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VISUAL SKILLS IN THE HISTORY CLASSROOM



Acknowledgements

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Visual Skills in the History Classroom

In a world where a vast majority of information is consumed not through text but through image, the urgent need for our education system to adapt needs no strong argument. Our students learn about the world through the images they see on a billboard, a television screen, an election poster, a meme, or any one of the countless images that an algorithm conjures on a device on the palm of their hand. They say seeing is believing; cognitively and culturally we are far more likely to uncritically accept an image as truth. Just as we train students to question what they read and hear, we need to teach them to analyse what they see. The following guide hopes to provide teachers with some ideas for how to design lessons to enhance skills in visual analysis - starting from the basic deconstruction of an image, through analysing common visual devices, to finally contemplating how meaning is shaped intentionally by the creator of an image.

Why are general visual analysis skills necessary?

Higher Order Thinking skills: The development of visual analysis skills leads to enhanced higher order thinking and collaborative skills among students. Some studies suggest that amongst contemporary students, a sustained engagement with visual analysis leads to a faster development of higher order thinking skills, compared to textual analysis.¹ This may arise from visual media being the principal mode of information consumption; students automatically apply the visual analysis skills taught in the classroom in their daily lives- as they discuss what they see in a film or their phone screen. Studies have also shown that training in visual media skills leads to a marked increase in verbal and writing skills of students as well, possibly as a result of faster development in higher order thinking skills.² This may also be due to the fact that it engages multiple learning styles stimulating engaged reflection in a larger number of students.

Developing Media Literacy: Most of our educational practices are geared towards developing critical reflection regarding textual accounts. Subjects such as history, Sinhala, Tamil and English that develop comprehension and critical reflection are still almost entirely based on textual analysis. This is a result of the prevalence of text as the mode of communication in human history- till just a few decades ago. Within the lifetime of most teachers, there has been a revolution. Visual media has far outstripped text as the main purveyor of information, opinion, and ideology. In an age marked by the steady flow of visual propaganda, the ability to analyse

¹ Raiyn, Jamal *The Role of Visual Learning in Improving Students' High-Order Thinking Skills*

² Mustafa Kaya, *The Impact of Visual Literacy Awareness Education on Verbal and Writing Skills of Middle School Students*

the intentions behind and methods used for persuasion is a vital part of raising young citizens. The urgency of introducing visual analysis to the classroom cannot be overstated.

Deeper understanding of the historical method: It is an excellent space to gradually acculturate students to the idea that history is not learning a story about what happened in the past, but an ongoing process of interpretation and debate based on the study of primary sources. Far more than textual sources, which often explicitly say what they mean, images are ambiguous. When confronted with a historical image, like a painting, a poster or a cartoon, students will inevitably arrive at different interpretations. A teacher can use the different opinions about an image to develop a debate between students - this models how historians disagree on interpretations. Outside of written texts, most primary sources from paintings and photographs, to sculpture, pottery, and even tools and weapons require visual analysis skills hence it is a key component of the toolkit of a history student.

Fostering Empathy and Engagement: Visual sources can give a more immediate feeling of what it was like to experience something in the past and help develop their empathy. Visual sources, in their vividness, often evoke emotional responses. Any history teacher who has struggled to have their students engage with a lesson, knows that engagement is a vital resource in a classroom. Creating an emotional response is a great starting point from which we can guide students to analyse why they feel the way they do, how the image invoked and shaped this feeling and how to reconcile differences in students' reactions.

Developing students Visual Communication Skills: As visual and social media take up more and more of our cultural space, students will need to develop their own visual communication skills. Learning to analyse how other creators make effective visual objects can help them develop their own communication skills. It is a necessary basic skill for many careers in the emerging tech economy.

How do visual skills relate to the study of history?

The study of history requires students to master two basic skills:

How to analyse the remainders we have of the past- primary sources

How to analyse claims made by historians or artists about the past- secondary sources

Both of these types of sources can demand visual analysis skills. For example, some primary sources we use are paintings, photographs, and cartoons. Meanwhile historical films and television shows are technically secondary sources because they try to convince us of the

creator's perspective on the past. This guide is focused on developing visual skills for primary source analysis but once students grasp some of these technician skills and get in the habit of analysing what they see, they are equipped to critically view secondary sources like a cartoon or historical film.

