

Humourous Worlds: A Study of Stand-Up Comedy in the Delhi-NCR Region

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Abstract

The position humour occupies as a form of expression is unique in the kind of open contradictions it seems to create. This is best expressed in the political contestation of humour. These political positions seem to oscillate between outrage and unconditional acceptance. Members on the left object to humour that in their eyes helps further marginalize the marginalized. On the right, humour that is seen as blasphemous in its open mocking of existing authority is treated similarly. Yet, both these voices (or more specifically, several voices) at different points defend humour by depriving it of all political value: It's just a joke, don't take it too seriously. These contradictions demand investigation. Why does humour occupy the privileged place that it does? The rapid rise of Stand-Up comedy in metropolitan centres in India offers us the ability to look at the dynamics of humour anew. The fact that the rules and norms for what works and what doesn't have not yet been set up allows us to see humour negotiate a new terrain. We see humour go wrong and therefore better understand why it works when it does. This new form of 'elite' entertainment allows us to investigate the micropolitics of offence and the strategies used by comedians in working around the apparent sensitivity of their audiences.

We argue that what constitutes an offensive joke requires a deeply contextual analysis of the kinds of social world humour creates. Furthermore, we wish to investigate the relationship between Stand-Up comedy as a specific form of humour and elite culture within metropolitan spaces in the country. We argue that humour, as a new form of entertainment, acts to mediate cultural differences between various identities by bringing to the surface the overarching commonality of class. In the context of the intense cosmopolitanism of Urban spaces in the country, we argue that humour, in attempting to navigate the treacherous terrain of comedy, acts to bring together some at the expense of pushing apart others. This paper therefore attempts to offer framework within which to understand the meanings associated with a specific form of humour in Stand-Up comedy.

Literature Review

Literature on humour has traditionally looked at humour from the perspective of the structure of the joke. The aim in this case has been to understand why certain forms of expression induce laughter. In the realm of Philosophy and Linguistics, this emphasis is particularly clear. The joke, as spoken or performed, and the joke as

written are, in large part, seen as equivalent (Critchley, 2002; Koestler, 1964). In slight contrast to this, sociological approaches to the study of humour, while not many in number, have looked at humour as either a means of oppression (Powell & Paton, 1988; Finney, 1994) or as resistance (Hillenbrand, 2002; Rodrigues & Collinson, 1995). Here, humour is understood to be a powerful tool that either dominates or subverts depending on its strategic and contextual usage. However what constitutes humour or what makes a joke funny is seen as irrelevant. Our attempt in this paper is to offer a systematic framework with which to view Stand-Up comedy and to therefore also suggest that a deeply contextual understanding of different forms of humour is required if we are to deconstruct the various, often contradictory, responses to humour. As a cautionary note then, this paper discusses specifically Stand-Up comedy and the framework we attempt to present should not be seen as a universal or generalizable claim for humour as a whole. Furthermore, Stand-Up comedy in India needs to be understood as a form of entertainment largely accessible to and tailored for elite communities in urban centres. This paper is therefore a study of the manifestation of elite culture as much as it is a study of humour.

Studying a Nascent Phenomenon: Setting the stage for a study of Stand-Up Comedy

Many of the comics we spoke to had been a part of the scene since its inception with the establishment of the first open-mic series by Papa CJ six years ago. They had witnessed the growth in its popularity and its heightened presence in the public consciousness. This was both an outcome of and a cause for the notoriety stand-up comedy had gained in recent times, best exemplified by the massive outcry over AIB's Knockout. While Bombay has had a flourishing stand-up comedy scene for the longest in the country – with designated venues for such shows and a good supply of comics given its proximity to the entertainment industry – other metropolitan cities such as Delhi and Bangalore are beginning to catch up. The audience in these latter cities is however not very mature and is only beginning to get acquainted with stand-up comedy.

An overwhelming majority of the audience members at the shows we attended had never seen stand-up comedy before. Its incipient status in India means that the criteria for what constitutes stand-up comedy have not congealed yet. This flexibility accounts for the uncertainty experienced both by the performer and the audience. The absence of an expected routine makes the relationship between the comic and the audience more fraught with tension. Once an art form gets established over time a consensus concretizes on the criteria for evaluating it. There comes into existence a whole regime of norms governing what counts as acceptable and what doesn't. Since the contours of stand-up comedy in India are still amorphous, each show is not only an exhibition of stand-up comedy but an exercise

in figuring out what stand-up comedy is - an exercise that the audience and performer are both equally engaged in.

