

**New Clowns in Town, From Live Performances to
Digital Media: Popularity, Stardom and Politics**

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CERTIFICATE


This is to certify that the dissertation titled "*New Clowns in Town, From Live Performances to Digital Media: Popularity, Stardom and Politics*", submitted by **Arun Patel** is in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy of this University.

This dissertation has not been submitted for the award of any other degree in this University or any other University and is his original work.

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DECLARATION

I, Arun Patel, hereby declare that the dissertation titled, "*New Clowns in Town, From Live Performances to Digital Media: Popularity, Stardom and Politics*", submitted in partial fulfillment for the degree of Master of Philosophy in Theatre and Performance Studies, to the School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University in a bona fide work. This work has not been submitted in part or in full for any degree or diploma to this or any other university.

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Dedicated to my Grandfather

Babu Ram Patel

Acknowledgement

The dissertation is the outcome and culmination of my studies in media and journalism and my engagement in performance, particularly comic impersonation and comedies and a transition to theatre and performance studies since the last two years. Study of media and journalism often entails studying skills and techniques of writing as a journalist which most institutions teaching journalism does. There is ofcourse very uncritical perspective in these courses and studies as they are training you to work in the profession and media houses, which are supposed to teach you how to uphold freedom of speech and democratic practices but the very problematic aspect of ownership and the monopolization of the media. As a logical corollary to the liberalization of the media and privatization drive, the State control over ownership also declined leading to big industrial houses owning most of the media today. Control and censorship is inter-woven with issues of ownership and stake in the media with the State also trying to wield its influence. As a result, journalism courses are as much to do with learning management and public relation skills as learning how to write on current events in an objective or fair manner.

As a performer who is invested in clowning, comedy and mimicry live performance are always more subversive and remains in defiance of media indoctrination. While I performed in such live shows and created my own memes, the protests which started in Jawaharlal Nehru University from February 2016, opened up a space for congregations and performance. It was an important moment to participate amongst peers, within a charged political environment making these comic performances more viable and meaningful. During these gatherings and performances there was also an abundant use of social media and dissemination of these performance manifestations and a new network of communication.

The inter-disciplinary nature of the research where my subjects are comic actors or new clowns, and performances are mostly for the media and other related spaces to apply a performance studies perspective was a difficult proposition but significant. Since the live performance aspect was the beginning of most of these shows, I used it as an entry point and then went on to discuss the content, performance, space, dissemination and performances. While discussing dissemination and spectatorship, I had to deviate from the more conventional methods of performance studies and apply it to the media today. Hence I explore new methodological perspectives, try to anchor myself into performance studies and create an analytical study of comedy shows in the media and related spaces. I have tried to also explore the possibilities of internet sites and YouTube and try to see it as problematic but also new areas of performance dissemination.

In the last two years, School of Arts and Aesthetics has provided me with theoretical and histories of comic and comedies and this has provided the justification and framework for the work. I have continued to perform and create more pieces and understand the conditions in both the University and the country which has become more politically, socially and culturally populist changing the meaning of comedy itself.

I want to thank my supervisor and teacher Prof. Bishnupriya Dutt for helping me through this transition and transforming a would be journalist into a would-be research scholar. I would also like to thank my other teachers at the school, Dr Urmimala Sarkar, Dr Ameet Parameshwaran, Dr Soumyabrata Choudhury and Prof Rustom Bharucha, who have contributed to this work through their valuable teachings and insights. I am deeply indebted to SAA administration and friends, especially Mrs Poonam Lather, Mr Harsh Kudaniya, Mr Diwan Ram and Mr Ghulam Rasool for their efficient management of resources.

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One of the most supportive and caring relationships that I share in this world is with my mother and grandfather. I am incredibly blessed to have a mother who despite all challenges of being a housewife in a farming family has been there supporting all my decisions; from leaving village for the town for higher secondary level studies and leaving town for higher education. I am grateful to my farmer father for making me fearless, hardworking and dedicated to work like him and my grandfather for being my backbone in my life. As head of the family, he is always concerned whether I have enough resources to support myself. I have deep gratitude for my four Jijjis (sister of my father), grandmother and my sister Rajni, teaching me ethics, morals and self-respect and my younger brother Arjun for all sacrifices he made to make me reach this stage in education.

During writing my dissertation, the only concern I had was about my cousin and friend Vimal, who is in jail since 23 June 2017 for a crime he himself does not know he committed. His bail is going to be heard on 23 July 2018, and I hope, he will be out to fight against the injustice, he has been subjected to. At last, I would love to mention the most important friendship and companionship which came from Larissa Jenne who befriended and supported me during her visit to India in (January to May). I feel fortunate that being part of the campus and especially the school, I could meet her and spend the most beautiful five months, full of artwork, performances, intellectual debates and arguments before she left for Berlin on 30 May 2016. We read Bakhtin, Antonin Artaud on the roof of my hostel in the winter sun of early 2016. She was throughout there during the process of writing the synopsis of my research, and left me with great insight of doing scholarly work. We often refer to my Guide, Prof. Bishnupriya Dutt as 'Half German' for her time- discipline and so I had two of them by my side during this work of research and therefore had no choice but to complete it.

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Glossary

Billingsgate: Abusive language, insulting words or expressions as a strategy to bring down people from various class hierarchies and positions of powers.

Heteroglossia: The discourse of language, in which language is understood naturally not bounded by one particular single meaning but has multi-layered dimensions.

New Clowns: The stand-up comedians in the age of new media emerged in 2010s.

YouTube Performance: YouTubized video of any performance.

YouTubization: the process of dissemination of performances on YouTube

Other Important Information

Research Indention: First line of every Paragraph by 0.5 cm.

Research Font: 12

Research Space: 1.5

Quotation: Each and every (full) quote (not only first line) is indented by 0.5 cm.

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Dedicated to my Grandfather

Babu Ram Patel

Introduction

The dissertation intends to look at popular comic performances which are enjoying unprecedented popularity in recent times in India with focus on three particular shows, namely *The Kapil Sharma Show*, *AIB Knockout* and *Aisi Taisi Democracy*. I hold these three to represent the dominant genres and their variations in recent times. These are performed live at different locations but recorded and transmitted for television and social media platforms. They are often seen as incorrigible, bordering on the obscene and have also been described, by one of *AIB Knockout*'s own advertisement, as, "filthy, rude and offensive."¹ The deliberate play on the transgression of propriety is among the principal reasons for their popularity. Censorship of this transgressive language, gestures and jokes are often balanced off with the commercial priorities, government's guidelines and the collective conscience of the people.

The dissertation intends to trace the complexities of such a transition from live into digital media while focussing on the performance of the comic. In the process, the dissertation aims to trace the history of stand-up comedy. In the Indian context, the research maps out two crucial changes: first, the introduction of stand-up comedy in India and second, its amalgamation into the popular culture of the twenty-first century. The first changes came by way of television at the onset of the privatisation of the media in the early 1990s while the second wave of change was ushered in the twenty-first century by the tools and technology of new media, which brought the 'new clown' into existence. Finally, it aims to take up some critical aspects to understand the form, idioms and implications of such a comedy show and critically understand its popularity among viewers, audience and also the stars and public figures whose public denigration is often the theme of these shows.

Though they do share a few common characteristics among them, the three shows are distinct from each other on the ground of the methodology of their performances. *The Kapil Sharma Show* ended its telecast in August 2017. It can be described as staged encounters between comic actors/hosts and celebrities, where they were introduced, entertained and

¹The advertisement of AIB knock out

ridiculed in front of live audience. The show had a scenic backdrop of a house with the comic hosts being its inhabitants and other neighbourhood characters joining in during the show.

AIB Knockout, however, was a gala show held at the NSC Worli Mumbai stadium with a 4,000 strong audience on December 20, 2014. All the spectators purchased expensive tickets worth 2,000 to 4,000 rupees. In that matter, the live show catered to an elite audience and transformed into the virtual domain for the English-speaking middle-class viewers, who could then watch on YouTube for free.

Aisi Taisi Democracy (2014) can be defined as a subversive comic performance; the troupe comprising of three performers, questioning the status quo of society. The compère or stand-up comics challenge its audience to laugh at sacred and sacrosanct subjects, in the process transforming them into the realm of the profane. *Aisi Taisi Democracy* holds public shows at different venues, mainly theatres with highly priced tickets ranging from 450 to 1,250 rupees.

The comic interlocutors, who are the primary focus of this research, are professional actors/comedians who perform mimicry, gibberish, clowning, and impersonation. Supplementing the comedian and balancing the verbosity are music bands. The work is divided into two phases. First, where the performance is staged, ephemeral and live, second, where performance is being recorded, edited and transmitted through television or social media platforms.

The central question which I would like to address is how the characteristic subversion of the comic genre reconciles with the trend of media-led popularity and, is an integral part of its commercial ethos? In addition, how do we perceive its dissemination sites which are technology driven? How do we look at the performers and their repertoire within the new media stardom of what I term 'new clowns in town' and how do we read 'engagement' in this context from the guests (stars), audience and spectator?

The new clowning performances or shows are lie squarely in the field of communication studies. Relevant to this context are readings which combine the recent history of the deregulation and privatisation of the media and the rapid evolution in communication systems. New satellite and digital technologies resulted in the rise of transnational media giants and new programmes with new concepts and formats. These works are relevant for me as they describe how these changes transformed the character of programmes. The popularity of the new

comedy shows owes its emergence to new technological developments and their extension into the social media platform viz, internet sites and YouTube.