General Primary Source Skills

To simplify the process of teaching visual skills, let us place them in the broader skill set of studying primary sources in history. When we look at a any primary source, be it a letter, a government document, a speech, a photograph or political cartoon, we need to always figure out the following:

Origin - what is the object and what was its function at that time? Who created it? How did it come down to us and was it tampered with?

Context - What is happening at the time that is relevant to the source? What issues and events that the source may refer to-and what it may not be directly referring to but are still important to understand the source.

Perspective - what is the creator's position that may shape his ideas - their age, gender, cultural background, social status. This requires 'historical empathy' as we try to make an informed guess about how the creator may have felt using what we know about what others in their position believed.

Audience - Sometimes this is easy, as in the case of a letter, but at times this requires more effort and is also an informed guess. Analysing type of source, the creator, time of creation and perspective can help us speculate who the intended audience may have been.

Motive - Sometimes this is easy like with tools or weapons, but at times this is much harder especially with artistic or textual sources. Here too we are making an informed guess using what we have established about origin, context, perspective and audience.

These are fundamental analytical skills that students need to have broader mastery of, so we suggest that every lesson plan brings the analytical journey the students goes on, back to this basic analytical rubric. One way is to have the students fill in a simple table for these elements

in every lesson. This allows students to repeat and master fundamental skills even as lessons change to present different types of visual sources, and gives teachers a simple tool to compare and measure students' progress over time.

Origin	
Context	
Perspective	
Audience	
Motive	

In order to fill this table, students will need different types of skills depending on the source they are looking at. A textual source will require students to be familiar with literary techniques like repetition, rhetorical questions and narratives. Similarly, a source that is an image will require them to be familiar with techniques used by creators to shape how the viewer understands an image. This guide focuses on visual techniques used by political cartoons- a common type of visual source that teachers can easily access online and incorporate into their lessons, especially on modern Sri Lankan history. There is also an online collection accompanying this guide, which we hope will be a useful resource.

Making a lesson plan to teach visual analysis with political cartoons

It is important to do some background research and understand what are the conventional techniques used by creators of that genre of item. For example, if you are teaching students to analyse a historical painting, you need to talk about techniques used by painters. In the case of political cartoons, students need to be familiar with these tools cartoonists use:

- 1) Caricature
- 2) Symbol
- 3) Labelling (within the cartoon)
- 4) Speech
- 5) Labelling (outside the frame of the cartoon)

Furthermore, the following literary devices may also be common:

- 1) Allegory
- 2) Metaphor

Below are two lesson plans you can use as a model to help students understand what these are and how they are used to shape meaning in an image.

Sample Lesson Plans

These sample lesson resources contain:

1. A step by step lesson plan
2. Selected sources
3. Worksheets with questions to guide the training of visual analysis skills
4. A simple table focused on the foundational primary source analysis skills

The following lesson plan uses Source A and B. This is a good beginner's lesson because the pair of cartoons have a relatively simple visual composition, include the basic components of cartoon, have repeated elements, and when the cartoons are placed together they raise simple historical questions which carry contemporary relevance.

The lesson plan suggests a flow of tasks with a gradual progression and repetition in building skills. The rhythm of the lesson is for the teacher to explain a key feature, ask students to study this feature in the cartoon, and return to a brief discussion to ensure that all students are following the discussion. At this stage, just before students answer the relevant question in the worksheet, it would be effective to implement a pair-share technique. Finally, students answer a question where the writing task helps them synthesise the information from the discussion.

The following unit uses political cartoons published between January and April of 1956 and have been selected because of their focus on the historic election held in that year. If a teacher

wishes to incorporate the lesson into their curriculum, the ideal opportunity would be when this historic episode appears in the NIA prescribed curriculum in Grade 9 or in Grade 11. In the history textbooks for both years, there is a brief discussion of the 1956 elections, the key issues driving the political context and the policies enacted by the subsequent governments. The selected cartoons provide reflection on a variety of these issues and can be used to create an engaging lesson focused on developing visual analysis skills.

The source collection with these cartoons can be accessed through the Historiana platform:

<https://historiana.eu/partners/histories-that-connect-sri-lanka>

NOTE: Given the contentious nature of this election, and its seminal role in the ethnic conflict, the unit is designed in a way to allow a teacher to engage with the dimension of the issue to the extent they feel confident to manage the conversations that would be stimulated by such a discussion.