This figuring out takes place during the performance itself due to the specific character of stand-up comedy, which distinguishes it from other genres of humour. Stand-up comedy involves live interaction between the performer and the audience. The impact of the audience on the performance is therefore a lot more direct and immediate than, say, in theatre or music. The feedback from the audience – loud laughs or hostile silences – directly shapes the material of the comic. This naked confrontation of the performer with the audience along with the phenomenon's nascency makes stand-up comedy an ideal prism through which to investigate the mechanics of humour.

Approaching the Field

This study was carried out over a month from late May to the first week of July in 2015. It consisted primarily of participant observation which involved us attending stand-up comedy shows. We also gained insight into the phenomenon from semi-formal conversations with audience members, and semi-structured interviews with stand-up comics. Our focus was on two types of shows: ticketed events and open-mics. The former were featured shows while open-mics were platforms for amateur upcoming comics to showcase their talent and hone their craft. Their juxtaposition provided a revealing contrast that helped us develop a more holistic understanding of stand-up comedy in Delhi.

Though a club dedicated solely to comedy is yet to be built in Delhi, a few restaurants and bars in the city's upscale markets are venues for stand-up comedy once a week. Besides, cultural hubs such as India Habitat Centre and Epicentre, Gurgaon also organize these events, albeit infrequently. These venues became key sites for the purpose of this study. We attended a total of eight shows over the course of a month and interviewed eight established stand-up comics – those who had graduated to performing featured shows. Three of these were 'solo shows' (featuring only one comic), two followed a 'showcase' format (which involves an opening act who is the host, a middle act, and the headliner), while the remaining three were open-mic events. We attended shows at Manhattan microbrewery in Gurgaon (2), Epicentre (1), also in Gurgaon, India Habitat Centre (1), Alliance Francaise (1), Summerhouse café (1), Café Red (1) and Barrels (1), all in South Delhi.

The Social World of Stand-Up Comedy: The Mediation of 'Class' and Diversity

Site 1: 'Manhattan' in Gurgaon

Several groups of people sit around various tables spread out over a dimly lit room. A bar on one side and a stage on the other roughly define the space of this room – both are visible to anyone sitting in the microbrewery. An unseen announcer tells the audience that they must “settle down” and place any final orders before the show begins. Most people have a drink in their hands and sit in groups talking to each other and laughing. The evening thus far, has been like any other evening where groups of friends might have decided to go to one of the several elite locations like Hauz Khas Village in Delhi or Cyber Hub in Gurgaon to grab a few drinks and celebrate the coming end of a long (but well paying) working week. People are dressed immaculately and wouldn't look out of place in a bar in London or a café in New York. There is richness in the air. The food on people's tables, the cocktails in their hands, all bear the signs of this richness – aesthetic in a way that only the truly elite can afford and, perhaps more importantly, appreciate. As the lights dim and a Stand-Up comic is invited onto stage, generous applause masks what is otherwise a sudden, even unwelcome change in context. Some people very simply didn't know that there was to be a comedy show tonight and aren't pleased that their conversations will now be hushed, their attentions unexpectedly divided. While the rest (most) are aware of the show, they aren't quite sure what to expect. Many have come only for the first or second time. The focus on the evening is suddenly shifted to one person standing on a stage, centrally located and unavoidable. The tense silence that lingers over the room briefly reminds the audience and the performer how precarious this relationship is.

Manhattan microbrewery is one of the most popular locations for comedy in the NCR region, with professional shows every Thursday. Located in a mall about two kilometers away from Sikandarpur metro station, it seems to stand out – as do several such places in Gurgaon – as an example of the contrasting landscape created by the rapidly developing suburb. The road right outside the mall is poorly maintained and broken in several places. Large parts of the area are under construction and yet these roads typically see cars that would cost many, who see them drive past, their lives earnings. The name, Manhattan describes perfectly the kind of space that is being constructed here. Whiskey is served in crystal glasses, cocktails in martini glasses and home brewed “Belgian” wheat beer is served in large 500 ml mugs. People in the audience, clothed in a variety of suits and dresses, finally turn their attention to the Stand-Up who has suddenly occupied Centre stage.

