

THE INDIAN STEREOTYPE: REPRESENTATION OF INDIA AND INDIANS IN AMERICAN TELEVISION CARTOON SHOWS FROM 1960 ONWARDS

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Abstract

Despite the Orient occupying an integral position in several European and American narratives, the relationship between the Occident and the Orient has remained one of domination, power and hegemony of the Occident. The Orient has become synonymous with barbarity and cruelty and at the same time, with magic and mysticism. Such presumptions have led to stereotyping and prejudices. The advancement of technology and media-helped re-establishing such preconceived ideas. Since the beginning of the Golden Age of American Animation, the Orient and its people have appeared in American cartoon shows.

This paper analyses the stereotyping of India and Indians in American television cartoons from the 1960s to the present time and how such stereotypes have changed over the last five decades.

Introduction

"I remember that India is like Wonderland. In this other universe everyone seems mad and everything is upside down, back to front and infuriatingly bizarre" (MacDonald 15). Sarah MacDonald's lines are evincive of the Western fixation with the Orient. Over the ages, Eurocentric narratives have chiselled the image of the East as a sphere of subverted social orders and practices. Kipling calls its "sullen" natives "[h]alf-devil and half-child". Conrad and Forster are more subtle in their respective approaches (Kipling 334). Nevertheless, the Orient has become the "deepest and most recurring images of the Other" in the Western canon (Said 1). This paper focuses on the portrayal of India and Indian stereotypes in American television cartoons from 1960 onwards.

The Emergence and Propagation of Television Animation in America

American animation reached the pinnacle of glory during the late 1930s, marking the Golden Age of American Animation. The birth of cable television in America, brought about prominent changes in "specific facets of storytelling" and "episodic and serial forms", which enabled animators to venture into creating shows exclusively for the small screen (Mittel 29). Companies like Disney, MGM and the Warner Brothers began investing in this sector. Theatrical clips like the Looney Tunes and Tom and Jerry were adapted for television viewing. In 1957, William Hanna and Joseph Barbara established Hanna-Barbara Productions, which refined, defined and dominated the television animation scene for the next four decades.

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The Indian Stereotype in American Television Animation over the Years

In *Orientalism*, Said asserts how "the electronic, postmodern world" has fuelled a "reinforcement of the stereotypes by which the Orient is viewed", having intensified the hold of the nineteenth-century academic and imaginative demonology of "the mysterious Orient" (27). Lippman, in *Public Opinion*, elucidates how "[i]n the great blooming, buzzing confusion of the outer world" one tends to "pick out" what one's "culture has already defined" (81) --- how "we tend to perceive that which we have picked out in the form stereotyped for us by our culture" (81). India, like the rest of Asia, falls into this pattern. It has been the premise of the adventures of the protagonists of a few shows, often depicted as a peregrine, utopian realm of sorcery and mysticism. India emerges as the "contrasting image" of the modern and flourishing America (Said, 2). It at once becomes "a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences" and barbarity and chaos (2) "Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West" (Said 5).

There is a deliberate use of spatio-temporal distortions to amplify incongruities. While the protagonists belong to the era the cartoon has been produced, they seldom bear a resemblance to the contemporary India. Anthony D. King quotes Hamadeh who affirms that the "dichotomy between tradition and modernity [is] a derivative of the dichotomy between East and West" (71).

On September 1964, *Jonny Quest* went on air. This popular animated science fiction series revolves around the eponymous eleven-year-old protagonist and his adventures with his scientist father and his bodyguard Race. In the seventh episode, "The Calcutta Adventure", they embark on a mission to Calcutta, where they first get acquainted with Hadji, who becomes a permanent member of their team. The first thing that would catch the eye of any Indian is the depiction of the city of Calcutta. Hadji appears sitting right outside the gate of Calcutta University, engrossed in snake charming! The renowned first multidisciplinary university in South East Asia does not bear its usual British architecture but appears to be a structure from the sultanate era with domes and minarets. Moreover, the busy College Street, amidst which the university is located, resembles a medieval oriental bazaar.