The intent is to research and study the new genre of comedies (emerged in the time of internet) within a Performance Studies methodology. I intend to, therefore, read the interdependence between the performance and the media as one where the latter is an integral part of the former's form and even its contents. I am arguing that to understand the comedies, we need to understand how, as Auslander describes, the 'ever permeable boundaries between the live and the mediated.' Auslander emphasises, "The progressive diminution of previous distinctions between the live and the mediatized, in which live events are becoming more and more like mediatized ones, raises for us the question of whether they are a clear-cut ontological distinction between live forms and mediatized ones" (Auslander, 1999: 7). Unable to resist commodification, Auslander concludes, "Performance succumbs to mediatization." He further states that it hardly matters what comes first, the culture or the industry (7). The dominant characteristics of these comedy shows that can be what Auslander sees as 'remediation,' which is representing one media into another and is an ideal example of a 'televisual' culture.² 'Televisual then can no longer be seen just as an element in our cultural environment ... however, must be seen as an environment in itself (2).

The social media platform has been far more successful in permeating everyday spaces (with live streaming and Facebook live) and constructs fragmented distinct spaces within home viewing and everyday life. 'Anti-septic' family entertainment and the discreet spaces of individuals, isolating themselves to watch on social media are not the same and the dissertation aims to understand this, through the multiple versions of the stand-up comedies. There are occasions when the staid social norms reserved for family entertainment are transgressed for the YouTube viewer. What is significant for me is that all these viewers' needs have to be accommodated into the 'source' of the live performance.

Delving further into this argument, I would like to underline from my own research how the person singled out for ridicule is not the average Joe but an exalted public figure. Suddenly, in comedy shows we see actresses as targets of laughter, whose faces freeze; or actors and other film celebrities who are forced to make private confessions. As Ridout would say, they find themselves suddenly at the centre of attention, "forcing a corporeal self-consciousness of the

²Auslander is quoting Bolter and Grushin and Macluhan here.

registers itself in a physical discomfort and in the tingling embarrassment on the face” or “own flesh and blood-body-predicament of being physically here and now in a historical sense: social, exposed, subjected, disciplined and split” (2006:76). Bakhtin’s conceptualisation is challenged., “In place of the roars, the shriek, the howl and all the healthy full-throated guffaws that signal the coming of community and the overthrow of grim-faced oppression come to the snigger, the smirk, the giggle, and the titter” (289). What does it do regarding the new star cult that pervades India where these star figures enhance day to day consumerism? Does their humiliation and awkwardness, taken unawares by the cruelty of the humour create an egalitarian impulse? Does it question the star cult and the role model they are made out to be for conspicuous consumerism?

A work in Performance Studies on comedy and comic requires Mikhail Bakhtin’s philosophical work *Rabelais and his World* (1968) as a theoretical reference for the integral subversive element of the comic genre, but more important re-defines in terms of my work, as lost possibilities. I read this as a methodological frame and follow, to a certain extent, Nicholas Ridout’s argument in context of *Theatre of Capitalism* for a register to record failures. He is sceptical of the intimate relationship (an inversion of the collective or the communitarian) which has come to dominate theatres as one based on economies of cultural exchange and hence ‘alienated and a difficult intimacy’ (2006: 80). Any disruption of this cultural habit, decorum and expectation of the correct code of behaviour causes embarrassment which Ridout says is a mild form of shame and hence a “predicament of the audience” (70-95). He analyses how the person singled out feels alienated and is a reversal of the laughter which forges communal bonds (Bakhtin). Someone, however innocuous, is “more or less honour bound to sit silently, arms folded in his seat as his companions split his or her sides at the mirth-inducing antics of the clowns and comedians” (129).

Relating to this directly, my own mode of analysis is to observe all the versions. It is critical to see the actor-performer playing a double role; one where the physicality, the communication of the jokes to the live audience and inciting a collective laughter from an audience who has paid high price for the tickets and attendance (a number of audience members come from other cities to see these shows) and a second life for its electronic/social media platform viewers.

Karan Johar, who as a host and roastmaster, came out with his sexual identity on *AIB Knockout*, supposedly inviting his guests and audience to acknowledge his sexual orientation or sexuality. It was followed by a script of horseplay around it (Ranveer Singh kissing him

publicly on the lips). What then still protects his standing in the film industry? Or, is it some reassertion of power status? My research wants to explore such scenarios.

To understand the origin of these comedy shows, the significance of these trends should be acknowledged rather than just seeing them as an emulation of American programmes that have been Indianised by *AIB Knockout* or *Aisi Taisi Democracy*. In this context, I try to understand the social media platform and the popularity of all three shows on YouTube. The comic shows are closely linked to the media scenario and broader ideas of the individual, society and its politics. The dissertation seeks to elucidate about this very connection of comedy shows that plays into prejudices and discriminations allowing one to enjoy misogynist humour directed at all, irrespective of class, religion, caste and sexuality.

The text of these comedies, the abundance of abuses, vulgar obscenities and in Bakhtin's term 'Billingsgate' (Bakhtin 1968:16) is also an important part of the research. Bakhtin uses the term 'Billingsgate' to define 'the language of the marketplace' that kept decency a little aside. From medieval times till now a fish market runs in London and relocated from the southeastern city of 'Billingsgate.'³ In India, if a situation becomes a little messy and multi-voices start speaking in a little loud pitch in a family space or other official spaces the common admonishment is to make the situation normal is 'Don't convert this place into a, '*Machchi Bazar*' (Fish Market). In this context, my argument stems from the fact that whatever distance we have with Europe in space and time (because the term is used to define medieval rural humour) the word 'Billingsgate' came to define the same situation like ours. Bakhtin says, "It is characteristic for the familiar speech of marketplace to use abusive language, insulting words or expressions, some of them quite lengthy and complex. The abuse is grammatically and semantically isolated from the context: and is regarded as a complete unit, something like a proverb. This is why we can speak of abusive language as of a special genre of billingsgate. (1984:16)" Bakhtin propose billingsgate or abuse as a strategy to bring down people from various class hierarchies and positions of powers. The research will explore the notion of creating communities through Billingsgate (as Bakhtin suggests) but I will also deal with the question of what community is being formed during these performances. If communities are not formed, then is the departure point a fragmentation? How is Bakhtin's heteroglossia relevant here? If heteroglossia refers to a diverse lexicon of words fallen into disuse (*Aisi Taisi Democracy*), then does the rustic and vernacular abuses (Kapil Sharma show) have any

³ <http://www.billingsgatefishmarket.org/about-us>

significance for the viewers? Then what does the abuse do? Why do the stars come for such shows to expose themselves to bear such humiliation? The often-stoic stances of the star or public figure reveal vulnerability. Does the star bear the humiliation in silence to expand her fan base?

This dissolution of the comic hosts, the audience and, sometimes, of some of the guests into one group who enjoy jokes at the expense of others indicates a fragmentation of the Indian middle class into urban-global citizens, representing cosmopolitan cultures and those who revel in indigenous lifestyle and language. The stars are often the brand ambassadors of the products of aspirational global brands and their star cult is an extension of retro urban consumerism. There is something punitive in this laughter. While globalisation has created specific physical changes in dressing and cultural habits, the divide over symbolic cultural capital has taken violent and misogynist overtones. The research explores these dimensions and my work, through the actual jokes and scenarios, intends to read and analyse how the new consumerism is trivialized through the comedies within the larger picture of social conservatism and neo-liberal economic trends.

Concentrating on comedies, mainly American sit-coms, David Marc claims in his book *Comic Visions: television comedy and American culture* that “a majority of Comedians are using stereotypes based on race, gender, class” (1989:5). Their jokes are designed around these stereotypes to reinforce departures from the myth of the ideal ‘American’ persona rather than with any objective to deconstruct these (7). They exploit deviations to evoke laughter and gender or sexual identities are frequent targets. These are more complex in the contemporary comic genre and are not so easily distinguishable. Does it destroy the representative stereotype, or does it reinforce it? The research deals with all these questions and mentions the testimonies of the performers regarding all these questions at a time in India when identity politics is of considerable significance.

Andy Lavender’s recent work, *Performance in the Twenty-First Century* explores such recent developments where modality has been extensively explored in performance practice. The significant analytical insight he offers in my context is that the digital version has to be regarded not only as an archive but a self-curated performance. He sees it as an enabling serial presentation of the self and a shared reiteration of the motifs of performance (Lavender 2016: 23). Considering, but at the same time questioning, comedians as the author-performers the research reads their performance and dramaturgical intervention. Since any study of comic

performance is compelled to focus on the material reality of the body, the digital dimensions demand a new method of reading them. It also refers to three different ways, “the body in performance, digitally archived, the body in performance, digitally distributed and the body performing itself” suggested by Lavender (123).

If we regard the digital dimension of performance as an integral aspect of the reading, what Lavender suggests is no longer straightforward theatrical/performative arrangements of bodies (virtual or real), images or objects but a sophisticated understanding where the people are arranged according to the various elements of the multiple mediums. Hence the performance aspects, the body, objects, scenography, choreography, soundscape are arranged for both live and virtual performances requiring their exploration through new analytical tools.

What incites laughs in the live shows may not have the same effect for the digital media versions. The spaces of the live show are usually studio: performance and audience area divided, stage or stadiums. The audiences at the back often miss subtle gestures or expressions. The research explores and searches for the question whether or not live audiences watch the performances again on YouTube to enjoy the finer nuances.

Close-ups are only possible in the virtual domain require different gestural nuances. In terms of my research work of three months in Mumbai from mid-August to mid-November 2017, I observed that the performance creates a different kind of effect or humour in its virtual form. It is more understood because of editing and close-ups. My argument in the research is that barring paid spectators (as there was a paid audience of television performance) guest audience members, including performers, go back to watch the performance to see if they are part of the virtual performance. They relate the online or YouTube performance with the memory of the live performance that they were part of. My personal experience watching same performance was rechecking my memory with the YouTube performance and most importantly I realised that sequence of the performances and even laughter of the audience is used again and again to make the online performance appear more humorous. In the early television sitcoms, there was a concept of canned laugh that was a recorded laugh to create an extra effect into a comic show. Now, when a comedian/anchor/host/roast master or producer (behind camera) asks people to clap and laugh, how to look on that manufactured laugh of the audience, why should it not be considered it as an improvisation of a canned laugh?