Lesson Plan I: Part A

(One hour)

In this lesson, the teacher will introduce students to three simple concepts: understanding the composition of cartoons, the use of caricatures and symbols, and the idea that a cartoonist uses all of the above to shape how we view the cartoon.

Skill 1: Understanding Composition

Step 1: Preparing for analysis

Ask students to answer question 1 on their own. It is important to get students into the habit of noting the basic details provided by the caption of a source.

Step 2: Noting the separate components

Ask students to carefully study the Source A without paying attention to the captions above or below the image. Ask them to make a list of the figures and objects in the cartoon for question 2 in the worksheet. This step trains students to pay careful attention to detail- and pay attention to how different objects come together to create meaning.

Step 3: Understanding composition

Point out how the composition places the figure riding the elephant at the centre of the image. Ask students what this suggests to get the response that this figure is the focus of the cartoon. Ask them to compare the location of this figure to the heads of figures placed along the bottom of the border. What does that suggest about the importance of these figures? Discuss spatial arrangement in a cartoon is an important and simple tool used by the artist to convey meaning).

Skill 2: Understanding caricature

Step 1: Recognizing a caricature

Explain what a caricature is to a student (using the definitions provided). Ask students to compare the image of the figure riding the elephant to an image of S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike. Ask students to list the features in the cartoon that are exaggerations of Mr. Bandaranaike's appearance in the photograph. As a class, discuss how this makes the character recognizable and funny. Ask them to write a brief explanation of how this makes the character recognizable, while still making fun of the figure.

Step 2: Context of an image

By this point, ask students to do a little thinking. Which year was the cartoon published? What do they know about S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike and the year 1956. Ask students to answer question 4.

Caricature in cartoons most often involves exaggerating the distinctive features or characteristics of a person or group to create a recognizable and often humorous portrayal. These might include physical attributes such as facial features, body proportions, or gestures. For a caricature to be successful, it must be recognizable. Once you identify the main features with which a person or group is represented, you will notice it tends to be similar across cartoons of the period even by different artists. This means that over time every student can cultivate a richer familiarity with the caricatures of a period. At the same time these exaggerations allow cartoonists to convey complex ideas or critiques quickly and effectively, even to audiences unfamiliar with the individuals being caricatured. Caricature allows cartoonists to mock or ridicule political figures, public figures, or social groups by magnifying their flaws, controversial aspects of their personas or contradictions in their subjects' behaviour or ideologies

Skill 3: Understanding Symbols

At this stage students have identified the basic components and context of the source. Now the lesson explores how the cartoonist is conveying a certain message about the source

Step 1: Ask students to identify what the caricature of Bandaranaike is wearing and what he is doing. Discuss what riding an elephant and wearing the mul-anduma means. Students will suggest celebration, perehera, grandeur, and victory. Explain what a symbol is (using the definitions provided) and explain to students how the Kandyan garment and the elephant is a symbol of what they suggested. At this stage, it is important to get students in the habit of thinking of the cartoonist as an artist, much like an author, and asking what the cartoonist may be suggesting to the audience.

Step 2: Students must answer question 5 explaining what the cartoonist suggests about Mr. Bandaranaike and the election through this symbol. Emphasise the idea that there is a creator behind the cartoon, within their own views and biases, trying to influence the audience through their image.

Step 3: It is important to get students to interrogate symbols and challenge the meaning that they suggest. Ask students to think about what the crown, Kandyan costume and elephant mean till the response that it symbolises kingship arises. Discuss the difference between an elected prime-minister and a king. Discuss how they are similar and different. Discuss what problems can come about if we think of elected officials through the lens of royalty.

Symbols are visual elements that convey complex ideas and abstract concepts in a quick and easily recognizable manner. By often being eye-catching, humours or controversial they immediately engage the viewer and invite them to view the image more closely. They are often used to evoke a strong emotional response in the viewer by vividly referring to a charged idea or issue. They can operate at multiple levels especially when symbols work together (for example, the appearance of a lion may evoke a strong sense of patriotism, but placed in front of a mirror it would ask the viewer to reflect on patriotism) therefore it is important to pay careful attention to a symbol in relation to other objects and symbols around it. They can consist of many types:

National Symbols: National flags, emblems, or landmarks are often used to represent countries or nations. For example, the Sri Lankan flag might symbolize patriotism or national identity in a political cartoon.

Political Symbols: Symbols associated with specific political ideologies, parties, or movements can convey political messages. For instance, a lion may represent the political interests of Sinhalese people.