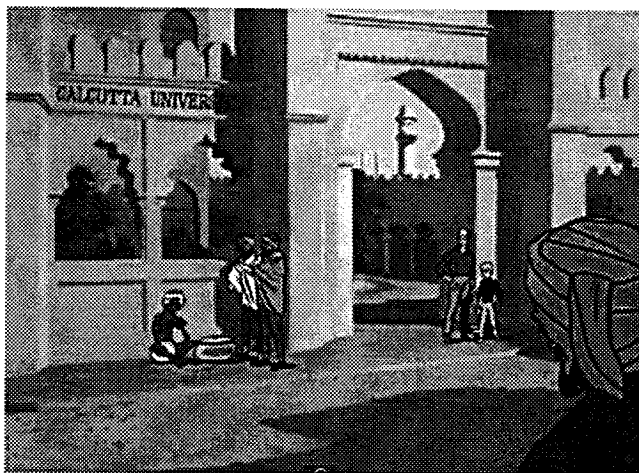


Figure 1 – Hadji charming snakes in front of Calcutta University

In "Bloodlines" of the *Real Adventures of Jonny Quest*, telecast in December 1996, Hadji and his friends go

back to India to meet his guardian Pasha the Peddler. In this episode however, Calcutta is somewhat, if not completely, a similitude of its actual self.



Figure 2 – The city of Calcutta as shown in "Bloodlines"

The cardinal justification in the arrant discrepancies between the two simulations is, undeniably, enhanced awareness due to increased immigration. Since 1965, the revised immigration laws of the United States resulted in an inundation of immigrants from the Asian and Latin American countries. The Indian community augmented from a paltry five thousand in 1960 to three million in 2010 (Gottschlich 283).

The vignettes of Calcutta in Laff-a-Lympics, which ran from 1977 to 1979, are much similar to the 1964 version of *Jonny Quest*. The series parodies the Olympic Games, with three teams of popular Hanna-Barbera cartoon characters competing for the gold medal in indigenous and exotic locations. The first part of episode 10 takes place in India. The elephant race commences from "downtown Calcutta" lined with sultanate style palaces ("India and Isreal").

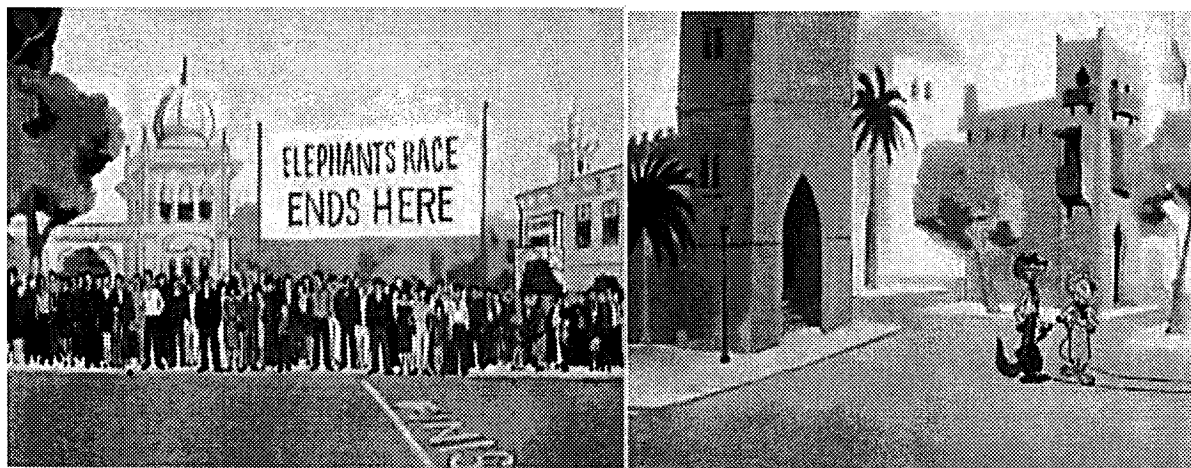


Figure 3 – The streets of Calcutta in Laff-a-Lympics

Another Indian city that has been caricatured is Bombay. The 1970s animated show *Josie and the Pussycats* follows the members of the band The Pussycats and their entourage performing gigs around the world. In "The Secret Six Secret", the Pussycats' schedule brings them to Bombay, where they successfully thwart the plan of a sinister group to overthrow an Indian leader. Bombay faintly resembles a modern metropolis. Yet the stereotype is conspicuous – the gateway of the Bombay airport resembles a medieval sultanate building!