Historical Background of New Clowns

In his 1985 article *'Standup Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation'*, Lawrence E. Mintz described stand-up comedy as, “an encounter between a single, standing performer behaving comically and saying funny things directly to an audience, unsupported by very much in the way of costume, prop setting, or dramatic vehicle” (1985:71).⁴ It is a “more complex than this simple definition can embrace,” he suggests because “standup comedy’s roots are entwined with rites, rituals, and dramatic experiences” (72).⁵ He considers stand-up comedy, “the oldest, most universal basic and deeply significant form of humorous expression” (72).⁶ According to Lawrence E. Mintz, ‘Circus clowns’ were the stand-up comedians of middle ages.

Standup Comedy has been an important feature of American popular culture since its earliest days. Popular theatre incorporated variety comedy as a complement to the main plot. Circus clowns provided verbal standup comedy in the early years of these productions, as well as physical and prop comedy, in the tradition of fools, jesters, clowns, and comic, which can be traced back at least as far as the Middle Ages (Mintz :72).⁷

Most scholars and critiques of ‘stand-up comedy’ believe that the history of the genre is untraceable though other philosophers have written about its appearances in history. In 1983, Michel Foucault talked about the ‘comic poets’ of Athenian democracy in his lecture series, *Discourse and Truth: The Problematization of Parrhesia*. Foucault suggests, “The word ‘*parrhesia*’ appears for the first time in Greek literature in Euripides [c. 484-407 BCE]”, He talks of three forms of word, “‘*Parrhesia*’ (noun) is ordinarily translated into English by ‘Free speech’, ‘*Parrhesiazomai*’ or ‘*parrhesiazesthai*’ (verb) is to use *parrhesia* (free speech), and the *parrhesiastes* is the one who uses *parrhesia*, i.e., is the one who speaks the truth” (2). He traces the word ‘*parrhesia*’ in the writings of Isocrates (436-338 BC), He said, “Isocrates refers several times to notion of *parrhesia* and the problem of free speech in a democracy” (31). The second volume of Isocrates writing contains five discourses: *Areopagiticus*, *On the Peace*,

⁴ E. Mintz, Lawrence, ‘Standup Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation’ *American Quarterly*, Vol.37, No.1, *American Humor* (Spring, 1985) <http://about.jstor.org/terms>

⁵ E. Mintz, Lawrence, ‘Standup Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation’ *American Quarterly*, Vol.37, No.1, *American Humor* (Spring, 1985) <http://about.jstor.org/terms>

⁶ E. Mintz, Lawrence, ‘Standup Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation’ *American Quarterly*, Vol.37, No.1, *American Humor* (Spring, 1985) <http://about.jstor.org/terms>

⁷Mintz, Lawrence E. “Standup Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation” *The Johns Hopkins University Press*, *American Quarterly*, Vol.37, No. 1, Special Issue: *American Humor* (Spring, 1985), pp. 71-81 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2712763>

Panathenaicus, *Against the Sophists*, and *Antidosis*. Foucault finds his writing *On the Peace* written in 355 BCE, interesting to raise the debate of good and bad orators. Foucault says:

the difference between the good and the bad orator does not lie primarily in the fact that one gives good while the other gives bad advice. The difference lies in this: the depraved orators, who are accepted by the people, only say what the people desire to hear. Hence Isocrates calls such speakers “flatterers.” The honest orator, in contrast, has the ability, and is courageous enough, to oppose the *demos* (31).

He refers Isocrates’s work *On the Peace* in his lecture, following is the quote of Isocrates from Foucault’s lecture;

I know that it is hazardous to oppose your views and that, although this is a free government, there exists no ‘freedom of speech’ [*parrhesia*] except that which is enjoyed in this Assembly by the most reckless orators, who care nothing for your welfare, and in the theatre by the comic poets (qtd Isocrate in Foucault’s lecture 1983:32).

According to me, considering “reckless orators” and “comic poets” the only *parrhesiastic* by Foucault in his lecture is a trace of ‘stand-up comedy’ (32). As Isocrates writes that either the freedom of speech is enjoyed by the reckless orators of the Assembly, who care nothing for your welfare, or by the ‘comic poets’ in theatre, who dare to use ‘parrhesia’ (free speech) to tell the truth to power, I propose that these ‘comic poets’ whom Isocrates call ‘Parrhesiastic’ and Foucault suggests the ‘bad orators’ (who do not care about the desire of the people but want to tell the truth of that society) were one of the earliest examples of ‘stand-up comedy’ in written history.

According to Lawrence E. Mintz, “The role of the comedian as a social commentator is surely not a new one. Shakespeare made extensive use of the fool’s traditional license to have the innocent but sharp, shrewd observer speak the ‘truth’ which was universally recognized but politically taboo” (1985:76)⁸ The tradition of *Hasya Kavi*, the ‘comic poet’, is a long performance tradition in North India. Kabir (1398-1518) is considered the first satirist, who used to comment upon the socio-political relations in his poems. In the context of *Parrhesia*, he was the first ‘*Parrhesiastic*’ in Brij Bhasha (an ancient Indian language). In *Hasya Kavita* tradition, one poet criticises politicians, corruption and other social ills of the society in poems to create humour. There are many stand-up comedians, Varun Grover, Rajeev Nigam et al.,

⁸ E. Mintz, Lawrence, ‘Standup Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation’ *American Quarterly*, Vol.37, No.1, *American Humor* (Spring, 1985) <http://about.jstor.org/terms>

who accept the influence of the ‘comic poets.’ Still, the current stand-up comedy arena in India is not inspired from native comic poets with long tradition in the genre of comic performances.

The present stand-up comedy in India is related to the ‘Modern Stand-up Comedy’ which started in mid-19th century in Europe and later spread all over the world. Indian Stand-up comedy is considered the Indianised version of American Stand-up comedy because of its direct influence on television culture. The first Indian stand-up comedy show, *The Great Indian Laughter Challenge* started telecast on American-Indian television channel ‘Star One’ in June 2005.⁹ Meanwhile, it is also important to mention that in between ‘comic poets’ and ‘modern stand-up comedy’ there were other comic performances (similar to stand-up comedy), such as mimicry performances, impersonation performances in late twentieth century India.¹⁰ Comic performers used to work in small orchestras to run their livelihood. However, the ‘modern stand-up comedies’ including sitcoms are very much influenced from English and American stand-up comedy.

The development of stand-up comedy in America was not some accidental event that happened after World War II. Just as American comedy today exerts a huge influence on Indian stand-up comedy, the former in its turn was influenced by British stand-up comedy. Lawrence E. Mintz writes, “There is no comprehensive, definitive history of stand-up comedy in America” (72). So much so that even the term ‘stand-up comedy’ was a British phenomenon. Charles Morton and his brother-in-law, Frederick Stanley had purchased *The Canterbury Arms in Upper Marsh*, in 1849 and they changed it into famously *The Canterbury Music Hall in Lambeth*.¹¹ Its opening on 7th May 1852 was consequently described as “the most magnificent date in the music hall.”¹² An anonymous article ‘*THE ROOTS OF ENGLISH STAND-UP*’ on an online portal *Mislaid Comedy Heroes* provide a trace to ‘blue comedy’ while mentioning the history of English comedy, “From 1737 to 1968, the censorship rules of The Lord Chamberlain’s Office required all scripts for public performance to be submitted for official scrutiny. Text was read and returned with any unacceptable routines and jokes underlined in blue pencil” (from which the term “blue” comedy arises).¹³ English comedians like Morecambe and Wise, Arthur Askey, Ken Dodd and Max Miller were quintessential music hall comedians.

⁹<http://www.hotstar.com/tv/the-great-indian-laughter-series/458/great-indian-laughter-champions-3/1000010408>

¹⁰<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wgiE1cepNew> 1987.

¹¹<https://www.mislaidcomedyheroes.com/history>

¹²<https://www.mislaidcomedyheroes.com/history>

¹³<https://www.mislaidcomedyheroes.com/history>

In fact, Max Miller is regarded as the first stand-up comedy star.¹⁴ The rise of television affected the stand-up comedy in England. The demand for content and comedy multiplied in a short span of time.¹⁵ Comedians Bernard Manning, Bobby Thompson, Frank Carson and Stan Boardman eventually made their way to television via such as *The Wheeltappers and Shunters Social Club*.

The rise of stand-up comedy in America started in the post-war period with English comedy wielding a massive influence. One of the main reasons for this phenomenon was the immigration of English speaking Jews from Europe to America in the 18th and 19th century. John Limon writes:

Around 1960, Jewish heterosexual men formed the pool of American citizens that produced most American stand-up comedians. According to one guess, 80 percent of nationally known stand-ups at the time were Jewish men; that they were Jewish men is more verifiable than that they were heterosexual, though that was the universal understanding (2).¹⁶

An Amazon Prime Video¹⁷ web series based on the story of Stand-up comedy in America is fictionalised in *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (2017) projects a divorced Jewish lady in her late 20s, Miriam ‘Midge’ Maisel, finding her talent in stand-up comedy. After graduating, Midge married a young aspiring comedian, Joel Maisel, in 1958. Parents of two children, Joel (son of a Jewish industrialist in the textile industry) and Midge Maisel (daughter of a Jewish Professor at Columbia University) used to live in the upper west side of New York. Joel works in a plastics firm, and Midge is a housewife, fully committed to her husband Joel, who used to perform at ‘The Gaslight Cafe’ (1958-1971) like other struggling comedians, musicians, and other artists. Midge helps Joel by giving feedback on his comic performance. However, she gets disenchanted when she learns that Joel’s best routines are a ‘stolen piece’¹⁸ of ‘Bob Newhart’ (1929-).¹⁹ One night, after a particularly unsuccessful performance, Joel confesses to Midge that he has been having an affair and leaves her in 1962. The same night a drunk Midge goes back to ‘The Gaslight Cafe’ and performs her first act as a stand-up comedian. After baring her breasts in an attempt to demonstrate how attractive she is, Midge is arrested and

¹⁴ Fisher, John. Tommy Cooper; Always Leave Them Laughing. London: HarperCollins, 2006

¹⁵<https://www.mislaidcomedyheroes.com/history>

¹⁶ Limon, John. Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or Abjection in America. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000.

