearance meant that few could witness the act itself, and over time, the tradition slipped from communal memory, especially as many community members from that era either passed away or assumed that these stories held little interest for younger generations.

A purposive sampling approach was used to select respondents – community elders and individuals who had clear memories of the period in question. Interviews were conducted in the homes of participants after gaining their consent. The method used was unstructured oral history interviewing, beginning with an open prompt inviting recollection of the posters. Respondents were encouraged to speak freely and narrate without interruption. Following their narratives, clarifying questions were posed regarding the visual characteristics of the posters (e.g., painted or sketched), the content and messaging, community reactions, and other sensory or emotional details. These interviews allowed for a textured understanding of the phenomenon as remembered by those who lived through it.

All respondents independently affirmed that the creators of the posters were Anglo-Indian, asserting that the knowledge displayed – often humorous, biting, or ironic – could only come from insiders. Notably, all mentioned the enigmatic figure of 'Laal Singh', widely believed to be an Anglo-Indian despite the name, due to the precise familiarity with community life and idioms expressed in the posters.

The traditions, anecdotes, and events discussed in this study are grounded in the lived experiences of our interviewees and reflect the social realities, cultural practices, and informal institutions of their time. We conducted interviews with four men and three women, all residents of Odisha, who were born between 1938 and 1961. To preserve authenticity and provide context, we have included brief descriptions of the respondents; however, no identifying information has been disclosed in this text or the analysis, in order to protect their privacy and maintain confidentiality.<sup>1</sup>

This study was conducted with full awareness that some members of the community may experience discomfort regarding references to this tradition. Firstly, because the posters occasionally called attention to individuals' behaviour in a public manner; and secondly, because some community members may perceive that the posters referenced individuals connected to their families, whether living or deceased. However, the work has been undertaken with deep respect and no intent to malign or misrepresent any individual, living or deceased. It is a tribute to the resilience, creativity, and complexity of a community whose everyday histories deserve to be remembered and recorded. Although all the respondents were familiar with the events discussed, we have deliberately excluded any identifying details that might indicate which individual contributed specific anecdotes about particular posters.

## THE POSTER MAN

Long before the age of social media and digital pranks, these handwritten or hand-drawn posters served as a charming form of community banter – an inside joke shared in full public view. At the centre of this quirky tradition stood a legendary figure: the mysterious Poster Man. An Anglo-Indian railwayman, it was believed, he was equal parts prankster and observer, respected for his wit and quietly infamous for his playful mischief. With a keen eye for human nature and a flair for gentle satire, he turned the church walls into his personal canvas, offering up sly commentary that never failed to amuse.

Though his identity was something of an open secret, no one ever officially unmasked him. His pranks were generally received in good humour – at least, that was the unspoken agreement. Rumoured to prefer the quiet hours of the night shift, the Poster Man would slip away from his railway duties into the church compound under cover of

darkness. His favoured spot was the grand archway at the church entrance, where he'd pin up his latest creation: a witty jab, a cheeky dig, or a light-hearted observation aimed at someone in the community. By the time morning mass began and people started to arrive, the poster would be in full view – ready to greet its unsuspecting 'star'. The moment of revelation was often met with muffled laughter or mock surprise from those already in the know, while the subject of the joke, more often than not, had no choice but to smile and take it in their stride. It was all in good fun, never cruel, just clever and cheeky.

These posters became mini-events in themselves, with people eagerly glancing up at the archway to see who the star of the day was. It was a unique form of social commentary, rooted in familiarity and a shared sense of humour that only a close-knit community could pull off. Among the many clever – and occasionally controversial – posters that appeared mysteriously on the church archway, one in particular achieved near-legendary status. Titled "The Short Lady with the Long Tongue", it quickly became one of the most talked-about pieces of community satire.

The poster was rumoured to be a playful jab at a woman who was, let's say, famously well-informed about everyone else's business. It was said that like clockwork, she would leave her home at 2:30 in the afternoon, making her way through the railway colony to make her daily social calls. Her route included five specific houses – homes of friends, neighbours, and, conveniently, sources of gossip. She never stayed too long, but long enough to exchange a few well-placed words, pick up a fresh story, and pass it along at her next stop.

The poster itself was a piece of art – crude, perhaps, but unmistakably effective. It featured five neatly drawn houses, each labelled with the family names of their respective occupants. At a distance from the cluster stood an unmistakably short woman with an exaggerated head and not one, but five long tongues snaking out of her mouth, each one slithering into a different house. It was both hilarious and horrifying in its precision.

What truly gave the game away, though, wasn't the drawing, it was the caption. At the bottom of the poster were the immortal words she was known to begin every

conversation with: “I will tell you something, but don’t tell anyone...” With that phrase alone, the entire colony knew exactly who the poster referred to.

Though the identity of the woman was never explicitly stated, the combination of imagery and catchphrase left little room for doubt. Reactions, as always, were mixed – some found it wickedly funny, others were scandalised, but most agreed it was done in the spirit of good-natured ribbing that defined the community’s humour.