Historical Symbols: Symbols with historical significance can be used to reference past events or ideologies. For example, a throne or crown may represent kingship

Cultural Symbols: Symbols derived from cultural traditions, stereotypes, or icons can convey cultural commentary or critique. These symbols may include religious imagery, cultural artifacts, or stereotypes associated with certain ethnic groups. For example, the costume of a character can tell us what type of culture the figure is being associated with.

Task 3: Studying the caption

Step 1: Ask students to discuss whether the meaning of the cartoon is clear without the caption: Is the cartoon celebrating or criticising S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike? Gather responses for both sides of the argument (Celebrate: he is shown in victorious royal clothes on an elephant. Criticise: the ordinary people are shown below Bandaranaike at the edge while he is dressed like a King). Emphasise the idea that a cartoon is ambivalent. It is hard to say what exactly an image means. Ask students to answer question 6.

Step 2: Drawing on the previous discussion of the possibility of different meanings, explain how cartoonists add captions outside and alongside a cartoon to control the meaning- to make sure that the reader looks at the cartoon in the way the cartoonist wants. Ask students to read both the caption above and below the image. Ask them what the captions suggest. They will say that the cartoonist clearly celebrates the victory. Show them how in this cartoon the caption is meant to direct the reader's attention, but mention that this is not always the case.