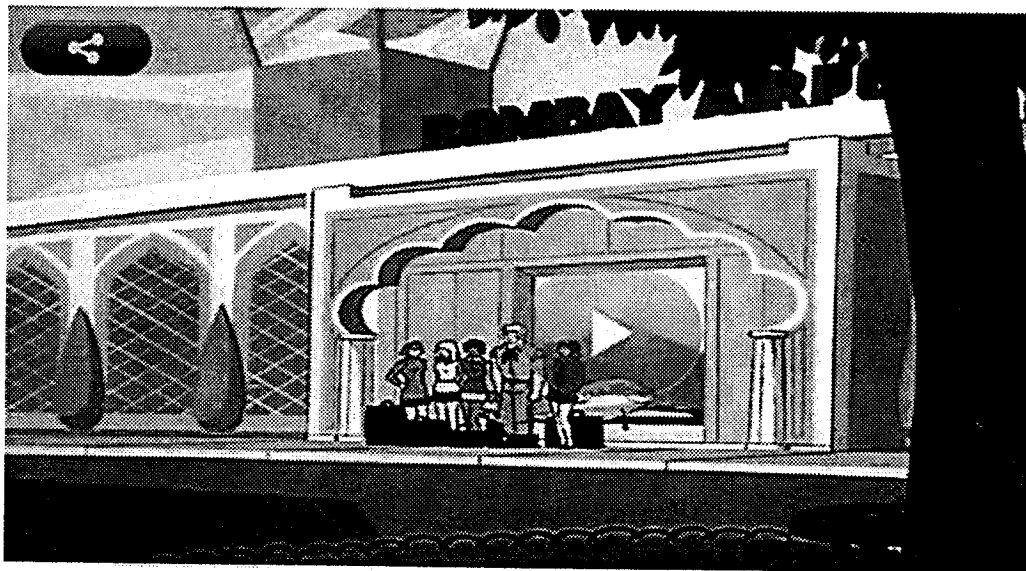


Figure 4 – Bombay Airport as showcased in "The Secret Six Secret"

In the scene where Alexandra and Alan board a taxi, their co-passengers include two locals, a cow, a goat and a hen.



Figure 5 – The taxi ride in "The Secret Six Secret"

Such "downward social comparisons", as Srividya Ramasubramanian avows, corroborate the ostensible primitiveness of Indian culture and "boost[s] the self-image of Western audiences" (259).

In the context of characterization, Hadji of *Jonny Quest* bears a great cultural significance being the very first Indian character to be included in an American show. He is shown to be endowed with the mystical gifts of telepathy and telekinesis. In "Bloodlines" it is revealed that he has inherited these gifts from his mother. Additionally, he is adept in hypnotism, possesses ability to communicate with animals and performs rope tricks.