It was this kind of clever, tongue-in-cheek storytelling that made the Poster Man such a legend. His posters didn’t just poke fun, they captured moments of real life, distilled community dynamics, and held up a mirror that made people laugh, even when it was at themselves.

One of the more memorable – and perhaps slightly uncomfortable – targets of the Poster Man’s sharp sense of humour was an elderly gentleman who, despite his advanced age, had developed a rather... well, shall we say, persistent fondness for a teenage girl. The disparity in age was undeniable, but his feelings for her remained strong, and in his mind, there was no question of the depth of his affection. This particular young lady, part of a large and handsome family, had captured the gentleman’s attention, and despite the obvious gap in their years, he harboured thoughts that might seem out of place in a more conventional setting. Being a respectable member of the community, he was entrusted with a somewhat formal, yet highly cherished, task: whenever her father was away, he was asked to accompany the young lady and her five sisters to church. It was a role he performed with great pride, faithfully escorting the sisters to their Sunday service, always in good spirits and with the air of a dutiful gentleman.

One Sunday, as he walked proudly with the object of his affection, flanked by her five other striking sisters, he could hardly have known that the Poster Man had other plans. As they made their way to church, a shock awaited him. Right there, on the church wall, was a freshly inked poster that depicted him in a rather compromising light.

The image was a playful but barbed commentary on the situation. The elderly gentleman was drawn pushing a pram with none other than the lady of his dreams

seated comfortably inside. Behind him, in full view, trailed her five attractive sisters, all walking behind like a parade. The poster, with its sharply worded caption, read: “Snatching from the Pram.”

The implication was clear, and it was both humorous and a little uncomfortable – no one needed to spell it out, but the message was clear: the young girl was far too young for him. The playful jab was a not-so-subtle reminder of the age gap and the somewhat inappropriate nature of his affections, all wrapped up in the Poster Man’s trademark cheekiness. The elderly gentleman, who had always taken pride in his role as the faithful church escort, was left stunned, his cheeks no doubt flushing as the congregation around him took in the poster with varying degrees of amusement. Some of the more knowing glances might have lingered a bit too long, but as always, the Poster Man had struck with a humorous – if a little embarrassing – truth that could not be easily ignored. In the end, the gentleman took it all in his stride, as these things tended to go. His feelings for the teenager may have persisted, but the community had spoken through the poster, reminding him that some affections were better left unspoken, at least in public.

The Poster Man never seemed to miss a trick, especially when someone in the community appeared to be stepping a little too far out of line – or perhaps in the case of one individual, simply getting a bit too comfortable with a well-established pattern. On one occasion, the target of his clever criticism was a man known for his love of tennis and his even greater affection for women in their forties. He had a certain reputation for getting involved with mature, sophisticated women, a fact that hadn’t gone unnoticed by the rest of the community. While his actions were often met with raised eyebrows, the man carried on with his tennis and his courtships, seemingly unfazed by the whispers around him.

In matters of the heart, the Poster Man reigned supreme. He had an uncanny ability to spot the subtle – often unspoken – patterns of desire and attraction within the community. His sharp eye was always peeled for those who crossed boundaries, particularly when it came to relationships. And in this instance, he trained his gaze on the tennis-loving gentleman, who seemed to have a penchant for older women.

One summer morning, as the churchgoers gathered for service, a new poster appeared, much to everyone's surprise. There, prominently displayed for all to see, was a drawing of a tennis player, distinctly recognizable by his left arm outstretched high in the air, preparing to serve a ball. In his right hand, he gripped his racket, ready to send the ball flying.

But it wasn't just the athletic posture that caught everyone's eye. What truly made the poster memorable were the words that accompanied the image. Just above the tennis ball, hanging in mid-air, was a score that made the message impossible to miss: "Love 40."

To the uninitiated, this might have seemed like a simple reference to a tennis score – but to anyone familiar with the community's dynamics and the Poster Man's style, it was clear what was being implied. The score "Love 40" was a pointed jab at the man's pattern of getting involved with older women, women well beyond his age, each one in her forties. The "Love" in tennis is a score of zero, and the number 40 is the next point, implying that this was not just a harmless game for him; it was a recurring pattern, one that the community had begun to notice all too well.

The poster was a sly commentary on the man's 'game' off the court. He was someone who seemingly played the field, but the Poster Man's depiction turned it into a metaphor – one that combined the tennis metaphor with a pointed remark about his relationships. By juxtaposing the world of tennis with his romantic exploits, the poster drew attention to the man's somewhat questionable behaviour in a way that only the Poster Man could – playful yet cutting. As always, the reactions from the community were mixed. Some, who had seen the man's flirtations unfold over the years, chuckled at the brilliance of the poster. The imagery was unmistakable, and the connection between the tennis score and his romantic pursuits was both clever and cheeky.