¹⁷ Amazon, an American online retailer providing streaming of films, TV shows and stand-up comedy performances in India since 2016.

¹⁸<https://bit.ly/2JjbEbj> at 12:30

¹⁹<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F0s7IJ-NRVw>

taken to jail for indecent exposure and performing without a cabaret license. The squad car contains another comedian who was also arrested: Lenny Bruce (1925-1966)—Bruce is renowned for paving the way for future outspoken counterculture-era comedians, and his trial for obscenity is seen as a landmark for freedom of speech in the United States.²⁰ Bruce warns Midge that the comedy business is terrible, but Midge takes his warning as encouragement and realises that she has a knack for stand up. She teams with a comedy club employee (Susie), to hone her act and career.

In the background of the show is the history of the American comic industry. The pubs were the places where open mics used to take place. Many struggling comedians would try their luck in such places. Most famous comedians were faced with the headache of having their acts stolen. Exposition of vulgarity was not allowed. The common theme of such performance uses impersonation talking about daily lives and culture. The small downtown pubs used to offer a window of opportunity for newcomers looking to make it big. Women comedians were almost never allowed, or they were only allowed for impersonations. Usually, performers got their comedy from hired writers. To get hired, comedy writers used to publish their advertisement in the newspaper. John Limon writes:

I said that for the suburban moment of American culture, half-suburbanized Jewish comedians, whose joke work was the structural equivalent of a suburban commute, was an updating of the destiny of American abjection, and it has become increasingly unclear, in this introduction, that Jewish male heterosexuals never had it all to themselves. The solution to the paradox is how thoroughly Jewish male heterosexual comedians in 1960 were female, homosexual, black, and Christianizing. Mike Nichols and Elaine May were enough, by themselves, to upset traditional gender categories. The cliché that stand-up was so macho that a female comedian (or comedienne, as she would have been called) had to be a hag was definitively falsified by May (6).²¹

According to Richard Schechner, “Modernity exists side by side with the most traditional kinds of practices all over the world.”²² It is also true in the context of the ‘modern stand-up comedy’; it would not be unequivocally true to say that it came to India in the twenty-first century and not before that. I have already said that there were other performances, which must be counted as stand-up comedy. For example, Johnny Lever used to perform in western clothes like any other American stand-up comedian in the 1980s.²³ In an interview, Johnny Lever said,

²⁰<http://www.nndb.com/people/406/000022340/>

²¹ Limon, John. *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or Abjection in America*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000.

²²<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dygFtTWyEGM> at 2:21

²³<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oXeCcnU9dal>

I went to England for the first time in 1979. At that time, we did not have televisions in our country or only the wealthy people had them. In the 1980s, around 20-25 television channels would be telecast in the US. I spent my days watching television in my hotel room because the outside world was not new for me but these channels, they were. For hours, I used to wait to watch, stand-up [performances] on these channels. Because of my language [English] illiteracy, I did not go to watch them live in comedy clubs. So, I used to focus on their [comic] style, timing and actions [of the body].²⁴

Lever further shares:

Stand-up already was popular there at that time. People were enlightened to stand-up and its talent. So, they were growing up continuously in the art form. On the other side, we had restricted it to mimicry and imitation. Therefore, I quit mimicking actors 18 years ago [in 1995] and brought [new subjects] sportsmen, political leaders in stand-up comedy.²⁵

This makes it clear that there was stand-up comedy in India but it was mostly influenced by European and American café and pub cultures. To try and connect local and indigenous performances to the area which I am exploring and finding similarities between them thereof is ahistorical and makes connections based on the comedian's background, the characteristics or genre of comedy popular at certain times and what I am referring to as a Western import into spaces designated for a café-entertainment culture. I try to take it up in the course of the work where I find the possible links of impacts and the various connections without attempting to write an over-arching cultural history.

Chapters

1. New Clowns in Town: Career Trajectories and Locating Shifts in Indian Comedy

The first chapter maps out in detail the emergence of particular comedies or, clowning. Here, I have dealt with the question, why these comic performers are the 'New Clowns'. The chapter traces the condition and popularity of the Indian circus clown as an antecedent genre through creative art practices mainly because the history of a circus clown is not written. I have decided to explore it through films like *Mera Naam Joker* (1970) and also trace the journey from cinema to television to look at the shift of the comic actor in recent times. The economic changes in the early 1990s brought some significant change in the field of technology and communication. This change and the emergence of the television are discussed in the chapter to analyse the situation in which first television comic performance (The Great Indian Laughter Challenge) emerged in 2005, which shaped the Indian stand-up comedy in the last decade and

²⁴<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CuyOlsrYdl8> at 7:10 to 9:45

²⁵<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CuyOlsrYdl8> at 10:40 to 11:12

brought performers, such as Sunil Pal, Raju Srivastava, Bharti and the most celebrated Indian comedian, Kapil Sharma. The chapter will briefly discuss the changing roles of region, religion, language, class, gender and cultural capital in the last hundred years in the profession of popular comedy from cinema to television to YouTube through a list of sixteen performers from Noor Mohammed Charlie (1911-1983) to Zakir Khan (1985-).

The chapter looks at the comic hosts of my case studies and follows their career graphs to understand on and off-stage personas and makes a detailed analysis of their comic techniques as much as their background regarding the region, religion, caste, class and gender. The chapter introduces the performance and maps the careers of the selected performers through their testimonies which are based on a detailed interview of Kapil Sharma, Varun Grover, Zakir Khan, Sanjay Rajaura, Rahul Ram, Rohan Joshi and Tanmay Bhat. I discuss the emergence of these comic performers as stars and their relation to an electronic culture industry in today's context. To look how different new clowns of the 2010s are from the previous decade, I have tried to attempt a factual data analysis of their social media accounts and sites.

2. Studio, Stadium, Stage Comedy: YouTubization of Performance

This chapter begins with the debate around the inter-mediality of performance. It advocates considering the term 'YouTubization' of performance in comparison to critical debates around the televisual culture which was prevalent within academic scholarship in the discipline of theatre and performance studies. The chapter discusses the changes which came in the field of watching experiences (from the cinema hall to the television to the smartphone) in the context of public and private screening and the larger issues of alienated lifestyles. In this chapter, I write about the government's control over the media and of equal significance—self-censorship by the producers of television programmes to avoid not only legal complications but also mob violence. On the other side, television remained a medium propagating the cultural continuum of the society whether it was progressive or regressive, feminist or patriarchal, capitalist or socialist. In the Indian context, the chapter will discuss this through two examples: a recent ban on advertisements for condoms from 6:00 am to 10:00 pm and the acceptance of '*Karva Chauth*'²⁶ as a necessary part of Indian culture (See Page 63). This will allow us to think, why a subversive comic performance will be censored from television just

²⁶ Karva Chauth, is a ritual festival performance. The common belief is that Hindu married women have total fast on the fourth day of Kartik Mass of Hindu lunar calendar for a long age of their beloved husband.

as Shyam Rangeela's mimicry performance was not telecast in *The Great Indian Laughter Challenge* (2017) (see chapter 3).

The second chapter, in addition, discusses the changes, effects and questions in terms of the performances and applies what are known as the tools of performance analysis. In this context the aspects which I will take on board are, space, actor, text, sound and comic idioms. To look upon its idiom and tease out the dominant features, I take a detailed view of a number of their jokes and scripts, my sources being their interviews, scripts and transcriptions of their actual performances as like all comedies there is a large degree of improvisation. Mikhail Bakhtin's conception of 'heteroglossia' and 'billingsgates' can be used as a formal tool although the irony of its larger implications and a Bakhtinian politics is one I discuss critically and as a methodological framework.

The second chapter is critical to raising the issues about laws that affect performances, especially those performances that cross boundaries of traditional morality. In this context, the performance of *AIB Knockout* would be discussed as a focussed example. It will also discuss the term 'share' and 'troll' in shaping a performance online.

The second chapter goes on to discuss what I see as the most subversive genre; the performances of '*Aisi Taisi Democracy*'. Some vital questions raised in this context are the economics of comedies and mediatization. All the other categories of subversion, insults and agency are related to the neo-liberal economy from which it emerges and which it, in a way, popularises.

The last section of the chapter discusses *The Kapil Sharma Show* and the way it represents the social-political establishment, and patriarchy as an ideology prevailing in the present structure. *AIB Knockout* apparently a bold, daring performance but is beyond the criteria of regressive and progressive; it is ultimately a comedy for the sake of comedy, comedy at any cost by the humourists. *Aisi Taisi Democracy*, a troupe of satirists, whose concern is to create comedy while at the same time concern about the society who can also then express these at best the anomalies and failures.

3. New Possibilities in New Media for New Clowns

The third chapter is the development of the research process. To do an overall analysis of the process of organising live performances, recording, editing and then disseminating through television and social media platforms I will discuss *The Great Indian Laughter Challenge*,

Season 5 (2017). It will analyse the changes which came into television in the context of its previous seasons in the 2000s and its very revival in the same mould shows its anachronism. The chapter then shifts its focus to ‘Open mic performance’, two aspects of which I focus on: an opportunity for the new aspirant comedians and an opportunity for club owners to make more profit.