Among the audience members we interviewed, not one had in fact seen a comedy show more than twice. Most were from corporate backgrounds, and were surprisingly old. While the majority were between the late 20s to the early 40s, a few people were even older (50s-60s). We expected, as a generation that is perhaps better exposed to Stand-Up comedy as it happens around the world, to find more people our age (early 20s). Then again, the prices column on the menu made it clear

to us why that couldn't happen. These were places frequented only by those who had already made money, or at the very least, already had it.

The fact that the audience in Delhi is a nascent one is hugely significant to the way in which (successful) Stand-Up comedy is structured in the city. The audience, apprehensive and unsure, is not yet willing to immediately abandon 'political correctness' and are far more guarded than in other cities like Bombay where audiences have comparatively 'grown' and in some sense prepared for this particular format of humour.

Nearly all the comedians we interviewed told us that they were more careful with audiences in Delhi for precisely this reason. The result is that almost all shows involve a great deal of interaction between the audience and the comic at the beginning of the show. The comedians we interviewed told us that "warming up the audience" in this way was an essential strategy to the success of the show for several reasons. The most important of these reasons to the comedians is fairly intuitive. If the audience likes a comedian, then she will get away with even the most offensive humour. On the other hand, a disliked Stand-Up comic will find the most harmless material falling on unappreciative, if not offended ears. Thus audience interaction becomes one of the most common strategies used by Stand-Up comics to negotiate with audiences that are relatively new to the genre. In fact, in every show we went to, a large part of the beginning of the show involved just this. Where there were two or more comedians performing – Manhattan often has three, and 'Open Mic' events have several – one comedian would exclusively be responsible for this interaction. The 'host' of the show thus becomes a comic whose primary responsibility becomes to gauge the audience and warm them up to the show. Individual performers often spend up to 15-20 minutes on this interaction, and in one instance we saw a show where over half the performance involved interaction with the audience.

Needless to say, this interaction is extremely tricky and is far from always successful. One good example that illustrates the tension between a nascent audience and a comedian is described here.

In our very first show, a member of the audience interrupted the Stand-Up comic during his audience interaction, by telling him to "be funny" and go on with the show instead of making fun of people in the audience. She was offended because she thought the comedian was being insensitive and offensive to the audience. She expressed her annoyance with the comedian by urging him to "go on with the real show". The comedian, incredulous, responded at this point by telling her that this was the show. "This is how Stand-Up is, have you never seen one before? What did you expect?"

This in our eyes is telling. While there are reasons to believe that people should take themselves less seriously, and many of the comedians we spoke to lamented that people didn't, the response here is not one that tries to justify the interaction on the basis of the content of the interaction. Rather, he resorted to the form of the

humour. The reason people shouldn't get offended isn't because the jokes aren't offensive, but because a 'good' audience shouldn't care even if they are. A good audience should know what a Stand-Up comedy show entails. Here we see the beginnings of the problem. While nascent audiences need to be introduced to the idea of humour, the comedian must do this without the usual willing 'suspension of offence' a mature audience would enter a show with. Hence secondary strategies that allow comedians to distance themselves from objectionable content in these interactions are born (Perez 2013: 35). Thus the comedian will usually preface her jokes with sentences that bring the audience and the comedian closer, while distancing her from any negative connotations of the joke. A good example of this is when a comedian addresses a particular regional/religious/ethnic group.

"Are there any Punjabi's in the house? Punjabi's in the house please give me a cheer!"

A loud cheer from a few tables towards the back of the room draws the comedian's attention.

"You know, my wife is Punjabi. I absolutely love them. They're some of the nicest and most hospitable people you will meet in the world. But why are they so loud? It's almost like every time they say something, they want their relatives in Pakistan to hear them!"

Here, the joke refers to a fairly sensitive topic for people from Punjab – partition. By prefacing the joke with a claim to have a close association with the community, the comedian makes it clear that the joke was meant in good taste and that in some sense, he had earned the 'right' to crack the joke because of this close association with the community.

But more important perhaps are the consequences of these interactions, and the various strategies used to make them successful to the social world created by Stand-Up comedy.