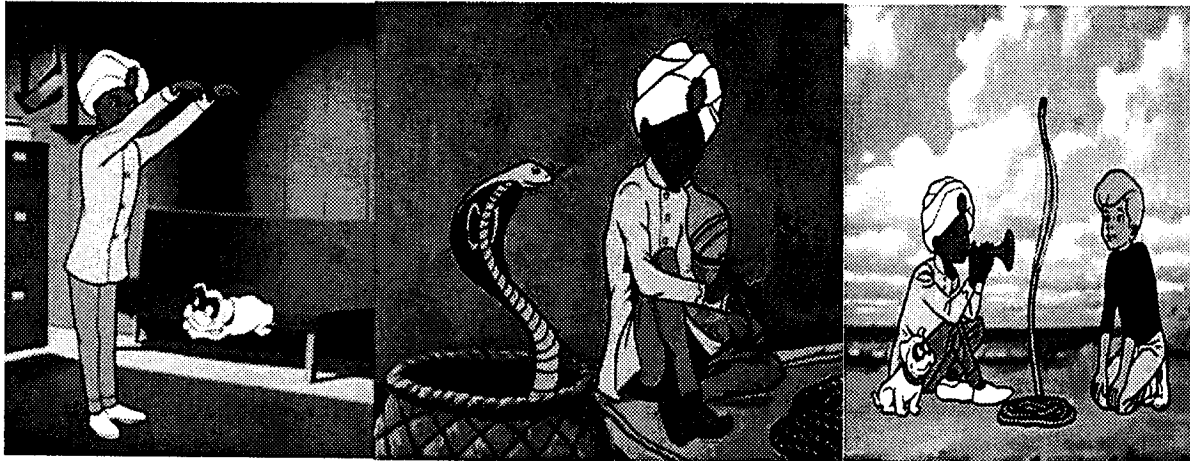


Figure 6 – Hadji and his many mystical powers—telekinesis, snake charming and rope tricks

The "standardization and cultural stereotyping", as Said asserts, "have intensified the hold of the nineteenth-century academic and imaginative demonology of 'the mysterious Orient'" (Said 26).

Clothing is an important marker of a given culture. It, as Pierre Gottschlich suggests, "become[s] projections for a pre-constructed set of character" (279). Hadji's heritage is evident in his attire—a kurta, a pajama, a Nehru jacket and the ever-present turban.

Interestingly, the turban has been used as an insignia of cultural identity. In *Recess*, a series telecast in the Disney Channel in the 1990s, a peripheral character called the Guru Kid is seen using his shirt as a turban and engaging in meditation.

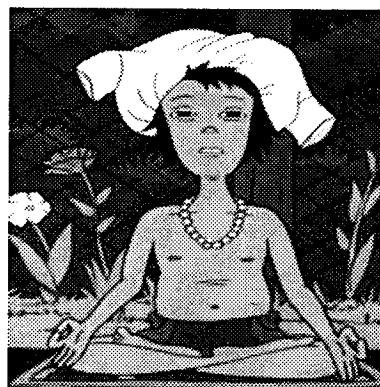


Figure 8 – Guru Kid, a character in *Recess*

In *Laff-a-Lympics* and all the *Jonny Quest* series, the entire Indian male populace is seen wearing turbans!

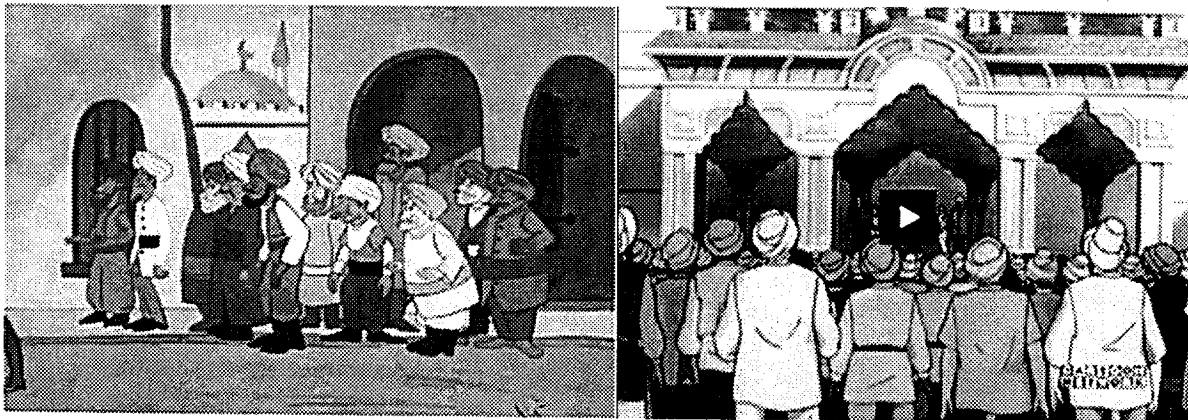


Figure 7 – All Indian men are seen wearing turbans in *Laff-A-Lympics* (left) and *The Real Adventures of Jonny Quest* (right)

Likewise, Indian women like Manjula Nahasapeemapetilon of *The Simpsons*, are perpetually shown wearing a bindi.