The younger members of the congregation might have found the joke amusing, a bit of harmless fun that made light of the man's situation. But for others, particularly those who were perhaps on the receiving end of his attention – or those who didn't appreciate such public critiques – the poster may have felt a little too bold. In the close-knit nature of the community, there was always the risk of stepping over the line



between humour and humiliation. And while the Poster Man was skilled at ensuring his work was never too harsh, there was no denying that this particular piece of art would spark conversations, and likely leave the tennis-playing gentleman a little more self-aware than before.

As the Poster Man's work progressed, it became clear that his creations were no longer just cheeky jabs at individual behaviour. Over time, they evolved into much more than just humorous critiques – they became a form of social commentary, a way for the community to reflect on its own values, norms, and sometimes, its contradictions.

The targets of his posters, once taken by surprise, could see the humour in his sharp wit, even as it exposed their vulnerabilities. The Poster Man's ability to capture not just the outward actions but the unspoken, subtle dynamics of relationships – whether romantic, familial, or social – made his work resonate deeply. Each poster was a snapshot of a moment, a humorous exaggeration of reality that often carried an undercurrent of truth.

As time went on, the Poster Man's artistic style became more refined, his observations more pointed. Early on, his posters were simple, almost childlike in their execution – a playful jab at the quirks of the community. But as his reputation grew, so did his craft. His work became more polished, his satire sharper, and the community's reaction more nuanced. As time went on, the Poster Man's creations grew more layered and sophisticated. He began weaving in clever metaphors, drawing from community culture, neighbourhood gossip, and even bits of history to deliver his messages. His focus shifted from poking fun at individuals to cleverly exposing the community's assumptions, double standards, and quiet hypocrisies. The humour remained, but it was now laced with insight, encouraging reflection as much as laughter.

The reach of his work extended well beyond the church walls or the local gatherings where his posters appeared. His commentary sparked animated discussions over evening strolls, tea-time chats, and post-mass conversations. People began to reflect, wondering if they, too, might one day find themselves in the Poster Man's line of sight. In doing so, the community developed a shared sense of self-awareness, a kind of

gentle introspection. Through his light touch and sharp wit, the Poster Man helped people learn to laugh at themselves, even as they grew more mindful of how their actions might be seen by others.

However, the posters also had a darker side. For some of the more sensitive members of the community, being the subject of a Poster Man creation was no small matter. It could lead to embarrassment, resentment, or even alienation. For individuals whose personal lives were laid bare for all to see, the experience could be uncomfortable, and sometimes the jokes felt too sharp. Even in a community as tight-knit as theirs, not everyone shared the same sense of humour, and some felt that the Poster Man had, on occasions, crossed a line.

But despite the discomfort, the posters also acted as a kind of social equalizer. No one was truly safe from their gaze – not the respected elders, not the wealthy, not the well-liked, and certainly not the outsiders. By using humour to expose hidden truths, the Poster Man ensured that the community was never too complacent, never too comfortable in its ways. In a sense, his work became a kind of gentle, yet effective form of social governance.

For those who found themselves on the receiving end of the Poster Man's sharp wit, the effects were often long-lasting. These individuals were compelled to confront the ways in which their personal lives were perceived – and publicly interpreted – by the broader community. One such case was the elderly gentleman involved in the now-infamous "Snatching from the Pram" incident. According to our respondents, the appearance of the poster served as a moment of reckoning. The public exposure of his affections, particularly toward a much younger woman, led him to reflect on the appropriateness of his actions. What he may have felt private was suddenly reframed as a source of communal humour, or even ridicule. We were told that the poster likely brought him to his senses. Though he did not give up his duties as escort immediately, eventually, he chose to distance himself from the family involved, though he maintained a respectful friendship with the young woman's father. This episode illustrates not only the power of communal commentary but also the capacity of individuals within the community to respond with a certain grace and maturity, navigating personal correction without open conflict or public fallout.

Similarly, the man depicted in the “Love 40” poster might have been forced to rethink his relationships with older women. The cleverness of the poster made it impossible for him to deny the pattern of his romantic entanglements, and it might have caused him to reflect on whether he was pursuing these relationships out of genuine affection or simply out of a desire to be seen as desirable. Over time, he might have realized that the Poster Man wasn’t just mocking him, he was holding up a mirror to his behaviour. Some targets, however, embraced their role in the Poster Man’s art. Rather than retreating in shame, they learned to laugh at themselves and became part of the community’s shared history of pranks. This is perhaps one of the more profound impacts of the Poster Man’s work: the way it encouraged individuals to find humour in their own flaws, to see their imperfections as part of a larger, collective narrative.

In 1980 however, the Poster Man’s usual light-hearted jabs took on a sharper edge, fuelled by something that had clearly irked him. The community had long prided itself on its grand *Meena Bazaar*,<sup>2</sup> a lively ten-day fete that brought together members from all communities for games, events, food, and fun. The festival was a highly anticipated tradition, drawing huge crowds year after year, and the profits, always substantial, were used to provide the community with a ‘free’ Christmas celebration – a much-loved gesture that ensured everyone could partake in the holiday cheer, regardless of their financial situation.