Very few popular performing arts deal with the 'fourth wall' the way Stand-Up comedy does. Here, not only is the performer addressing the audience directly (as would a speech) but also interacting with them. The Stand-Up is often engaged in a dialogue with her audience, something reserved usually for more experimental genres of performance arts like interactive theatre. Further, while there are significant exceptions to this, in most performing arts, to be made acutely aware of a fellow audience member is usually extremely undesirable. Invariably, this takes the form of the man whose cellphone rings loudly while you're sitting next to him watching a play, or the person in front blocking your view at a music concert. The crowd is usually recognized as an anonymous 'mass' that adds to the general environment of the performance – applause at the end of a play, or singing along to a song being performed. With Stand-Up, it is clear that the audience is differently oriented.

“Hello!” (Referring to a couple sitting in front of the stage)
“Are you two here together?”

“Yes.”

“What are your names?”

“Raj and Priya.”

“Are you married, Raj and Priya?”

“Yes, we got married two months ago!”

“My condolences.”

By addressing the couple sitting at a table, the comedian here does a few things. Firstly, she enters into a relationship with the couple referenced. Invariably, the couple (or any group) will be repeatedly referenced throughout the show, both by her and other comedians performing at the show. Secondly, the rest of the audience comes into a relationship with this couple. Raj and Priya become an important part of the rest of the show and therefore an important part of the performance itself. Thirdly, and this is dependent more on the space in which the performance is happening rather than the comedian’s proficiency, a particular configuration of space takes place. The table in the front, is the table where Raj and Priya sit. It would be hard to identify them after the show, when everyone is walking around but as long as they are sitting on the table right in front of the stage, they will be recognized as Raj and Priya. Lastly, and this is crucial, Raj and Priya are given one, complete identity. They are the newly wed couple, complete with all the associated stereotypes. It hardly matters if Raj and Priya will go on to have a completely happy marriage, or if Raj is actually more proficient at remembering anniversary dates than Priya. For the purpose of this show, they are a ‘newly wed couple’. The humorous aspect of this interaction is based in precisely this trope: everyone knows marriage makes you miserable, you poor, naïve things. Thus people are carefully and thoroughly categorized in this way, with each group being given it’s own identity. A group of engineers sitting on a table would be identified by their characteristic lack of female company, the table with an old married couple with the typical dysfunctionalities of marriage (forgetting anniversary dates, baldness etc.) and the group of Punjabis with their loud, supposedly obnoxious demeanors. In each case, the identities given to these groups are very specific. It goes without saying that the old married couple may also be Punjabis and the group of engineers may all be married, but for the purpose and duration of the show, they are to see themselves, and more importantly, others are to see them, within the framework of the identity assigned to them.

The initial point of interaction is usually very tense. It does, of course, help if people happen to have more ‘brew’ in their stomachs than in their mugs, as is often the

case in places like Manhattan or Summerhouse Café where comedy shows are regular. Nonetheless, if the group addressed by the comedian responds with anger or even indifference to the interaction, the show is often doomed. Here is where we see certain vital elements to the weaving together of a social world. If the group that has been singled out laughs at the joke, not only are they accepting and therefore validating the interaction, but also they simultaneously extend an invitation to those around them to laugh along both at and with them. Thus this invitation gives humour an extremely intimate value. To allow someone to laugh at you is often one of the most intimate processes in the formation of relationships. While using obscenity to greet a friend evokes laughter and camaraderie, to do so with a stranger is to invite serious bodily harm to the self. Opening up aspects of your identity, your self, to be the object of humour, is an act reserved only for the most intimate and this intimacy is achieved, temporary though it maybe, through the interaction between the audience and the performer. The stage is set, both literally and metaphorically, for such closeness.

Thus despite the often racist, regionalist and sexist undertones of these jokes, they often function to create a sense of closeness and intimacy among the various members of the audience. Therefore, while the Stand-Up comic employs several secondary strategies to ensure that her joke is taken in the “right spirit”, these strategies work together to help weave a strong, if transient, paradoxical intimate social space. Intimate because it transcends the social, the everyday norms of conduct and boundaries set for interaction with strangers, paradoxical precisely because they are strangers.

While members of various identity groups may come to these venues, they sip on the same drinks, eat the same food and listen to a comedian who speaks their language. They laugh at their identities, important though they are, in the face of what truly brings them together: class.