However, Baljeet Tjinder of *Phineas and Ferb* dresses like an average American child.

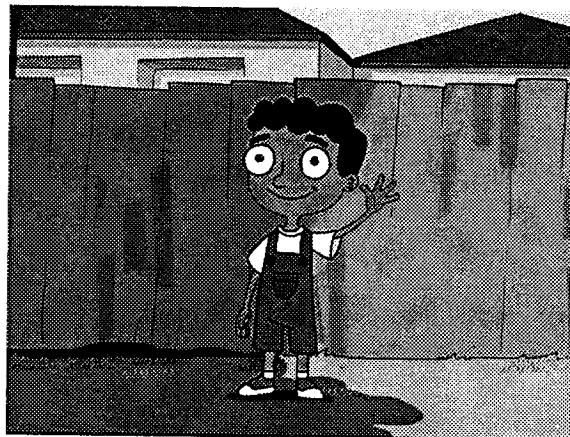


Figure 9 – Baljeet, a character in *Phineas and Ferb*

Mild mannered, shy and docile like other portrayals of Asian children, Baljeet is somewhat a caricature in that, like most other Asian stereotypes, he fixates over good academic scores. To a pedantic and assiduous Baljeet, an A is the "worst grade of his life" ("Unfair Science Fair"), and getting an "F" is the most terrifying thing known to him ("The Baljeatles"). He is adept in trivia and is a mathematics wizard, spending most of his spare hours "doing math" ("The Baljeatles"). Another interesting reminder of Baljeet's Indian heritage is his house—amidst a busy American city, Baljeet dwells in a flat-roofed mud house, but with ornate decorations like stone statues and fountains.

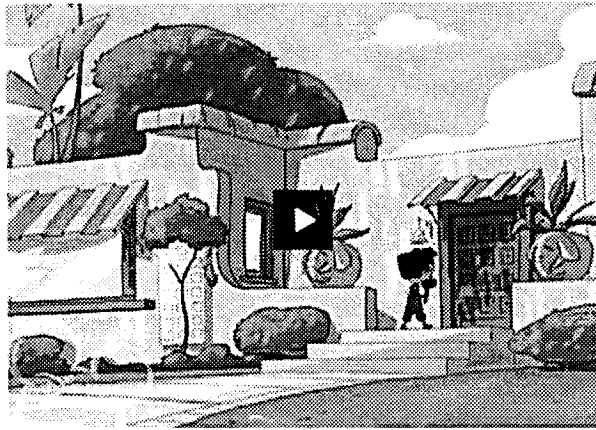


Figure 10 – Baljeet's house

Apu, whom Shilpa Davé rightly identifies as "a cultural and spiritual spokesperson for India", encapsulates notions prevalent about Indian immigrants in America (323). He is highly educated, with a Computer Science degree from CalTech or Calcutta Technical Institute. Apu is accepted for a doctoral programme in the United States. His exact heritage is somehow disputed due to discernible inconsistencies in the facts provided in the show. He is often seen conversing in Hindi, indicating that he belongs to a North Indian community. However, in *22 Short Films About Springfield*, Apu is explicitly referred to as "the jolly Bengali". Interestingly, a few aspects of his marriage ceremony, like Manjula's bridal trousseau and ornaments indicate them belonging to a South Indian community. Yet, in the context of cultural prejudices, he is a double-edged weapon. In *Planet Simpsons*, Chris Turner expounds the dual use of Apu's character:

Apu is a mixed blessing. On the one hand, he is a broad stereotype with a cartoonishly thick accent [...] reinforcing any number of prejudices about South Asians. On the other hand, Apu is a bona fide pioneer: he was the only recurring South Asian character on a major American sitcom [...] he remains the most prominent South Asian on primetime TV, an iconic part of one of America's most important cultural institutions—strong evidence that South Asians have become a significant segment of the social fabric of the West. (345-46)

The character of Apu is an embodiment of aspects that baffles the Western, specifically the Anglo-American consciousness. Firstly, in *The Two Mrs. Nahasapeemepetilon*, Apu recapitulates the arrangement of his and Manjula's marriage back in India. Both are shown to be eight-year old children, bereft of the faintest idea regarding the gravity of the proceedings. Here, the Western conjecture concerning arranged marriages and dowry negotiations come to play, as the two parties are shown bargaining over "electric fans" and "textile [factories]" (*"The Two Mrs. Nahasapeemepetilon"*). While initially, evasive Apu tries to wriggle out of the premeditated marriage, he later falls in love with his bride and proceeds with the nuptials.