Over the years, the event had grown in scope, but the organizing committee – comprising forty members, led by the Honorary Secretary of the South West Institute (SWI) – had always kept a relatively low profile when it came to the event’s financial details. Though no one had ever explicitly questioned the profits, the sheer success of the festival meant that the funds generated were always significant. That is, until one year, when the crowd for the *Meena Bazaar* was larger than ever, and the profits were expected to be particularly substantial. Yet, despite the excitement, the committee chose not to disclose the profits from that year. The decision raised eyebrows, and whispers of suspicion began to circulate. Why the secrecy? Why the sudden withholding of the community’s earnings? To the Poster Man, who was never one to pass up an opportunity for a well-aimed critique, this was too much to ignore.

The very next Sunday, as churchgoers gathered for the morning service, they were greeted with yet another of his masterful creations. This time, the poster was neatly inked and boldly titled: “Ali Baba and His Forty Thieves.”

The message was clear, and the satire was biting. In his inimitable style, the Poster Man had taken aim at the forty members of the organizing committee, comparing them to the infamous band of thieves from the classic tale. It was a pointed commentary on the lack of transparency and the suspicion surrounding the unaccounted-for profits. The choice of the Ali Baba reference was particularly apt: here, the committee was positioned as the ‘thieves’, and the wealth of the community – the metaphorical treasure – was hidden behind closed doors.

While the community couldn’t help but appreciate the wit and the audacity of the prank, the message struck a nerve. Some saw it as a clever way of bringing attention to the issue, while others found it unnecessarily harsh. The Poster Man, as always, had walked that fine line between humour and critique, and with this bold stroke, he’d succeeded in making the community confront a matter that had, until then, remained unspoken. According to our respondents, from that day onward, financial matters were watched more closely by the community, and members became noticeably more vocal and vigilant about transparency and accountability.

Over time, as the ‘poster tradition’ grew in notoriety, not everyone found themselves laughing along, especially those who had become the subject of the prankster’s wit. Some of the younger men in the community, whose own family members had been on the receiving end of the Poster Man’s cheeky jabs, began to take things a little more personally. Fuelled by a mix of irritation and curiosity, they formed a kind of informal vigilante squad, determined to unmask the mystery man behind the midnight missions. They lay in wait near the church in the early hours of the morning, hiding in shadows, eyes peeled for any sign of movement near the archway. But no matter how carefully they plotted or how long they kept watch, the Poster Man remained elusive.

With each failed attempt to catch him, the legend only grew. His anonymity became part of the fun, adding an element of mystery that only deepened the tradition’s allure. Even now, in 2024 and 2025, our respondents speak of him with a mix of amusement

and admiration – the man who knew how to take a joke just far enough, who poked fun without malice, and who managed to outwit his pursuers every single time. And perhaps, that's the way it was meant to be. Some legends are best left unnamed – after all, what's a good story without a little mystery?

The Poster Man's creations had a way of making people take a step back, sometimes with a laugh, other times with a deep, embarrassed sigh. It was as if he cast a spotlight on the community, one that reflected both its most endearing quirks and its most awkward truths. His posters were never purely malicious; they were sharp, yes, but always cleverly executed, and often framed by a layer of wit that made it hard to dismiss them outright. In a way, the community came to look forward to them, even if they occasionally wished they could be spared a personal jab.

The reactions varied depending on who you asked. Some of the younger members of the community, always ready for a laugh, would point and chuckle, nudging each other as they admired the Poster Man's latest work. These were the people who enjoyed the cheeky humour, the inside jokes that only those who had lived in the close-knit community for years could truly appreciate. They would discuss the posters over cups of tea, dissecting the images, pointing out subtle details, and trying to guess who would be the next target.

On the other hand, those who found themselves the subjects of these public pranks often had a less enthusiastic response. The elderly gentleman, for instance, the subject of the infamous "Snatching from the Pram" poster, must have felt a mixture of indignation and embarrassment. From our interviews, we learnt, that while he had no intention of abandoning his role as the church escort, the poster thrust his feelings for the young girl into the public eye, forcing him to confront the awkwardness of the situation. It was a humorous reminder of the age gap, but also a public acknowledgment that something about his actions seemed out of step with the community's expectations. How did he handle it? Likely with some discomfort but also with a dose of dignity. In many ways, the Poster Man gave him no choice but to laugh at himself, even if the joke was on him.

Then there were those poor souls on the Meena Bazaar organizing committee, who found themselves immortalized as “Ali Baba and His Forty Thieves.” Let’s just say, the humour didn’t go down quite as smoothly for them. The decision to keep the festival profits under wraps had already raised a few eyebrows, and the Poster Man’s cheeky exposé was the final nail in the committee’s carefully varnished reputation. The metaphor wasn’t subtle – it cast them as a merry band of looters making off with the community’s treasure, and no amount of awkward laughter could quite scrub that image clean. Some members reportedly turned a shade of red not found in any church calendar, and whispers of heated backroom squabbles weren’t far behind. But as satire tends to do, the poster hit where it hurt – and it worked. Suddenly, financial transparency became all the rage. Whether they liked it or not, the committee began announcing profits with the enthusiasm of repentant pirates discovering spreadsheets.