Here laughing at each other is strictly differentiated from laughing at the other.

Interaction to confrontation: the heckler and the temporary ‘other’

Laughter is one of the few things lawfully done together. But not only is it lawfully done together; the thing about laughing is that to do laughing right, it should be done together.

- Harvey Sacks (2010: 559)

One of the most common places in which we saw the importance of maintaining a good relationship with the audience was in experiences where an individual in the audience would attempt to heckle the Stand-Up comic. In fact, in all of our interviews with comedians, one common theme was the heckler. In every case we were told that, if the audience was on your side, then you could say pretty much

anything and receive generous applause, effectively dismissing the heckler. Some comics went so far as to say that they looked forward to hecklers, as they were “fair game” once they decided to take on the comic. This was described to us neatly by one Stand-Up comic in the following way:

“Whenever you get heckled, never get worried. Instead of insulting the heckler, calm down and get the audience on your side. Ask the audience whether they want the show to go on. They’ll always say yes. So even if you can’t think of something funny to say to put him down, you can count on the audience. Hecklers always lose.”

While some comedians intuitively comment – “they’ve paid for the show, they don’t want it interrupted by a heckler” – it is clear that the issue is more complicated. It is important here to spend some time on precisely where the heckler stands with respect to the social world and why the audience is so quick to take the comedian’s side in such a confrontation. In fact, confrontations often become sources for entertainment in themselves and there is no reason to believe that money spent was the motivating factor in choosing one form of entertainment over the other, particularly since some events (especially open mic events) were free.

Rather, we argue that the heckler in many ways challenges the harmony and intimacy of the temporary social world created by the (talented) Stand-Up comedian. Thus, declaring to both the Stand-Up comic and the audience that has thus far based its intimacy on laughter that the performance is “not funny” is met with jeers. It is met as such not because the performance is necessarily funny but because the very existence of this newly configured audience is suddenly under threat. Thus, hecklers aren’t judged for their reasons, whether legitimate or illegitimate, but rather for the simple reason that he or she chose to contradict the framework of the show. The category of the heckler is therefore not reducible to simply that person that chooses to unnecessarily pick on the comedian to cause trouble – as is often done by comedians and audiences alike. While there is no denying that this may sometimes be the case, the category of the heckler often involves people that have in their own eyes been offended or hurt by the comedian. Thus, anyone that objects to the content of humour, whether that may be because the humour is sexist or because it threatens the dominant political order, becomes, in so far as they make their opinion evident, the heckler.

In order to compensate for this threat to the social world, those involved in it now laugh at the temporary ‘other’ created during the performance. This other may be the offended or the indifferent, but in each case they become ‘hecklers’. Thus in this case, the term seems to disguise rather than reveal the nature of the people that are described by it.

At an open mic event held at Summerhouse Café, the host addressed a group of women sitting at a table on one side of the room. This group had been fairly quiet through the performance and perhaps exactly this drew the comedian’s attention.

“Hello, what are your names?”

The group of women hesitated, clearly uncomfortable with the exchange.

The host then pointed to a table of engineers who he had previously mocked for not having brought any women with them.

“Maybe you should introduce yourselves!”

He then made a series of sexist jokes almost directly addressed to the table of women.

“I’m not a sexist or anything, I’m just saying I like sandwiches” ...

Here, while the women were merely indifferent to the performance staged in front of them, the strategy used by the host to address this group was identical in form to the strategy used when dealing with hecklers. While addressing the group, the comedian’s immediate strategy was to get the crowd on his side by referencing the table of engineers who had been equally participants and trope through the entirety of the show. Gradually, he brought his audience together, and together they were able to laugh at this new temporary ‘other’. The subtle allegation made is clear. “We’re all laughing at ourselves, why can’t you?”

It cannot be both simultaneously. Either humour is harmless and people being made fun of laugh along, or it isn’t and people being made fun of must take offense. It is to protect the logic of this social world then that the audience and the Stand-Up laugh, in this case, not at each other but with each other, at the other.

Thus, humour and its content cannot be read without simultaneously analyzing the process in which this content is performed. Stand-Up comedy in Delhi is clearly thus far a product of elite culture. While the audiences are still being configured to the format, there is no denying that it is a form of entertainment that is rapidly becoming very popular. As one comedian told us, “earlier, you played the guitar to become cool, now everyone wants to be a Stand-Up comedian instead.”