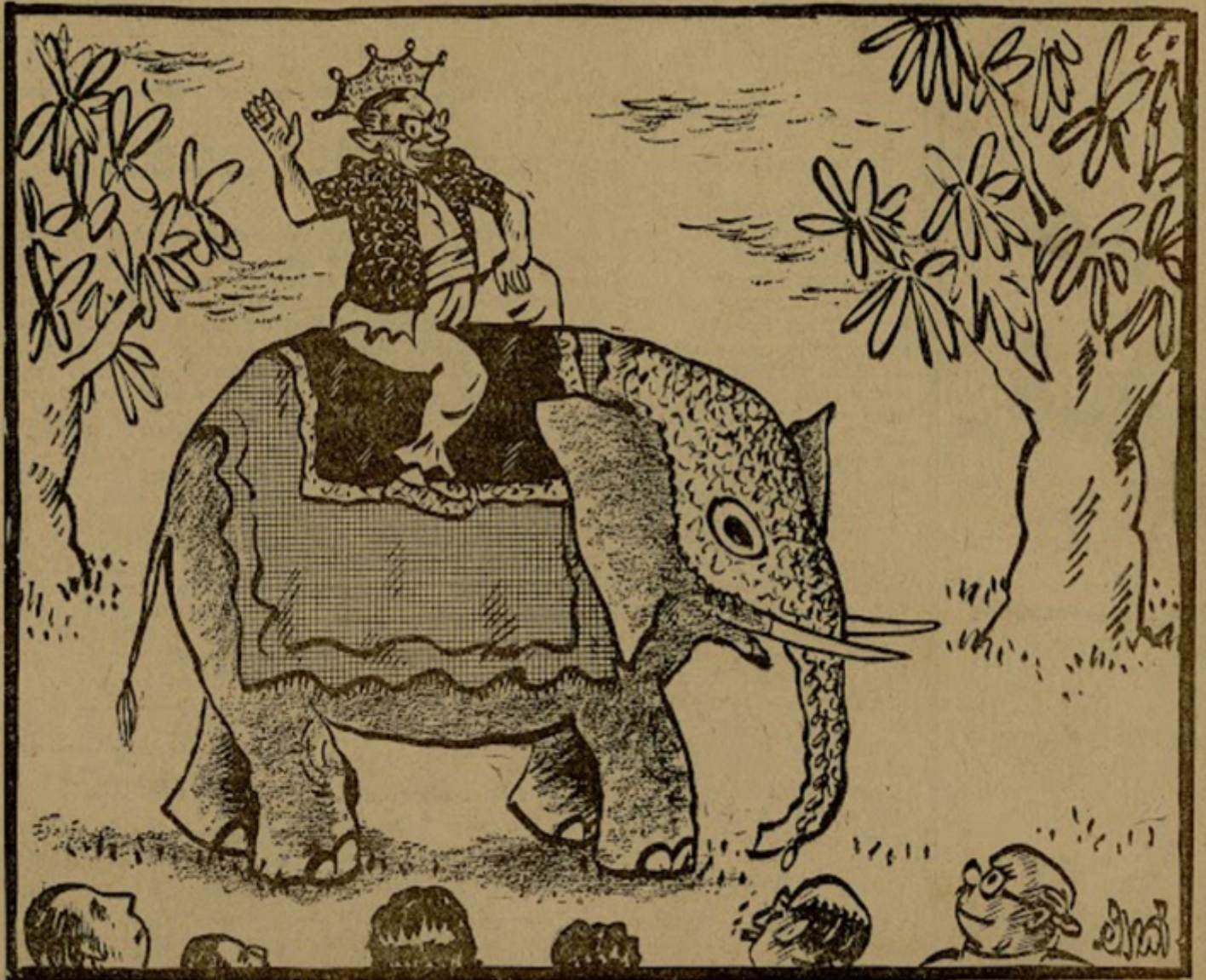
Optional Activity

A teacher can finally work with students to fill out a table like the one below. If teachers are practising primary source analysis in other units, this will help relate these visual skills to broader historical analysis skills.

It will also allow students to step back and appreciate how this methodical analysis has revealed an extensive amount of information or informed speculation about this Primary Source.

Origin	
Context	
Perspective	
Audience	
Motive	

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Source A

A cartoon published in Dinamina on April 12th 1956

Activity Sheet

Lesson Plan I: Part A

1) When was the source published and in which newspaper?

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2) Make a list of all the figures and objects in the cartoon.

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3) What does the positioning of the figure in the centre and the figures along the bottom border suggest about their relationship. What is the cartoonist trying to say?

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4) Compare the figure to a picture of S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike found in your textbook. What features from the photograph have been exaggerated in the cartoon?

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5) What do we need to know about the context of 1956 to understand the source?

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6) What does the cartoonist suggest to the viewer about Mr. Bandaranaike and the election of 1956?

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7) Do you think it is correct to place Mr. Bandaranaike, an elected official, in the costume of a King?

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8) Without reading the captions, ask yourself, do you think the cartoon is celebrating or criticising S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike? Refer to how he is dressed, where his figure is in the frame and where the other people are placed in the frame.

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9) Summarise what the caption says. Explain how this shows us how the cartoonist wants us to understand the source.

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Lesson Plan I: Part B

(One hour)

The following lesson is intended to build on the previous lesson. It revisits visual analysis skills from the previous lesson and explores the idea of a metaphor. This lesson is intended to help challenge the views in the textbook that celebrate the swabasha movement. It gives an opportunity for teachers to gently question why this movement may have had limitations, a perspective not present in the syllabus.

Finally, teachers can place the two cartoons together and have students compare different perceptions of the electoral victory of S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike. Both cartoons were published on the same day in two different newspapers showing an immediate difference in reactions. There are multiple avenues for inquiry. At one level the lesson could emphasise how there are multiple perspectives in history, beyond the prescribed curriculum, and how political cartoons provide a vivid way for us to appreciate such perspectives. Instructors could open up a discussion and ask how far students think that indigenous culture provides solutions to modern political problems. It is important not to prescribe a perspective on to students but encourage them to think through the question raised by the cartoons.

Task 1: Consolidating skills of recognizing caricature and composition

Step 1: Preparing for analysis

Ask students to answer question 1 on their own. It is important to repeat and get students into the habit of noting the basic details provided by the caption of a source.

Step 2: Noting the separate components

Ask students to carefully study the Source B without paying attention to the captions above or below the image. Ask them to make a list of the figures and objects in the cartoon for question 2 in the worksheet

Step 3: Recognizing a caricature

Ask students to identify S.W.R.D. Banadaranaike and what characteristics made it possible for them to identify the figure. Following the discussion, students can answer question 3.

Step 4: Understanding composition

Ask students to pay attention to the composition of the image. The initial task is to have students

practise describing the image and noticing details and positions of figures. Who is the figure at the centre? Students will read the label and tell you. Accept the answer and move on as we will focus on the labels in depth next. Who is at the centre of the image? It's a sick woman representing Lanka. Ask them to remember what they learnt about composition in the previous lesson- what does the cartoonist suggest by placing the woman in the centre of the image? Is this cartoonist focused more on the country than S.W. R.D. Bandaranaike, for example.