Inspired by the academic work of Andy Lavender, the chapter will discuss ‘Comic Performance in Twenty-First Century: YouTube Performance’ which is an example of how online spectatorship directly affects the content and subject of the performance. It will also discuss that not only the change in the way a performance is watched (from the public to private) but also the change in the defined concept of spectatorship with the value of a performance adjudged by the number of its online views.

To analyse the process from Live to digital and digital to live, I will discuss various positions and impacts, through one performance which led to a very significant incident and pertains to censorship, the hegemony of the producers and sponsors and discrimination on the verge of humiliation and shaming the participants. The example also bears testimony to how complex the various media platforms are and how they can become authoritative at various levels. Taking from the same show, I then bring in some of the debates which come in, not with social discrimination but misogyny around gender and sexism. I refer to these debates to bring in the issues which are relevant and try to frame them academically. The chapter also dwells on spectatorship, but being a difficult area of research, I opt to open up these overarching debates through performers talking of their own work and audiences.

Chapter 1

New Clowns in Town: Career Trajectories and Locating Shifts in Indian Comedy

If one were to say a clown is a comedian, perhaps no question will be posed to its veracity. But, it is essential to raise the question: can we call contemporary comedians the new ‘clowns’? In popular parlance, these new clowns are none other than those who are enjoying unprecedented popularity in the age of technological advancement. I intend to focus particularly on three comic troupes viz, *The Kapil Sharma Show*, *All India Bakchod* (AIB) and *Aisi Taisi Democracy*. The new clowns would then be Kapil Sharma and his entourage—Sunil Grover, Ali Asgar and the others from *The Kapil Sharma Show*; Varun Grover, Sanjay Rajoura and Rahul Ram from *Aisi Taisi Democracy*; Tanmay Bhat, Rohan Joshi and other performers from *All India Bakchod*. Representing a very diverse group, the major characteristics they share are performing live at different locations, having recorded and transmitted performances for television and social media platforms; and perceived as incorrigible, even bordering on the obscene. AIB described its performance (*AIB Knockout*) in the disclaimer as “filthy, rude and offensive.”²⁷ The deliberate play on transgression of propriety is often the reason for their popularity.

The crux of this debate lies in the notion of ‘new clowns’ or ‘clowning’ and the fundamental questions of whether or not these performers are ‘clowns’ and what is the fundamental difference between comedians and clowns. The chapter intends to unravel this debate through the work of the performers, their performances and by entailing a brief history of stand-up comedy. I would also like to take a look at the comic performers of the twentieth century and the genealogy of contemporary comedy. The historical analysis would explain how the televisual (which would include television into social media platforms) culture has changed the inherent characteristics of comedy shows itself.

Next, we will take a look at all the comic hosts and performers of the shows that have been chosen for the case studies and trace their career graphs to understand their on and off-stage

²⁷<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3YizWAMYcls> at 0:11

personas and make a detailed analysis of their comic techniques and examine their background in terms of region, religion, caste, class and gender. I would be discussing the emergence of these comic performers as stars and how it relates to the film and television industry in today's context. In the process, it aims to trace the history of stand-up comedies which has evolved since the privatisation of media in the last decade of the twentieth century.

New Clowns: Meaning, Definition and History

The recent debate is critical in the sense that clowning pertaining to popular culture is today seen as anachronistic. In my reading, the clown has historically belonged to the genre of popular culture; he is a vagabond, a social miscast, both from what he plays on stage and his off-stage entity. His act and performance, which I refer to as a social imagination, are synonymous with his social reality. In that sense, the emergence of a comedian under the garb of a clown is an anomaly where the social imagination of his act and the social reality marked by gentrification is apparent.

According to the result returned by the search engine 'Google'²⁸ a clown is, a comic entertainer, especially one in a circus, wearing a traditional costume and exaggerated make-up. As a verb, it means to, "behave in a comical or playful way."²⁹ and in the sense of a comic entertainer, its synonyms are listed as "Pierrot, and comedian"³⁰

The Cambridge Dictionary describes a clown as "an entertainer who wears funny clothes, has a painted face and makes people laugh by performing tricks and behaving in a silly way; someone who behaves in a silly way, often intentionally."³¹

The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) details a clown as, "a comic entertainer, especially one in a circus, wearing a traditional costume and exaggerated make-up; a playful, extrovert person," and, "a foolish or incompetent person."³²

²⁸ It can be argued that Google is not a valid source. It probably sources its definitions from the Oxford Pocket Dictionary of Current English (OPDCE) and the Oxford American College Dictionary (OACD). That would also explain why both offer the same primary definition. Still, it is important to mention because it dominates the popular meaning of the word.

²⁹<https://www.google.co.in/search?q=clown+meaning&oq=clown+meaning+&aqs=chrome..69i57j0l5.12740j1j9&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8>

³⁰<https://www.google.co.in/search?q=clown+meaning&oq=clown+meaning+&aqs=chrome..69i57j0l5.12740j1j9&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8>

³¹<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/clown>

³²<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/clown>

Google and the Oxford English Dictionary both ascribe an orthodox meaning of the word clown, associating it with circus but the Cambridge Dictionary's description is closer and can be applied to the recent comedians of the twenty-first century. I went back to search the meaning of 'comedian' and I found that according to the Oxford English Dictionary, a comedian is, "an entertainer on stage or television whose act is designed to make an audience laugh."³³ Moreover, the Cambridge Dictionary describes it as, "a person whose job is to make people laugh by telling jokes and funny stories or by copying the behaviour or speech of famous people."³⁴ Barring painted faces, it would be hard to distinguish between a clown and a comedian based on the definitions of the Cambridge Dictionary. In 1985, Lawrence E. Mintz went one step ahead and called circus clowns the stand-up comedians of the Middle Ages. In the context of American stand-up comedy, he wrote:

Standup Comedy has been an important feature of American popular culture since its earliest days. Popular theatre incorporated variety comedy as complement to the main plot. Circus clowns provided verbal standup comedy in the early years of these productions, as well as physical and prop comedy, in the tradition of fools, jesters, clowns, and comic, which can be traced back at least as far as the Middle Ages (1985:72).³⁵

For me, Lawrence E. Mintz is the first scholar to establish the genealogical line between stand-up comedians and circus clowns. He has made it clear at the very least that a stand-up comedian can be described as a clown. The next step is to analyse the difference between them. My subject of research is not the stand-up comedian in general. I am researching about stand-up comedians of the second decade of the twenty-first century. So, my emphasis is not on calling them clowns rather, it is in representing them as the 'new clowns'. The term 'new' signifies the difference from the previous jokers or clown performers of circuses, stage plays, *Nautankis* or any other performance. During the fieldwork of three months in Mumbai, I attended many stand-up comedy performances and interviewed performer comedians. Rohan Joshi of AIB was one of them and who agreed with me in identifying present stand-up comedians as 'new clowns'. Joshi said:

Whether it is Raju Srivastav, Kapil Sharma, Sunil Pal, what you want to call 'new clowns'. The difference is not the language; the difference is the idiom. That is the key thing people forget. The idiom of the 'new clown' is more of the Western idiom. Where 'stand-up' is a thing, where you go

³³<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/comedian>

³⁴<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/comedian>

³⁵Mintz, Lawrence E. "Standup Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation" The Johns Hopkins University Press, *American Quarterly*, Vol.37, No. 1, Special Issue: American Humor (Spring, 1985), pp. 71-81
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2712763>

up there, and you confront them, that is transgressive. In a culture that does not value that, it is time we start valuing it and the entire point of the comic is supposed to be to go up there and give people that transgression to enjoy. They (television comedians) rely on mimicry. So, I feel what is important is the idiom, not the language. I find that the idiom is transgressive like today, the perfect example of that is somebody like ‘Zakir Khan.’³⁶ His rise has been meteoric. He took this idiom of sort of western stand-up comedian and he makes those observations. He does all those things but in Hindi as opposed to Raju Srivastav’s style. He is very different and is indeed a ‘new clown.’ He is speaking in Hindi but the idiom is translated. The confrontational, taboo-breaking, talk about our insecurities as opposed to stereotypes [sic].³⁷

According to Joshi, all comedians are clowns; television comedians being the old clowns. Therefore, he considers present stand-up comedians the ‘new clowns.’ I do not subscribe to the view that all comedians are clowns but I do not have any problem with it either because, as a stand-up comedian, he himself answered the question of whether or not we can call contemporary comedians the new ‘clowns’.

Joshi’s view on ‘new clowns’ is more inspired by western stand-up comedy. This is a *sequitur*, after all, recent stand-up comedy is a western import ushered in the time of neoliberal economy through television. Now is its time of success. We see stand-up comedy (as a western art form) everywhere on social media and in live shows in pubs, halls and malls; quite contrary to the circus clown who is facing an existential crisis.

Historically, I argue, performances like circus, *nautanki*, *bahroopia*, *bhand*, *tamasha* and others have become part of the residual in today’s context.³⁸ In these native performing arts, clowning, gibberish, comedy, mimicry and imitation were significant aspects. While writing this chapter, the crisis is more evident, in which these performing arts stand at the cusp of being archaic. Recently, India hosted the eighth edition of the Theatre Olympics, inaugurated on 17 February 2018 in Delhi.³⁹ The festival was criticised for excluding many indigenous cultural performances in the nearly two months long continuous programme. On the day of its inauguration, the *Indian Express* published an article, “Note from a theatre wallah” written by theatre director Sunil Shanbag. In his article about these dying performances, Shanbag wrote,

³⁶ Zakir Khan is the first star stand-up comedian of YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/user/zakirkhan208>

³⁷ Interview was taken at a studio in East Andheri, Mumbai on 6 September 2017, Rec:3, at 10:34.