What needs to be recognized, is that while humour can often perform the function of othering – and this is indeed quite a significant part of Stand-Up comedy – it does so while simultaneously bringing together identities that are will to engage with its language. Those that lie beyond its reach – the ‘other’ is both constituted by the social world of Stand-Up comedy and simultaneously helps construct it.

In this section, we have focused on form that humour takes in Stand-Up comedy and the social world of humour created by it. However, in our experience of Stand-Up comedy, one thing was clear. People, as we observed, laughed for far too many reasons for us to be able to generalize, on the basis of content, the causes of their laughter. We will not be the first to point out the importance of comic timing to the success of humour and expect to be the last. While there is no doubt that humour, in

the case of Stand-Up, cannot be restricted purely to the content of the joke, it is equally clear that this content is a necessary, if not sufficient condition for humour. In the next section we argue that the content of humour provides for us meaningful insights in to the underlying system of “commonsense” (Critchley 2002) within which the world of Stand-up comedy functions.

The Content of Stand-Up Comedy

The profession of comedy requires the Stand-Up comic to be intimately aware of the cultural world that her audience inhabits. A shared ground of meanings is imperative for the performer’s success since – we were repeatedly told – the scope for failure is extremely limited in stand-up comedy.

“If you’re a singer, as long as you’re not very bad, people will clap at the end of your performance. Even if they didn’t enjoy it, they will clap. Out of respect, pity, whatever. But laughter is not something that can be feigned. If you don’t find it funny, you can’t laugh. Take a look at the audience during any performance, and you can figure exactly how well the comic is doing.”

When asked whether he shapes his material to suit particular audiences, a comic admitted to tweaking a joke on sexual dimorphism to substitute Justin Bieber with Falguni Pathak in front of older crowds. If jokes function as moments of ‘uncommon sense’ that sneak up on our ‘common sense’ and take it by surprise (Critchley 2002: 18), it is the reservoir of shared meanings that the comic draws upon that we examine in this section.

Almost all comics we interviewed used the word “spontaneous” to describe their process of writing jokes. As a comic with ‘cogito ergo sum’ boldly tattooed on his forearm put it:

“I don’t think much about what will work and what won’t...I just talk about things that strike me as funny...If you start thinking too much you end up killing the joke.”

However closer scrutiny revealed a broad convergence of themes that most routines dealt with, leading us to suspect more than just an unbridled spontaneity at work.

We witnessed that the sets of comics were saturated with stereotypes. This is understandable since stereotypes as an ordering process provide a ‘short-cut’ which the comics can rely upon. They possess the ability to condense a great amount of information in a strikingly simple manner that can be easily grasped (Dyer 1999). By far the most frequently used trope consisted of regional stereotypes. Comics deployed well-established caricatures of people from various parts of the country to elicit laughter. A related set of jokes pertained to cases of

cultural mistranslation, again highlighting cultural differences that cause accidental humour. The keen consciousness of this kind of diversity is perhaps a result of urban life – especially in a city like Delhi – that has historically been the melting pot of peoples and cultures. As Sacks (2010: 474) argues, jokes contain information relevant to the people among which they circulate. Humour thus becomes a way of reckoning with cultural diversity, within the framework of urban, elite society.

The elite character of the audience was easily discernible from the jokes of the comics itself. A lot of the humour we observed was clearly accessible only to a particular class. Jokes about awkward moments on airplanes, or complaining about the size of trial rooms in mall can be understood and laughed at only by people who have experienced these issues and can relate to them. The waiters at these restaurants are thus barred from the temporary community forged by humour, even though they are physically present. When pressed on the issue, a comic blurted out:

“I talk about what I see, what affects me. Poverty nahin dikhti mujhe yaar... kahaan hai poverty? Main poverty ke baarey mein kyun baat karun?” (I don’t see poverty man... Where is the poverty? Why would I talk about it?)

Indeed, looking around our posh surroundings, we couldn’t find evidence to prove him wrong. This was a class that had the luxury of blindness.