Task 2: Reading labels, captions and understanding a metaphor

Step 1:

Ask students to pay attention to the text in the image. Remind them how text is used inside and outside the image by the cartoonist to convey his message more clearly. Start with the label 'Mother Lanka/ All manner of complications.' Discuss how this caption helped us understand how the cartoonist wants us to read the image. Then direct the students' attention to the label 'SWRD Banda (Ayurveda)' -Discuss how this image associates Bandaranaike with Ayurveda. At this stage the teacher would have to explain the context of the Swabasha movement and how Bandaranaike promoted the idea that indigenous ideas and practices would provide the best solutions to the problems of the country. This idea is highlighted in both the year 9 and year 11 textbooks.

Step 2:

Ask students why the cupboard next to the bed reads 'Western medicine.' What does that suggest about what methods are NOT being used to treat 'Mother Lanka.' This is an opportunity to remind students of composition- how does the placing of the labels 'Ayurveda' and 'Western Medicine' help us understand what the cartoonist intends. Ask students to answer question 6.

Step 3:

Explain the concept of a metaphor to students. In this case, the metaphor is the country as a sick woman, and the new Prime Minister as the doctor choosing between two possible forms of treatment. The creator of this cartoon does not seem to be celebrating the election of S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, as much as he is asking a key question about if the policies of the new government will be effective. Use the components of the metaphor, such as the doctor inquiring from a patient and carrying a bag of medicine to show how the cartoonist is conveying this message. Ask students to answer question 7.

A metaphor, in the literary sense, is as a figure of speech that compares two unlike things in order to express a more abstract quality about one or both entities compared. In political cartoons, metaphors enable cartoonists to encapsulate multifaceted political issues into a single, compelling image. Metaphors in political cartoons often use multiple symbols to represent broader abstract political concepts or entities. (For instance, depicting a nation as a ship sailing stormy waters as the challenges facing the country's leadership.) The details in the symbols are an important tool for cartoons to express complex details in the concept and it is important to have students pay attention to the interplay within these details and the concept in the metaphor as a whole. (For instance, in the image of a nation as a ship, torn sails would convey a different meaning to a damaged hull.) Given the strong satirical tradition in political cartoons, metaphors are often further coloured by satirical flourishes.

Optional Task:

Ask students to fill out a table like the one below. It gives students a challenge to apply the skills they have learnt and work on their own. It also provides a standard tool that students can use after any primary source exercise, practice core skills, and appreciate their own improvement.