Figure 11 – Apu and Manjula Nahasapeemepetilon

Apu and Manjula's conjugation is a blissful one. Despite being overtly sedulous with his business, he is a caring husband and a doting father and brother—"Close family bonds are a very common stereotype about Indian immigrants, and Apu fulfils this cliché as well..." (Gottschlich 289).

Secondly, Apu serves as a commentary on the overpopulation of his homeland. Earlier in the episode, Apu remarks, "I have noticed this country is dangerously under populated" ("Eight Misbehavin"). Later in the episode, Manjula delivers eight babies after an overdose of fertility pills, much to the fascination of the residents of Springfield, who call them "the eight wonders of the third world" ("Eight Misbehavin"). Apu is however, anything but a flat character. Multilayered and intriguing, Apu is not without faults. He at times fits into the mould of the greedy and unethical Indian shopkeeper by selling products of inferior quality to make a profit.

In order to understand Apu's role in the gamut of American society, one must acknowledge the trials and tribulations he encountered in the episode "Much Apu About Nothing". Upon the expiry of his student visa, Apu is reduced to the status of an illegal immigrant. His fear of deportation compels him to purchase forged documents from the local mafia. In a desperate effort to ensconce his true identity, he disencumbers himself of all his ethnic indicators. Yet, in the end, his conscience gets the better of him as he repents: "I have brought shame to my parents, to my homeland, and to myself. I cannot deny my roots..." ("Much Apu About Nothing").

He identifies himself with either nation. "His story", as Pierre Gottschlich establishes, "is about integration, not assimilation" (289). Apu simultaneously serves as an attack on American orthodoxy and ignorance, epitomized by Reverend Lovejoy, as well as "a vehicle to introduce current views and debates about minorities in the United States" (Davé 323).

The extent of racial typecasting, to quote Dobrow and Gidney, depends on the various "facets" including "visual representations, behaviour, and linguistic representations" (107). Discernibly, all Indian characters are shown to have brown skin and other distinct physical differences. Baljeet is petite with a shrill effeminate voice. The most prominent indicator of ethnicity is unequivocally, language. Thus, foreign dialects and indigenous dictions are frequently and immaculately used in the media ventures. All the aforementioned characters bear the trademark Indian accent. Interestingly, only Baljeet is voiced by an Indian artist. "The use of dialects in children's animated television", to agree with Dobrow and Gidney, "reflects commonly held American attitudes toward dialects and foreign accents" (117). The phonetic aberrations at once accentuate the minority status of the characters and set them apart from the rest of their respective circles.

Role of Visual Media in Minimising Stereotyping

Not all stereotypes are negative. Hadji is an assertive and astute individual. Baljeet is academically endowed. Apu, though more complex, is the epitome of "model minority" and a travesty of Indian stereotype (Davé 323). However, such earmarking is a threat to one's identity, as he or she is scarcely judged outside the gamut of the predefined postulates.

The ethnic stereotype is however, in a state of flux. With the emergence of globalisation, augmented immigration and outsourcing, the idea of the stereotype has changed. That is quite visible between Hadji and Baljeet. Apu, being on air for nearly three decades, has evolved from a flat racial cliché to a multidimensional character.

The behavioral, linguistic and verbal stereotypes are problematic due to the exiguousness of images to impugn them. Despite their widespread acceptance of such notions, they can be effectively bridled by "expanding interests" and promoting "complex pro-social ideas" (Johnston and Ettema 239). The ethnicity and customs of the characters must not dispose their personal identities but become an integral part of it. This can be achieved by extensive research by the respective production teams in clarifying the misconceptions about other locations and cultures and the active participation of members of minority communities in "reclaim[ing] and reconstruct[ing] their own histories" (Ramasubramanian 260).

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