Not only was there a homogeneity with respect to the class composition of the audience, most of them also worked in the corporate sector. This was indicated by the fact that comics had developed some content specifically for them. Many of the Stand-Up comics we interviewed had pasts relating them to the corporate world – either in marketing, advertising, or in one case even owning a restaurant. Repeatedly through the shows we watched, references were made to the corporate world. This is an interesting phenomenon in light of the relationship between Stand-Up comics and corporates. Every Stand-Up comic that we spoke to, without exception, told us that they made money off ‘private shows’ that they did for various social events organized by corporates. It is interesting that the private sector has, in this way, become one of the primary patrons of Stand-Up comedy. While Stand-Up comics often speak of these shows with disdain, it is clear that the influence of corporate audiences extends beyond the explicit patronage of the private sector. During one of our interviews we saw a perfect example of the relationship between the comedic and corporate worlds.

“I went to do a private show for some office and I was told it would be a show exclusively for HR employees. When I got there, ready to do my bit, I realize the audience was entirely male!”

She then looked at us incredulously as we nervously laughed, not quite understanding why. It was only later on that we realized that HR employees were ‘supposed to be’ women.

Sexual content and vulgar language was another prominent feature the extensive use of which sufficed to generate laughter regardless of context. This was permissible since stand-up comedy constructs itself – and is perceived as – a privileged space free of the restrictions operating in society at large. In fact not only was such content allowed, but it was a major attraction which in part defined the character of these shows. Another interesting thing we observed here was that the usage of more ‘rustic’, indigenous, North-Indian ‘gaalis’ (swear words) was almost always more successful than their ‘elite’, English counterparts. In some ways, the space of the comedy show allows this crowd of urban elites to momentarily relax into a state where they can look back fondly at their ‘subalternity’ which they recognize in most other spaces as a source of discomfort and even embarrassment. This is highlighted by the way in which officially organized corporate shows control explicit content. All of the Stand-Up comics we interviewed told us that they were categorically told to leave any explicit/vulgar content when performing at corporate gigs. Thus, while elite spaces are often cleansed of profanity, the space provided for Stand-Up comedy allows for such repressed facets of the otherwise repressed every day to be addressed comfortably.

Their status as comedic exempted such remarks in the eyes of most audience members. On querying them we always received a response along the lines of: *“it’s comedy... anything goes.”*

The freedom to say anything did not seem to extend to all topics however. Here, perhaps as important as the themes that were repeatedly addressed, are the themes that were, either deliberately or otherwise, left out.

Here again, there is no reason to believe that comedy need be a format of expression exempt of scrutiny. However, for members of the audience, it is important that the space be looked at as such in order for it to perform the function that it does. This attitude composes the ‘willing suspension of offence’ that audience members enter a show with. While undoubtedly, this suspension isn’t anywhere near perfect and needs to be carefully constructed, it is essential to the success of Stand-Up comedy.

Limits to ‘free’ expression?

All comics we interviewed denied there was any issue they would refrain from as long as they thought it was funny. Some subjects, however, lend themselves more easily to humour while others require greater delicacy. A comic reflected:

“I have a Muslim joke... I’ve never used it... I’ve been polishing it for two years... I don’t think I’ll ever use it”.

Another comic with a particularly well-crafted Muslim joke told us that he used it only with “audiences who could take it” and that too only after they were “some drinks down”.

Some found it easier than others to deal with certain sensitive topics. Citing the case of a young Muslim comic who regularly does Muslim jokes, one comic noted: *“It’s generally ok if it’s coming from the horse’s mouth.”* Indeed any comic who didn’t conform to the normative male, Hindu identity was implicitly required to address the issue of his or her difference. A female comic confessed:

“When I’m on stage I have the additional burden of being a woman...Not only do I have to make them laugh, I have to make them laugh being a woman...I can’t ignore that...Once I talk about it, the audience can be at ease, and then we can move on with the show.”

We saw her do exactly this at the beginning of her show:

“You know, I really hate feminists. Because of them I have to stand here on stage and actually earn a living for myself. Shame on you!”

Here, she expertly addressed the elephant in the room – the fact that she’s a woman – immediately brushing aside questions of feminism while recognizing that if it weren’t for feminism, she wouldn’t have been on stage in the first place. This post-feminist narrative on the experience of comedy as something that ought to be gender neutral, but clearly isn’t was clear in her annoyance with people that often told her that she was funny ‘for a woman’.