The Poster Man never seemed to fear the consequences of his work, perhaps because the very nature of his pranks made them feel almost like a rite of passage for the community. The posters became a form of public theatre, with each new one adding another layer to the ongoing story of the community’s evolution. They allowed the community to laugh at its foibles, to confront uncomfortable truths without the need for direct confrontation. And for the individuals who became the subjects of the posters, they often provided a much-needed moment of reflection. For some, it was an opportunity to change – whether in the way they conducted themselves or how they interacted with the community. For others, it was simply a matter of accepting that, in the world of the Poster Man, no one was above a little playful critique.

In the end, the Poster Man’s work had an undeniable impact. The community grew used to the idea that humour could be both a weapon and a balm, and that laughter could be the means to air grievances and, at times, heal wounds. As much as the targets of the posters might have grumbled about being caught in the crossfire, there was also an understanding that these public jabs weren’t intended to destroy but to point out the little absurdities of life in a way that everyone could understand, even if only through laughter.

The Poster Man may have been an enigma, but if there’s one thing our interviewees agreed on, it’s that he left an indelible mark on the community – whether people liked

it or not. His posters were more than pranks; they were playful time capsules, capturing the quirks, contradictions, and closeness of Anglo-Indian life in Odisha. With every cheeky sketch and sly caption, he held up a sideways glance at the society he knew so well. In doing so, he preserved something precious: the ability to laugh at oneself, to squirm a little, and still feel part of something larger. One irreverent poster at a time, he reminded the community of who they were.

Almost a decade and a half later, the younger generation of Anglo-Indians, many of whom had moved away from their hometowns for better opportunities, began to return to visit or for holidays. They had heard the stories of the Poster Man though perhaps they had never had the experience first-hand. For them, the posters represented a bygone era, a time when the community's values were more tightly held, and personal boundaries were constantly nudged, poked, and prodded with sharp humour.

When we discussed the posters with younger members of the community, their reactions were thoughtful and mixed. To them, the posters felt like relics from a more innocent – or perhaps less sensitive – time. They appreciated the creativity and wit behind the tradition, but also questioned its ethics. Was it acceptable to use public humour to expose the community's flaws? Did the Poster Man's pranks reflect the intimacy of a tight-knit group, or did they reveal a more judgmental and less tolerant past? Despite these reservations, the younger generation agreed on one thing: the stories, with all their contradictions, were worth remembering and preserving.

Nevertheless, the older generation (our respondents), viewed the Poster Man with a sense of nostalgia, seeing his work as an essential part of the community's identity. Even as the younger generation moved away from the traditions of the past, the legacy of the Poster Man remained – a testament to the community's ability to laugh, to critique, and to remain united in its shared history. In the end, the Poster Man's impact was felt far beyond his posters. He played a pivotal role in shaping the culture of the community, challenging individuals to reflect on their actions, and uniting them through shared humour and sometimes uncomfortable truths. Even as the world around them changed, the Poster Man's legacy endured, reminding everyone that no one – not even the most respectable member of the community – was immune to a little gentle satire.

As the Poster Man quietly rode off into the sunset somewhere around 1985-86 – most likely transferred to another railway station as part of the endless shuffling of postings – his absence was felt almost immediately. The walls of the church compound, once a canvas of sharp wit and gentle satire, now stood bare. Sunday mornings became quieter, the once-eager anticipation of discovering the latest jab or jest slowly gave way to a sense of loss. For a while, it seemed like the era of clever commentary and community gossip, laid out in ink and wit, had come to an end. But just as the community was beginning to settle into the quiet, something curious happened.

One bright Sunday morning, as parishioners trickled into the church, exchanging greetings and smoothing the creases in their Sunday best, something new caught their eye on the old corkboard near the entrance. A freshly pinned poster, bold in ink and unmistakably cheeky, had become the centre of murmurs and muffled laughter.

Drawn in broad strokes, it depicted a recently retired gentleman, unmistakably dressed in the crisp uniform of a railway ticket conductor, dashing across the page as fast as his legs could carry him. In one hand, he clutched a small sack labelled “PF” (Provident Fund), tied tight like a treasure bag. His expression was a perfect mix of panic and determination.

Hot on his heels were two hilariously exaggerated figures: a young man, sprinting, balancing loaves of bread under his arm like batons, and a dishevelled young woman, baby in arms, hair askew, with a face that combined desperation and grim resolve. Their eyes gleamed with comic intensity. The whole scene shimmered with mischief, a hilarious tableau that needed no explanation for those familiar with the rhythms of the community. The caption read:

Budda Boy with his bread,  
Buddi Girl with her kid,  
I think it's time I ran and hid.

The art was not professionally done – a bit rough, a little skewed – but it crackled with energy, its humour biting and beautifully timed, filled with the kind of local flavour and familial sarcasm only an Anglo-Indian from that town would truly understand. But what made people really pause, what got heads turning and eyebrows raised, wasn't the



joke, or even the audacity of the scene. It was the signature, confidently scrawled in red ink at the bottom right corner: Laal Singh.

