

Hindu cartoon complaint dismissed

A complaint about a Jonathan "Zapiro" Shapiro cartoon in the Sunday Times depicting the Hindu god of success, Lord Ganesha, has been dismissed.



(Image: Harredog, via Wikimedia Commons)

Press Ombudsman Johan Retief gave the newspaper the benefit of the doubt for exercising its right to freedom of expression.

"I eventually conclude that the cartoon was unfortunate and in bad taste, but that the offence that Hindus took to it did not outweigh Zapiro's right to freedom of expression, although he came dangerously close to breaching the [press] code," Retief said.

[The cartoon](#) shows the Hindu god holding a cricket bat and money while Cricket SA CEO Haroon Lorgat, tied up on an altar, is about to be stabbed as a sacrifice to him by two CSA officials. In the cartoon Lord Ganesha symbolises the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI).

This came after CSA had agreed to suspend Lorgat for the duration of India's tour to South Africa, following alleged pressure by the BCCI.

Retief said the complainants said the cartoon was disrespectful, insensitive, fallacious, disingenuous, and insulting as it trivialised and belittled Indian culture and religion. They said it exceeded the parameters of freedom of expression.

Some complainants said the cartoon misrepresented the situation between CSA and BCCI, while others argued that Hindus did not make sacrifices to Lord Ganesha as portrayed in the cartoon, and that the god had nothing to do with money.

President of the Universal Society of Hinduism, Rajan Zed, said Lord Ganesha was meant to be worshipped and not "thrown around loosely in re-imagined versions for dramatic effects or other agenda".

"Unnecessarily tying the deity with the BCCI... was highly inappropriate," he said.

The SA Hindu Dharma Sabha argued that the cartoon could fan the "flames of religious acrimony and division".

The organisation demanded an undertaking that Hindu symbols would not be used in cartoons in newspapers and magazines in future.

No comment

Sunday Times editor Phylisia Oppelt argued that the cartoon made no comment on Hinduism or Lord Ganesha, but merely depicted Ganesha as a symbol of the BCCI because of its strong association with India.

"The fact that Ganesha's headgear was labelled BCCI Indian Cricket, and he was holding a cricket bat and money, underscores the meaning the cartoonist sought to portray.

"To read the cartoon as an expression of disrespect to Hinduism is to misconstrue the point," she said in the newspaper's defence.

Sunday Times legal editor Susan Smuts said the newspaper would not apologise for the cartoon.

Shapiro explained that cartoonists did two kinds of cartoons involving religion - some commented on a particular religious doctrine while others used religious iconography as a metaphor to comment on something else.

He argued that most readers would see it as metaphorical and not literal.

"The cartoon criticises the way the Indian cricket board... has bullied Cricket SA into sidelining... Lorgat.

"India is so closely associated with Hinduism that I feel the metaphor I have used will be broadly understood," Shapiro said.

In his ruling, Retief said he had weighed up Shapiro and the newspaper's right to freedom of expression against the offence that complainants took to the cartoon.

"The money and the cricket bat in Lord Ganesha's [hands] is not directed at the deity, but rather at CSA in the first place and secondly at the BCCI," he said.

"The perversion is not about Lord Ganesha, but rather about the adverse influence of money in the game of cricket; it is about how people religiously allow that influence to taint their decisions."

If the cartoon did ridicule the god it would have been an entirely different matter, Retief said.

After taking everything into consideration Retief said his mind was swayed towards the newspaper's right to freedom of expression.

He added: "A friendly word towards Shapiro and Sunday Times would be appropriate here: The cartoon came much closer to breaching the code than it appears to appreciate. In future, please proceed with caution."

Source: Sapa, via I-Net Bridge