While some themes were avoided in the shows because they were considered tricky to negotiate, others – such as questions of caste – were absent from the consciousness of the gathering. When a caste group was mentioned, it was usually referenced as a regional group rather than as caste groups proper. So ‘Haryanvi’ and ‘Jaat’ were often exchangeable as were ‘Gujrati’ and ‘Marwadi’. While caste terms may be present, caste, as a relational category is left entirely untouched. For the elite that consume Stand-Up comedy, caste is not only taboo, it is well and truly invisible. The absence of any humour on this topic is to us indicative not of the fear associated with the response these jokes might elicit. Rather, these questions are never considered. They exist outside the world of commonsense that this form of humour constructs.

“Agar main Khatri boloonga, toh koi relate nahi karega. Par jaat boltey hi logon ke dimaag mein stereyotype aajata hai” (no one will relate to me saying ‘Khatri’. On the other hand, when I say ‘Jaat’, people will instantly have a stereotype in their head)

The aversion to talk about certain social axes or lack of consciousness about them is clearly not a given, but is contextually dependent. It is the social climate which

determines what will count as funny. This was evidenced by the demise of rape jokes after the December 16 incident:

“The following February we were having a show in Bombay...It was going well... This one comic suddenly cracked a rape joke...It fell dead...And then the crowd didn't laugh even once during the rest of the show.”

Increased sensitivity regarding the issue of violence against women meant that facetious remarks on the topic would not be appreciated. Stand-up comedy therefore seems to act as a barometer for social change.

One other incident that was credited for the increasing caution with which comics approached their material was the airing and subsequent banning of All India Bakchod's show, 'Knockout'. The show involved several comedians and celebrities from the film industry from around the country 'roasting' two Bollywood celebrities. The show drew as much flak as it did popular attention for its offensive material. This genre of 'insult comedy' was met with huge controversy and FIR's against the organizers of the event were filed.

“Post the AIB incident, Stand-Up comedy has become a lot more popular in India... Because of Bollywood, at least now everyone knows that such a genre exists... that also means that there is a lot more attention paid to what we say and there are some comics that always have at least one FIR filed against them”

Thus, these two watershed moments in the brief history of Stand-Up Comedy in India seem to frame the questions surrounding free speech and self-censorship. While AIB's video brought increased scrutiny to the world of Stand-Up comedy, the December 16 incident brought an unprecedented sensitivity to a particular genre on jokes, setting it apart entirely as taboo.

Conclusions:

When we first entered the field, we were concerned primarily with the cultural meanings of humour. We hoped to break down the recurring themes in Stand-Up comedy in order to be able to understand why people laughed and the political implications of their laughter. While these questions remain important, it became increasingly clear to us that Stand-Up functioned as a carefully constructed process. People laughed for various reasons and to essentialize this laughter as a result of simply the 'joke' in its textual form is to seriously miss the various aspects of Stand-Up comedy that make it the increasingly popular, unique cultural phenomenon it is in urban spaces all over the country today. The relationship between a nascent audience (in the NCR region) and a nascent comedy industry provides a special circumstance in which these processes can be observed and analyzed as a product of the elite culture they cater to. Class, in many ways, becomes the common

denominator for humour. Here class is not only a pre-requisite to access these shows or to understand the content of the humour presented. It is, in addition, the sense of commonality and identity that rises to the surface as a result of the social worlds constructed by comedians during these performances. Laughter, when looked at through this framework, becomes a powerful factor in constructing intimacy. Thus regional stereotypes, for instance, become ways in which two groups of people are brought closer to each other. This sense of intimacy, however, further places the 'unfunny' or those who refuse to accept laughter in extremely vulnerable positions. The othering that results from the latter form of laughter is essential to understanding how and why humour can become an equally effective tool in distancing two groups. The offended have no space in the world of Stand-Up comedy and are thus exiled. They are no longer members of the social world to be laughed with, but rather objects of ridicule. It must be strongly emphasized here that these observations are far from perfectly generalizable. It is often possible that the Stand-Up fails to build the kind of world that we have described. However, when this is true, the offended is no longer the exiled or the 'other'. It is precisely here that we see how humour functions. A bad performance is as unlikely to create intimacy, as it is a sense of otherness. A good performance is able to do both these things extremely effectively.

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