And with that, another legend was added to the quiet folklore of the community. Gasps and whispers rippled through the crowd. The Poster Man had never signed his work – not once. His anonymity was part of the legend. His creations had spoken for themselves, and his refusal to be named had only added to his mystique. But this new artist, whoever he was, had chosen a different approach.

A name with no obvious connection. No one in the community could immediately place it – was it real? Was it a clue? A pseudonym? A parody? Theories abounded. Some thought it was a railway employee with a flair for satire, others believed it was a group effort, or even a woman continuing the legacy in disguise. A few elders scoffed at the name, suspecting that someone was trying too hard. But for most, curiosity turned quickly into amusement, and then, quietly, into a sense of relief. The spirit of the Poster Man had not died. It had simply changed hands.

Where the Poster Man had used elegant satire and subtle jabs, Laal Singh was bolder – perhaps less refined, but just as fearless. His posters often came with louder visuals, more direct humour, and a willingness to tread where even the Poster Man had hesitated. His style was brash, but his aim was true. If the Poster Man had poked fun at love and ambition with a sly smile, Laal Singh pointed and laughed outright. And the community, though a little stunned at first, couldn't help but be drawn in once more.

In some ways, Laal Singh's arrival marked the beginning of a new chapter for the community. The world around them was changing: youngsters were leaving, traditions were being questioned, and the old rhythms of community life were slowly fading. But the reappearance of the posters – signed this time – was a small act of continuity. It reminded everyone that humour was still alive, and that their stories, no matter how ordinary or absurd, were still worth telling. The legacy of the Poster Man now had a successor. Laal Singh for the moment, had captured the imagination of a community that had learned to laugh at itself – and in doing so, had remembered something important about who they were.

If the Poster Man was known for his finesse, Laal Singh was quickly earning a reputation for audacity. His posters didn't merely tease – they jabbed, poked, and occasionally, sucker-punched. His latest target was a lady well-known in the community for her polished airs and determined belief that her two sons were cut from a finer cloth than the rest. She was a regular at all community gatherings, always elegantly turned out, always with a comment about how “my boys are just different, you know...” She held big dreams for them – not just respectable jobs, but respectable futures. It was no surprise, then, that when she excitedly announced at a social gathering that one of her sons was, “trying out for the ships,” she did so with unmistakable pride. Perhaps she imagined epaulettes, foreign shores, and dignified salutes under the ship's bell.

But Laal Singh, ever the sharp observer, had caught the tone. It wasn't just pride – it was a sort of subtle dismissal of the community, a belief that her boys were meant for more. And that, in Laal Singh's eyes, was fair game. The following Sunday, as the usual flow of churchgoers passed through the compound, all eyes turned – as they now habitually did – to the arch at the church entrance. And there it was.

A hand-drawn poster, sketched in bold, expressive strokes, portrayed the lady's elder son aboard a ship. He stood on deck in naval whites – but not in the proud, commanding pose his mother might have envisioned. Instead, he appeared in a scene of dishevelled revelry. In one hand, he cradled a guitar like a lifeline. The other hand held a smouldering *chillum*.<sup>3</sup> He had a *beedi* tucked behind his ear, and the deck around him was littered with cigarette stubs and empty bottles marked 'XXX'. Hovering above this spectacle was a banner, inked in thick, unapologetic letters: “My Love is for my Sailor Boy!”

The imagery was unmistakable. It wasn't just humorous – it was brazen even bordering on crude. Laal Singh had done it again, pulling no punches as he undercut the mother's lofty proclamations with a visual that drew hearty laughter from some, and gasps from others. But not everyone was laughing.

The lady, spotting the poster, stopped in her tracks. Her expression reportedly turned from disbelief to outrage in a matter of seconds. With shoulders squared and head

high, she walked into the church – but not before a few sharp looks were cast around the courtyard, as if to root out the culprit herself.

The murmurs were instant. Some said she left early that morning, too furious to stay. Others claimed she confronted one of the Parish Committee members, insisting that “this kind of nonsense has no place in the House of God.” Either way, by the time mass ended, she had stormed out, the sound of her heels echoing sharply across the compound, her pride clearly bruised. The reactions were, as always, split. Some felt that Laal Singh had finally gone too far. They argued that ambitions – no matter how lofty – shouldn’t be mocked so cruelly. Others saw it as a well-deserved puncturing of pomposity.

For the younger members of the community, it was just another thrilling episode in the growing saga of Laal Singh. He was unpredictable, unfiltered, and clearly unafraid to challenge the old guard. In some ways, he felt more relatable than the enigmatic Poster Man – he didn’t just comment on behaviour, he challenged status, hierarchy, and aspiration itself.

And for those who had always felt judged or looked down upon by the lady and others like her, the poster was nothing short of poetic justice. The lady in question kept a low profile for a few weeks. Her sons did eventually leave town – they were packed off to boarding school. But the image lived on, becoming part of the community’s growing anthology of Laal Singh moments.