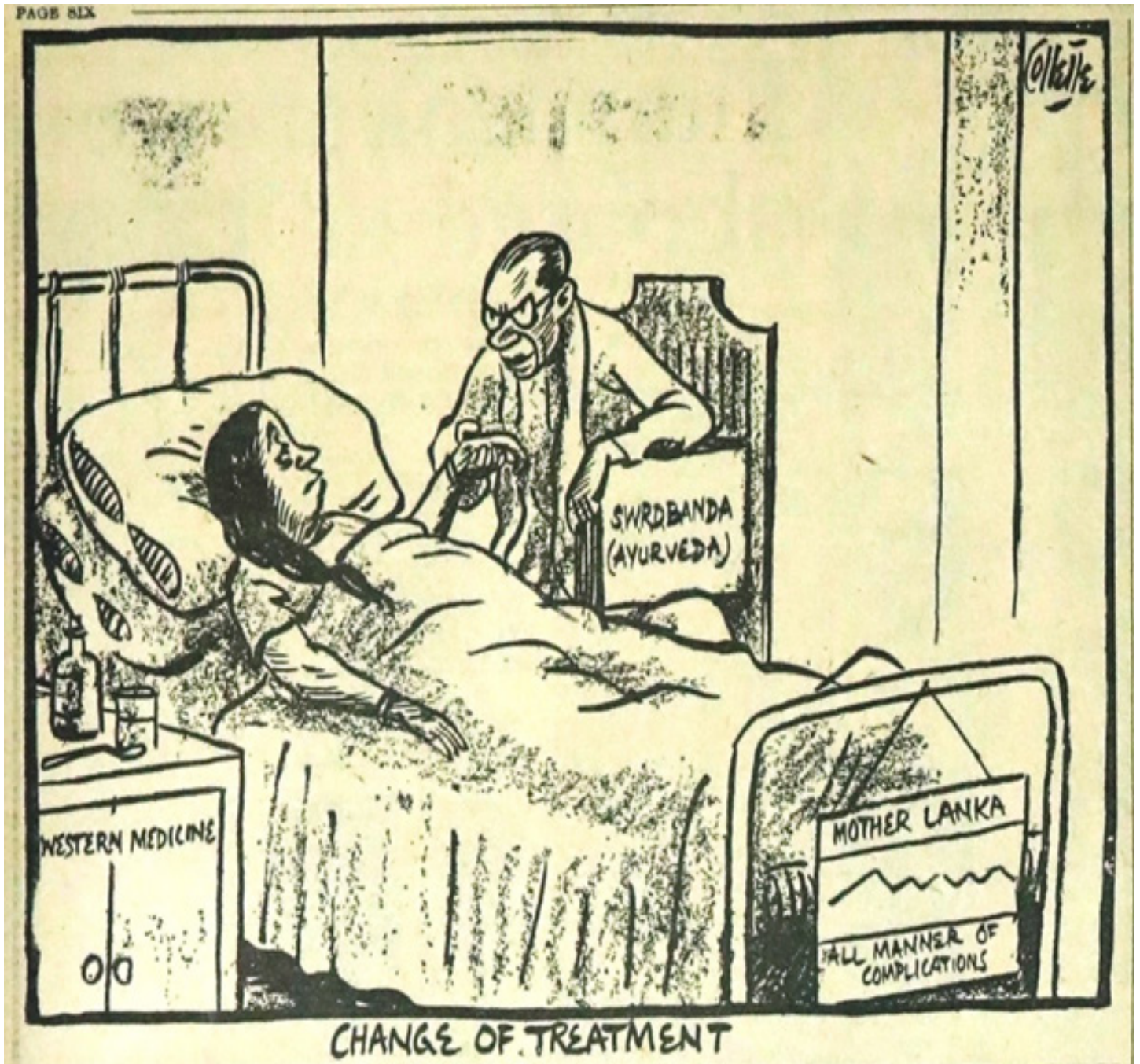
Task 4: Comparing cartoons

Step 1:

Ask students to consider the dates on which both cartoons were published. They are from the exact same day, but from two different newspapers. If teachers worked with the tables presented in the optional activity they can ask students to compare what they said for the two cartoons. If not, students should fill out a simple table like the one in the worksheet to help them organise their analysis.

Step 2:

Discuss the differences between the two interpretations and how these different ideas were represented through different techniques. Placing two different cartoons that they have already analysed and comparing different ways in which the meaning is conveyed can often be a helpful way to consolidate learning. Ask students to look at the textbook and think about how looking at these two cartoons have helped them understand and imagine this period much better because of a close visual analysis of the cartoons. Ask students to answer question 8.

**Source B**

Published in the Ceylon Observer, April 12 1956

Activity Sheet

Lesson Plan I: Part B

1) When was the source published and in which newspaper?

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2) Make a list of all the figures and objects in the cartoon.

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3) What is a caricature? What features of S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike does the cartoonist emphasise to make him recognizable?

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4) Why do you think the cartoonist placed the image of the woman in the centre of the image?

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5) Using your understanding of the labels, as well as the position of the woman, what is the cartoonist trying to show the viewer?

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6) What were some of the policies of S.W.R.D. Banadaranaike listed in your textbook? How can this help us understand what the cartoonist is suggesting with the use of the labels 'Ayurveda' and 'Western Medicine.'

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7) How does the creator of this cartoon view the election of S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike? Explain how the cartoonist uses a metaphor to communicate their perspective

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	Source A	Source B
Date and Place of Publication		
Key ideas conveyed by the cartoonist		
Methods used by the cartoonist to convey their ideas		

8) How are the perspectives present in the two cartoons different? How does this difference help us build on the knowledge provided by the textbook about the election of S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike?

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Further Suggestions:

These two lessons, hopefully, provide a model that teachers can use to develop their own step by step plans. The key takeaways are

- to breakdown the process of visual analysis to the principal skills discussed above
- provide students with images that help them engage with their history curriculum in greater depth
- to combine teacher led discussion and guided independent student reflection and writing through worksheets
- to repeat the core visual skills a few times to allow students to integrate their learning into daily life.

There are many exercises similar to these available online that teachers could use to develop more focused lessons. The lack of material in Sinhala and Tamil means that teachers will need to adapt these exercises to the needs of their classroom and to relate it to our curriculum. We hope that political cartoons from past newspapers in Sri Lanka, such as those compiled and available on Historiana.eu, can provide a convenient source for this.