³⁸ The term is borrowed from Raymond Williams’s article ‘Dominant, Residual and Emergent’. His usage of term is to understand the human culture in its complexities. According to Raymond Williams, “By ‘residual’ mean something different from the ‘archaic’, though in practice these are often very difficult to distinguish.... The residual, by definition has been effectively formed in the past, but it is still active in the cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the past, but as an effective element of the present.

https://ericastanleydotnet.files.wordpress.com/2012/05/williams_marxism-and-lit.pdf

³⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aym2o57EOjE>

“Tamasha theatre companies are in dire conditions. Their pleas for government support fall on deaf ears. In Uttar Pradesh, the fate of Nautanki is worse. A lack of formal training facilities is a huge issue. The NSD is an island of privilege.”⁴⁰

History of the Indian Clown (with Special Reference to Two Films)

In article, ‘dominant, emergent and residual’ Raymond Williams uses same three terms to define the complexities of human culture. The use of ‘dominant’ is synonymous with the performances and rituals of popular culture—that aspect of culture which is most celebrated among people in a particular time. ‘Emergent’ is the performance or culture which is evolving and may occupy a dominant place in near future. In that process, ‘dominant’ is marginalised into the ‘residual’. To define ‘residual’, he writes, “By ‘residual’ I mean something different from the ‘archaic’ though in practice these are often very difficult to distinguish” (1997:122).⁴¹

I believe that the relation between the emergent and the residual defines the future of the artists and performances that are headed towards residual. If the emergent art form is the extension of the previous ‘residual’ art form or culture, the person or the performing artist will have the chance to become the part of the emergent as well. The most popular example is, of course, that of Charlie Chaplin, who used to perform as a comedian in ‘vaudevilles’ until 1913.⁴² The Oxford English Dictionary defines vaudeville as, “A type of entertainment popular chiefly in the US in the early 20th century, featuring a mixture of speciality acts such as burlesque comedy and song and dance.”⁴³ Vaudevilles enjoyed popularity only upto a certain time, making it clear that the performance became residual because of the emergence of the new culture of cinema and stand-up comedy. Therefore, in 1912, when twenty-three-year-old comic performer Chaplin was offered a role in a motion picture, he quit the residual-vaudeville performance and immersed himself in the emerging art of cinema. He, of course, became a star as the character of a tramp in a time when the art form (of which he was a master) was shifting to residual. However, in the Indian context, the comic performers of the circus, the clowns, could never join cinema or transform themselves into stand-up comedians. All the Indian star comedians of the cinema of the twentieth century viz, Noor M. Charlie, Tun Tun, Johnny

⁴⁰<https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/note-from-a-theatre-wallah-8th-theatre-olympics-5066980/>

⁴¹https://ericastanleydotnet.files.wordpress.com/2012/05/williams_marxism-and-lit.pdf 122

⁴² Charlie Started a career as a comedian in vaudeville, which eventually took him to the United States in 1910 as a featured player with the Fred Karno Repertoire Company. <https://www.charliechaplin.com/en/articles/21-Overview-of-His-Life>

⁴³<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/vaudeville>

Walker, Mehmood, Johnny Lever and others hailed from working-class families but they were not from local performance practices that related to clowning or comedy, i.e., *Nautanki*, *Tamasha*, *Launda Naach* and circus.

Still, the earlier art forms continued to exist and were performed among people. In the mid-twentieth century, cinema emerged as an art form and soon enough became a dominant force as part of the popular culture. However, it did not affect indigenous performances in the same way that the changes of the 1990s impacted them and pushed many of them to the verge of extinction. Aastha Gandhi and Bishnupriya Dutt in their article, ‘Laws and Marginalised Bodies: Sex Trafficking, Child Labour and Circus as a Site of Negotiations’⁴⁴ write about the decline of participation of girls and women as circus performers. Their article suggests that the conditions of the circus in India have generally declined, with the big circuses suffering losses due to the ban on the use of animals and child labour laws. Many circuses are trying to survive by inviting international performers while the smaller circuses are closing down or are reduced only to remote, rural parts and local fairs. There “at the weekends the box-office collection is decent, while on weekdays the circus continues with its daily three performances despite having an audience of no more than 50-75, where the full capacity is almost 1000” (2018:299).⁴⁵ Dutt and Gandhi’s work is unique in that it narrates the history of Indian circuses and the changes that befell their fortunes in neo-liberal India.

The recent proposed modifications (under ‘Child Labour Prohibition and Regulation Amendment Bill’ 2016) actually allow employment ‘where the child works as an artist in an audio-visual entertainment industry, including advertisement, films, TV serials or any such other entertainment or sports activities except the circus’ [our emphasis] (Dutt and Gandhi: 306).⁴⁶

According to them, “The anomalous conditions created by a right-wing hegemonic discourse dominating cultural dissemination and a growing commercial ethos suspends the circus and its performers in a precarious balance” (303). Dutt and Gandhi’s work is limited to the concept of citizenship in the context of the circus performer, where they argue about a section of the society being ‘citizens’ and the other being ‘invisible characters’ (circus performers, in this case). This reality of the circus and its performers lapsing into the residual or the ‘invisible

⁴⁴Dutt, Bishnupriya, Jelle Reinelt and Shrinkhla Sahai. *Gendered Citizenship: Manifestations and Performance*. New Delhi:Black Swan, 2018.

⁴⁵ Gandhi, Aastha and Dutt, Bishnupriya. *Laws and Marginalised Bodies: Sex Trafficking, Child Labour and Circus as a Site of Negotiations*. Delhi:Orient BlackSwan, 2018.

⁴⁶ They quote a report published in Hindustan Times published on 8 April 2015, Page:1.

character’, despite the officially unchronicled history of the Indian clown, is movingly rendered in a well-known film.

In 1970, Raj Kapoor made a film on the life of a clown— ‘*Mera Naam Joker*.’⁴⁷ The film is about the tragic life of a clown, in which the clown makes people laugh but his own happiness eludes him. The tragedy is symbolised by his affections towards three women, dividing the film into three parts. In each, the clown meets a woman but always gets heartbroken. In the last part, he associates with the third woman. Both of them mutually decide to perform together as a team, but she too leaves him when she gets a chance in the film industry, and the clown remains just a clown who could never assume his own persona over the mask. I refer to this film and the characterisation to argue that the clown cannot be a dual or double persona, adorning a mask, the notion of the clown is all-pervading and his on-stage imagination and real-life persona have to merge. Hence, he is the vagabond, the marginalised and can only remain a clown. The clown cannot be a marker to enhance market price or demand. Clowning is not a performance you adapt to build your star status and it is against this marker that I want to assess and analyse the new phenomenon of the clown. The importance of the film mentioned above is more today when the clown is invisible and has hardly any spectator base in India. Therefore, there is a possibility to find the history of the circus, the comic performer, the stand-up comedian or the comic actor but it is tough to find an account of a circus clown and a joker of *Nautanki* as the key figure of research. The popular film amongst the common people is a historical account of a clown and therefore, an essential documentary on the dying art of clowning. The socio-cultural anomalies where actual, popular genres die out due to lack of capital investment brings up the serious question as to which art forms attract capital investment while also throwing up the conundrum of the fact that the natural logic of popularity and profit is not always played out in capitalist society, particularly what we read as neo-liberalism.

The Tamil film, ‘*Apoorva Sagodharargal*’. (1989), made by Kamal Hasan depicts the tragedy and humiliation of a dwarf clown.⁴⁸ I am not mentioning these films to only portray the history of clowns. I seek to accentuate the notion that films have affected popular perceptions about clowns. Films have also presented clowns in completely new perspectives. Hollywood in particular, has given the clown a new identity by showing him repetitively as

⁴⁷https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ays_zT4_-7A

⁴⁸<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Hv5ZZkrwvE>

horror element, murderer, killer, dead walking man, ghost, phantom and evil clown. The recent film *'It'* (2017) was based upon the novel of the same name (1986) written by Stephen King.⁴⁹ Literature and films of this kind have subverted the meaning of the comic clown to the horrifying. They have even given birth to a new term— 'coulrophobia'. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word 'coulrophobia' originated in the 1980s and means an, "[e]xtreme or irrational fear of clowns."⁵⁰

The films responsible for bringing about 'coulrophobia' show a ghost or a killer in a clown dress with a smiley face that creates horror, not humour. It means the humour lies in the form, in the action, in the clowning, in the comedy but not in the dress and its face. Therefore, my usage of 'clown' for the recent stand-up comedians is not limited to the dress and looks of clown because looks and face do not always seem to matter. It is self-evident by films that the dress and even the same looks can instil horror as well. It is the comic tradition which is related to the clown and if the tradition shifts to a new performing art, like the shift from a residual (clown) to an emergent (new clown) then the usage of the word (clown) will also change.

I subscribe to Lawrence E. Mintz's argument that 'circus clowns' come in the guise of stand-up comedians. However, my usage of 'new clowns', as opposed to clowns, applies only to the stand-up comedians who emerged in the age of the technological advancement of the twenty-first century. Film actor, and ostensibly the first star stand-up comedian, Johnny Lever says, "In 1972, there used to be a 'Mimicry night at Patkar Hall', Birla Hall in the Town side of Bombay."⁵¹ Anurag Kashyap's period film, set in 1960s Mumbai, *'Bombay Velvet'* (2015) depicts also depicts Varun Grover—a comic performer of my case study *'Aisi Taisi Democracy'*—as a stand-up comedian performing at the town halls of that era.⁵² In mimicry nights, mimicry artists used to imitate famous actors and politicians but in the 1980s it changed its format to include artists who were able to make someone laugh at their jokes, puns and stories.⁵³ Like Chaplin, Johnny Lever became part of the film industry and is more famous today as comic film actor than a stand-up comedian. Film comedians were more 'character actors' than live stand-up comic performers. I will be detailing their comic graphs later in this chapter.