Even those who disapproved couldn’t deny one thing – Laal Singh had a way of keeping the community on its toes. His posters were more than art; they were events. And love him or hate him, people kept looking at that church arch every Sunday, wondering: Who’s next?

Among the many characters that populated the vibrant world of the Anglo-Indian community, there was one man who stood out – not just for his ambition, but for his unmistakable swagger. Known for his carefully groomed, almost theatrical hairstyle and booming voice, he had recently begun hinting – rather loudly – at aspirations beyond the community. Whispers floated around about his plans to enter local politics,

to represent not just his fellow railwaymen but, perhaps, the broader citizenry of the town. He had the confidence, the connections, and a flair for dramatic speeches that made some think he might just make it. But he also had something else – enemies. Or at least one.

For months, the community had speculated that Laal Singh – usually quick with a joke or jab – was deliberately steering clear of this particular man. Some said it was out of caution; others believed it was personal. Rumours swirled of an old rivalry, perhaps a past confrontation, something left unsaid but not forgotten. And then, one Sunday morning, the speculation ended.

Tacked boldly on the arch of the church compound was a poster that removed all doubt. It featured the man in question – there was no mistaking him. His unmistakable hair was exaggerated into a towering wave, glistening as though oiled with half the town's supply of Brylcreem. He was shown marching forward, chest puffed out, waving a massive flag. The flag bore the emblem of the union he represented – an organization he often spoke of with passion, as though it were his ticket to greater things. But this wasn't a celebration. It was satire at its sharpest. The exaggerated grin, the heroic pose, the over-the-top size of the flag: it was theatrical, bordering on farcical. And in true Laal Singh fashion, the caption beneath it drove the message home: "The 1<sup>st</sup> Anglo-Indian MLA!"

It was devastating. The poster mocked his political ambition with the same tools he used to market himself: pomp, pride, and performance. The community burst into a mix of laughter and unease. It was funny – but it was also the first time Laal Singh had taken aim at someone with real political ambitions, and that made it feel more loaded than usual.

One of our respondents, a close friend of the man in question, shared that he was, reportedly, livid. Not the kind of simmering annoyance one might shrug off, but the full-bodied fury of a man who had been publicly lampooned and couldn't retaliate. He didn't cause a scene – he had, after all, a certain political gravitas to uphold – but those in his inner circle said the sting ran deep. For someone who had carefully crafted a reputation of stern leadership and solemn dignity, being reduced to a cartoonish

caricature on a church wall was a public relations nightmare. He went quiet for a spell, missed a few Sunday services, and even found reasons to skip a community meeting where he was expected to speak – perhaps wary of further ‘artistic tributes’.

Others weren’t so sympathetic. Some long-time members of the community felt that his arrogance had been long overdue for a takedown. “He’s always looked down on us,” one elderly man muttered over tea, “like we’re just votes waiting to be counted.” For them, Laal Singh had done what the Poster Man before him used to do so effectively – level the playing field with a bit of ink and wit. But not everyone was cheering.

A few voices began to murmur that Laal Singh was going too far. This wasn’t just gentle teasing anymore – it felt pointed, perhaps even politically motivated. Some feared that mocking someone so openly could have real consequences, especially now that politics was involved. What if there were investigations? What if the church became a battleground for hidden rivalries?

We were told that the poster stayed up for most of the day – an unspoken sign that the winds of community satire had shifted. Usually, such posters vanished within hours, quietly removed by some discreet hand eager to restore decorum. But not this time. No one dared – or perhaps no one wanted – to take it down. And just like that, Laal Singh had made his mark. If the Poster Man ruled with a sly smirk, Laal Singh governed with boldness and brass. This episode marked a shift in Laal Singh’s narrative. His posters, once playful and cheeky, began to take on deeper tones. There was more purpose in them now – more edge. It was no longer just about harmless fun. His posters had become a tool – a statement. And somewhere in the shadows of the community, the older folks began to whisper again – not just about the poster or its target – but about the ghost of the Poster Man. Would he approve? Would he step in? Or had the torch truly passed into newer, more fearless hands?

However, the Poster Man never resurfaced, and Laal Singh continued his reign for a while longer, until he too quietly retired from public life sometime around 1989. As the old posters faded from the walls and from the community’s collective memory, life settled into a quieter, almost suspiciously well-behaved rhythm.

Then, one morning in 1990, without warning or fanfare, a new poster appeared. At its centre was a beautifully rendered scissor, poised mid-snip, with a long ream of cloth slipping between its blades. In bold, deliberate lettering, the message declared:

“Cut your suit according to your cloth.”

The sudden reappearance of a poster – bearing a delicately drawn scissor slicing through a length of cloth, accompanied by the adage “Cut your suit according to your cloth” – carries quiet but profound symbolism. In contrast to the earlier, chaotic depictions of rebellion and satire, this final image speaks to restraint, self-awareness, and acceptance. The scissors symbolize choice and transformation, while the cloth represents one’s resources or reality – finite, personal, and inescapably one’s own. Together, they suggest the wisdom of shaping one’s life within the bounds of what is truly available, a subtle critique of excess, ambition, or delusion. Coming after the disappearance of the elusive Poster Man and the quiet retirement of Laal Singh, the poster lands as a contemplative coda to a chapter of ‘unrest-marking’, a shift from loud defiance to inward reflection, from public spectacle to private reckoning.

Today, the poster tradition is just a fond memory, a relic of a time when community life was colourful, personal, and full of character. It reminds us of a world where even the pranks had personality – and where laughter, no matter how it came, was always communal. In those vivid strokes and cheeky slogans lived a kind of shared spirit, a quiet rebellion wrapped in wit, stitched into the very fabric of the neighbourhood. Though the walls are now bare, the echoes remain – of sailors and scissors, of satire and sense – whispering that once, not so long ago, paper and ink were enough to stir a whole town.

Now, the posters live on only in memory – a quirky, fading echo of a time when community life was loud, lived-in, and deeply personal. The posters were often irreverent, poking fun at authority, mocking pretensions, and sometimes skirting the edges of good taste. Yet they were never seen as threats – rather, they were accepted, even cherished, as part of the community’s character. They brought people together in laughter, in debate, and in recognition of shared stories. In a world before digital

noise, a wall with a poster could still surprise, provoke, or delight – reminding everyone that life, in all its messiness, was meant to be noticed.

## CONCLUSION

The poster tradition, with its unique blend of humour, wit, and gentle protest, was more than just a series of playful pranks – it was a form of social commentary, a mirror reflecting the nuances and contradictions of life within the community. Through the Poster Man's mischievous creations, the community not only found laughter but also a subtle reminder of the importance of self-awareness and respect.

What began as a form of harmless mockery soon evolved into a vehicle for moral reflection, poking fun at the idiosyncrasies of individuals while holding up a mirror to the collective conscience of the community. In an age long before digital platforms and viral memes, these hand-drawn posters were an intimate and personal way of conveying messages – messages that, while humorous on the surface, often carried a deeper truth about the values and norms that governed everyday life.

The legacy of these posters is not simply in their comedic value, but in the way they captured the spirit of a community – one that could laugh at itself, reflect on its behaviour, and, at times, be called to question its actions. They remind us that even in the most intimate, tightly knit societies, there is room for both affection and critique, humour and conscience, in equal measure.

Today, the tradition may have faded into the past, but the lessons it imparted remain timeless. Whether through a handwritten poster or the whispered stories shared over tea, the need for connection, reflection, and a good-natured laugh endures. And as we look back on these moments, we are reminded that sometimes the greatest forms of protest – whether against social norms or personal quirks – are the ones that come wrapped in a smile.

These memories, lovingly retold and cherished across generations, are more than just amusing anecdotes – they are the heartbeat of a community that found strength in togetherness and joy in the everyday. Through this tradition, the Anglo-Indian community wove a cultural tapestry rich with humour, resilience, and a deep sense of

belonging. Even as time moves on and faces fade into memory, the laughter, camaraderie, and spirit they shared continue to echo in the hearts of those who remember. In telling these tales, we keep alive not just the people, but the essence of a way of life – spirited, sincere, and always ready with a smile.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Details about the seven interviewees are limited to ensure their privacy as they commented about the members of their own community connected with the posters.

- Anglo-Indian, Male, born 1938
- Anglo-Indian, Male, born 1940
- Anglo-Indian, Female, born 1941
- Anglo-Indian, Female, born 1945
- Anglo-Indian, Female, born 1948
- Anglo-Indian, Male, born 1958
- Anglo-Indian, Male, born 1961

<sup>2</sup> Meena Bazaar: For anyone who grew up around the South West Railway Institute at Khurda Road Junction, these words are part of memory's soundscape. The Meena Bazaar wasn't just an event—it was a highlight of the year, a glittering, noisy, delicious explosion of community life, woven together by laughter, elbow grease, and sheer Anglo-Indian charm.

Traditionally, Meena Bazars referred to temporary marketplaces organized for charitable causes, but in practice, they were also vital social gatherings, especially for Anglo-Indian communities in smaller towns. In Khurda Road, it became an annual ritual, held often on the Railway Institute grounds, with



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stalls lining the perimeter, and kids darting between the food counters and game zones. The games of chance – spin-the-wheel, fishing games, darts, razzle-dazzle and the infamous crown and anchor board. For the young, it was a time to dress up and mingle, to eye your ‘crush’ from behind a puff of smoke curling off a meat roll, or to try winning a prize for that special someone at the balloon-popping stall.

The Railway Institute, once the heart of Anglo-Indian recreational life, came alive during Meena Bazaar. It wasn't just about the funds raised but also about belonging, about visibility, about creating a space where Anglo-Indian culture could be celebrated without apology.

<sup>3</sup> A *chillum*, also spelled *chilam*, is a straight, conical smoking pipe that has deep cultural and historical roots in India. It is often associated with the smoking of cannabis.