⁴⁹<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hAUTdjf9rko>

⁵⁰<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/coulrophobia>

⁵¹<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=swozBbWMzNQ>

⁵²<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2979920/fullcredits>

⁵³<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oXeCcnU9dal>

The Emergence of the Television

After cinema, television brought new changes to the field of cultural habits in the 1990s. Private Cable channels entered into Indian homes. The flow of information, entertainment and infotainment were not limited to India any more. A series of foreign channels started getting telecast on the Indian television, e.g., AXN, HBO and Star channel series (Star TV, Star Movies, Star Sports and others), all owned by American mass media productions.

Rupert Murdoch, the owner of the owner of media giant News Corporation (that would be later succeeded by 21st Century Fox) is widely held to be the emperor of the media world. He bought all the channels mentioned above including few others having 49.9 percent shares i.e., Zee TV, Zee -Cinema and Zee news. Sandeep Bhushan writes, “Since Indian Laws did not permit this, he (Murdoch) picked up a 49.9% stake in Zee network.”⁵⁴ In March 2018, Forbes listed Murdoch as having a net worth of 15.3 billion dollars, number 94 on its world’s annual billionaires list.⁵⁵

Murdoch’s purchase of Star TV in 1992 was based on a theory of media globalisation assuming that people across nations and languages will watch the same TV programs...the original plan for Star TV was to broadcast popular American Shows to Asian audience with as little effort as possible. However, the plan was unsuccessful, and Star TV had to invest on local branches to make local shows. (Hong-chi Shiau 2008)⁵⁶

A shift came subsequently with the State-run television broadcaster facing competition and challenge. In his book *Television in India: Values and concerns*, Md. Firoz writes that there was a time when the whole market used to be empty, when *Ramayan* and *Mahabharat* would play on Doordarshan. Gradually people became more and more indifferent. Since its establishment in 1959, Doordarshan had for a long time been the primary source of information and entertainment in the twentieth century. In the comic genre, it brought soap operas, sitcoms and series of comic episodes in the 1980s such *Yeh Jo Hai Zindagi* (1984),⁵⁷ *Nukkad*(1986-1987), *Wagley ki Duniya* (1988-1990),⁵⁸ *Flop Show* (1991),⁵⁹ and *Ulta Pulta*,⁶⁰ *Dekh Bhai*

⁵⁴ ‘The Original ‘News Trader’: The irresistible Rise of Subhas Chandra’ published by *The Wire* on 16 March, 2016. <https://thewire.in/books/the-original-news-trader-the-irresistible-rise-of-subhash-chandra>

⁵⁵<https://www.forbes.com/profile/rupert-murdoch/>

⁵⁶ Animating the Cute, the Mean and the Beautiful: The Production and Consumption of Animation: Taiwan’s Struggles in the Age of Globalization by Hong-Chi Shiau.

⁵⁷<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wcgb2KBEpdM>

⁵⁸<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KV1WRI2qSbc>

⁵⁹<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NxdHTPmlruk>

⁶⁰<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1WS2Fa3tqvM>

Dekh (1993-1994), *Zabaan Sambhalke* (1993-1994),⁶¹ *Tu Tu Main Main* (1996),⁶² among others.

Comic shows mostly represented the issues and socio-political condition of that time. Kundan Shah's *Nukkad* was based upon the daily struggle of the urban working class.⁶³ *Dekh Bhai Dekh* was a sitcom about an affluent family living in a bungalow in the suburbs of Mumbai, then Bombay.⁶⁴ Jaspal Bhatti's *Flop Show* (1991) was a satire on social issues. In each episode, the director used to bring a new relevant issue like time punctuality, landsharks, corrupt contractors and engineers, false medical bills of Governments employees, corrupt Government officers misusing their position for their interests and PhD researchers doing more services to their guide than their subject.⁶⁵

The enormous shift regarding comedy, as a genre is that it emerged as a business in a short span of time. It started after the implementation of the new economic policies of Liberalisation, Privatisation and Globalisation. They not only brought about a paradigm shift economically and politically, but also brought about new social and cultural changes in the lives of people. The subject of the television shows changed with the arrival of private channels. The first and last famous sitcom on a private channel was *Office Office* (2001).⁶⁶ Its central theme was Red tapism, which still exists as a hurdle in the everyday lives of common citizens and the development process of the Indian economy.

However, sitcoms steadily changed their subjects from satire to personal slandering and id-ego- fights set in the oases of affluence. *Sarabhai vs Sarabhai* (2004- 2017), *Taarak Mehta Ka Ooltah Chashmah* (2008-),⁶⁷ and *Bhabhi Ji Ghar Par Hain* (2015-)⁶⁸ are cases in point. The most important characteristics were however not the subject of sitcoms but the absence of satire in these shows. *Bhabhi Ji Ghar Par Hain* is about two neighbours in Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh, flirting with the other's wife.⁶⁹ *Sarabhai vs Sarabhai* was about a well off Gujarati family of South Bombay and their personal family issues, mainly focussed on the equation

⁶¹<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8KvIETkQ1Q8>

⁶²<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MZtClnTLXsE>

⁶³<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vacKA7ytab4>

⁶⁴https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rw38Ty_2vbw

⁶⁵<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vNp3Ope1-Rk>

⁶⁶https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e_0D_NWoiD0

⁶⁷<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cHFsa75XIk>

⁶⁸<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ygib4QF3B3I>

⁶⁹<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zDvl1NASns8>

between the mother in law and the ‘middle class’ daughter in law.⁷⁰ *Tarak Mehta Ka Ooltah Chashmah* is about a gated society of Goregaon, Mumbai. It purports to present a mixed culture society where eight houses are the centre of the show, representing different parts of the country, i.e., two families are Gujarati, one from Punjab, a couple where the husband is from Tamil Nadu and his wife from West Bengal. One family is from Madhya Pradesh, one from Maharashtra while one family does not know their background. The show is based upon a weekly column, ‘*Duniya Ne Undha Chasma*’ written by Tarak Mehta in the Gujarati magazine *Chitrlekha* (1971). It is the longest-running scripted show of Indian television. These shows continue to find an enthusiastic audience among middle-class Indian families. On 21 June 2018, the 2,494th episode of ‘*Tarak Mehta Ka Ooltah Chashmah*’ was broadcast. The very next day, it had 133,271 views on YouTube.⁷¹

The Great Indian Laughter Challenge: 2005-8

Even after twenty years of sitcoms on television—that started with Kundan Shah’s *Ye Jo Hai Zindagi*’ in 1984—there was still no change in the field of comic performance. Comedians were either comic film actors or comic television actors. The turning point in the history of Indian comedy came in 2005 with the first comic reality show inspired by stand-up comedy on American television. Star TV launched a new youth-based, Hindi channel called Star One on 1 November 2004.⁷² In the series, on 15 June 2005, they introduced the American style of stand-up comedy to the Indian audience with the title *The Great Indian Laughter Challenge*.

The show ran for four seasons from 2005 to 2008. In 2017, the show was telecast again on Star Plus (again owned by Star India Private Limited). It was the first kind of show which made comic performers stars in their own right. They started becoming famous and were being paid a hefty amount for their live shows particularly after participating or winning in the ‘The Great Indian Laughter Challenge’. CDs and DVDs of the winning performances were sold. After winning the first season of the show, Sunil Pal became the first star stand-up comedian of India. Struggling Bollywood actor Raju Srivastav received recognition as the second runner-up of the same show. Srivastav said, “After 2005 it became opposite for me [sic], films became a side thing and live shows took the central place in my life.”⁷³ According to him, people in

⁷⁰<http://www.hotstar.com/tv/sarabhai-vs-sarabhai-2/maya-sarabhai-meets-her-match/1000150563>

⁷¹https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=39sKhKj_73k

⁷²<http://www.indiantelevision.com/headlines/y2k11/dec/dec84.php>

⁷³<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J4klGjggL6w>

India started appreciating stand-up comedy only recently. He credits *The Great Indian Laughter Challenge* to herald these times in India.

Everyone's luck turned from that point on, it changed the whole history of Indian-comedy from the time when a comedian was just a mimicry guy, who was there as a filler because singers wanted to change their dress or when they wanted a break to take a few snacks. Now it is the time when comedians use singers as fillers (Raju Srivastav).⁷⁴

The show was immensely popular not only in India but also Pakistan owing to the winner of the second season (2006), Pakistani comedian Rauf Lala.⁷⁵ Rajeev Nigam was the first runner-up to Rauf Lala. When the show was revived for its fifth season, he was appointed as writer and groomer (the popular term for trainer) of the selected contestants of the show. The biggest comedy star of India, Kapil Sharma first found recognition by winning the 'the third season of *The Great Indian Laughter Challenge* in 2007.⁷⁶ In an interview for the *Times of India*, he said:

I somehow wanted to just get into Laughter Challenge. They auditioned in Amritsar for Season 3, but I was rejected. My friend from school, Raju (Chandan Prabhakar, who became the first runner-up of the show) was selected. I was determined and again went to Delhi for audition and this time got selected and finally became the winner in 2007. After that, I did a few small shows before doing Comedy Circus and then within one year started my own show.⁷⁷

The Comic Performers of The Great Indian Laughter Challenge

The importance of *The Great Indian Laughter Challenge* has been amply demonstrated in the previous section by all those performers who received accolades because of it. However, in 2018, when we look back on these shows, it seems more like a parody of stand-up comedy as we know it today. The content and method of stand-up performance have turned upside down. In the 2000s, the comedians used to perform in the coat- pants of different shades and colours. Mostly they used to tell jokes and read poetry and did mimicry. Raju Srivastav was a contestant in the first season of *The Great Indian Laughter Challenge*. I am going to mention the first performance he started with,

⁷⁴<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=swozBbWMzNQ>

⁷⁵<http://www.hotstar.com/tv/the-great-indian-laughter-series/458/rauf-lala-wins-the-finals/1000008742> at 9:00

⁷⁶<http://www.hotstar.com/tv/the-great-indian-laughter-series/458/kapil-creates-a-laughter-riot/1000008775> at 40:10

⁷⁷<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/tv/news/hindi/Kapil-Sharma-Seeing-my-daddy-suffer-in-his-last-days-I-prayed-to-God-to-take-him/articleshow/39944224.cms>

Raju Srivastav's Introductory Performance in 2005⁷⁸

In the recent past, Mumbai was flooded. Local trains shut down, and many people were stuck for two-three days without any food and shelter. You must have seen all that in the news, it was a horrible situation. A thirsty and hungry man rings a random bell in the hope of shelter.

MAN: *Hello, Apko Pata HoGa, Barish Ho Rahi Hai, Aapko Malum Hai Na. Barish Ho Rahi Hai, Train- Bagarah Sab Band Hai, Ja Nahi Pa Rahe Hain. Bhook Lagi Hai Matlab Raat Aapke Yaha Guzar Len? Subah Chale Jayenge Bas.*

LANDLADY: *Aise Kaise Chale Aaye Muh Uttha Ke? Aise Kaise Apko Rakh Len? Yun Chale Aaye, Kahin Bhi Akar Bell Maar Di! Ye Bahu Betiyon Ka Ghar Hai, Yahan Bahu Betiyan Rahti Hain.*

MAN: (with humiliation) *Accha!* (He went to the next house and rang the bell.)

MAN: *Hello, Hum Idhar Fans Gayen Hain, Matlab Raste Me Hain, Kahin Ghar Bhi Nahi Ja Pa Rahe Hain, Train- Bagarah Band Hai. Apke Yahan Matlab Raat Guzar Len?*

OLD OWNER: *Arre Bhai, Aise Kaise Rakh Len Aain, Bhai, Batayiye? Jaan Nahi Pahchan Nahi, Muh Utthaye Chale Aaye, Aain. Ab Kaun Hai, Kya Hai, Kidhar Se Aaye Hain? Aain, Aain.. Ye Bahu- Betiyon Ka Ghar Hai.*

(So, this man went to the third flat and rang the bell of the house and he himself-started asking first).

MAN: *Aapke Yahan Bahu Betiya Hain?*

OWNER: *Qun?*

MAN: *Vo Kuch Nahi, Bas Raat Gujarni Hai!"*

The Judges of The Great Indian Laughter Challenge

It is evident by its name, the show was laughter 'challenge', and the contestants' goal was to elicit as many laughs as possible. Just as every competition requires judges so did *The Great*

⁷⁸<http://www.hotstar.com/tv/the-great-indian-laughter-series/458/great-indian-laughter-champions-3/1000010408> at 14:24 to 15:50

Indian Laughter Challenge. Navjot Singh Siddhu and Shekar Suman were the judges of the show from 2005 to 2007. In the last season (2008), Bollywood actor Shatrughan Sinha replaced Shekhar Suman.⁷⁹ From 1997 to 2001, Shekhar Suman hosted the first Indian late-night comedy talk show, *Movers & Shakers*.⁸⁰ According to production house (Runaway Productions India Private Limited), “The show was a huge hit, and it catapulted Shekhar Suman to stardom making him one of India’s most popular TV Actors (Movers And Shakers- *YouTube*).”⁸¹ In 2008, the year actor Shatrughan Sinha replaced him as a judge, Shekhar performed in Delhi’s Taj Hotel, which was telecasted later with the title *Still Moving Still Shaking* from 14 December 2008 on NDTV Imagine channel.⁸²

The second judge Navjot Singh Siddhu was a former Indian Cricketer and is now a politician. In April 2016, he was appointed as a member of the upper house (Rajya Sabha) of the Indian Parliament by ruling right-wing Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP). After five months of his appointment, he resigned from the BJP in September 2016 and joined the Indian National Congress. Popular for his self-improvised poetry, Siddhu became a judge on the show because of his unceasing belly laugh after each performance. Comedy viewers and stand-up comedians have accused him of sexism in his ‘poetry’ and comments that were directed towards the female host, comedienne and actresses. Tanmay Bhat (from AIB) said, “Whenever Parizaad Kolah [the host of *The Great Indian Laughter Challenge*] used to come onstage, [Shekhar Suman and Navjot Singh Siddhu used to comment] ‘*Oh Parizaad, Qya Lag Rahi Ho Aaj!*’ Parizaad was reduced to ‘*Qya Lag Rahi Ho Aaj.*’ Except for this, she has no other meaning, and that is casual sexism. This was considered ‘okay’ for a long time in our mass media.”⁸³

It is evident from Raju Srivastav’s skit and the judges’ remarks directed at the women on the show that they used to propagate highly offensive jokes with innuendos and casual sexism in the name of humour and comedy in *The Great Indian Laughter Challenge*. The widespread perception and the position maintained by the producers of these shows was that the television viewers supposedly wanted such content. With the internet’s growing popularity and the emergence of new media, the landscape of Indian comedy would soon change.

⁷⁹<http://www.hotstar.com/tv/the-great-indian-laughter-series/458/unlimited-entertainment/1000008776> at 3:00 to 4:00

⁸⁰<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DEvmJpHqdI0>

⁸¹<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DEvmJpHqdI0>

⁸²<http://ishare.rediff.com/video/entertainment/still-moving-still-shaking-politics-special-part-1/527325>

⁸³ Interview was taken at the office of AIB in Mumbai on 27 October 2017.

The Arrival of the Internet

In the present decade, social media has played a prominent role in organising protests, spreading rumors, information, and knowledge. The *Arab Social Media Report* suggests that in the ‘Arab Spring’ that started on 18 December 2010, the protesters used social media to communicate with other protesters, disseminate information pro or against the government and gain attention on an international level.⁸⁴ Two years later in India, it would again play a key and decisive role in a burning socio-political issue. After the gangrape of a medical student on 16 December 2012, protesters used social media to share information and held an impromptu protest at India Gate. It forced the Government to reexamine the law for female survivors of sexual and gender violence.⁸⁵ In February 2016, students of Jawaharlal Nehru University used an online campaign, #StandWithJNU (to counter another online campaign— #ShutdownJNU), to influence people’s opinion in their favour.⁸⁶ #MeToo was the most recent online worldwide campaign started by Hollywood actresses in October 2017, against sexual harassment at workplace.⁸⁷

On the other hand, a 2014, research states, “Social media played a key role in the Assam violence, Kishtwar (Jammu) & this time in the Muzaffarnagar riots, the posts by user over Facebook, Twitter, SMS & coverage by the Indian media tend to affect the opinions and actions of other individuals of society.”⁸⁸ NP Singh, District Magistrate of Gautam Budh Nagar in case of #DadriLynching (2015), said, “Villagers lynched Mohd Ikhlq after an announcement was reportedly made from a temple loudspeaker about a suspected cow killing in the village. However, social media had vitiated the atmosphere in the area much earlier,”⁸⁹ A 2016 report, *Social Media in the domain of communal violence* finds social media a tool for gossip and rumour, responsible for communal riots.⁹⁰ Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg wrote on 19 January 2018 that “There’s too much sensationalism, misinformation, and polarisation in the world today. Social media enables people to spread information faster than ever before...”⁹¹ It

⁸⁴<http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/dsg/unpan050860.pdf>

⁸⁵<http://www.iimkashipur.ac.in/hi/academic/centers-of-excellence/public-policy-government/research/social-media-in-protests>

⁸⁶<https://www.deccanchronicle.com/opinion/op-ed/301216/dev-360-2016-hashtags-hysteria-hope.html>

⁸⁷<https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/sexual-misconduct/metoo-hashtag-becomes-anti-sexual-harassment-assault-rallying-cry-n810986>

⁸⁸<https://www.lawctopus.com/academike/abuse-of-social-media/>

⁸⁹<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/like-in-muzaffarnagar-social-media-misused-in-dadri/articleshow/49235908.cms>

⁹⁰http://www.ijariie.com/AdminUploadPdf/SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE DOMAIN OF COMMUNAL VIOLENCE_A STUDY OF ASSAM RIOT 2012_ijariie1673.pdf

⁹¹<https://www.facebook.com/zuck/posts/10104445245963251>

has a mixed character of making people aware and at the same time taps into people's violence and has also proliferated rumours. All this information is shared in text, video and picture format on social media sites and mobile Apps. People create, watch and share information, articles, pictures and videos according to their belief, faith, and opinions. These mediums create opinion by the the subject content.

The increased importance and power of the internet and social media in recent times can be understood by a fact that at the beginning of 2018, everyone in their twenties might be the last generation to remember the world without internet and social media sites. Today, an individual might get by if they avoid using the internet, but the world cannot be imagined without these technologies any more. An anonymous joke I received in a WhatsApp in which an old man is telling about world without internet to a millennial. It reads:

GRANDFATHER: My child, there was a time when the computer, laptop, smartphone, iPhone were not in existence.

GRANDDAUGHTER: Then, how did you post your pictures on Facebook and watch YouTube on the internet?⁹²

The joke apprises us of the situation where even if the teen might be able to imagine a world where these devices were absent, the vast world of internet and social media sites have become part of their life; millennials cannot even imagine the world without them. The technological advancement that occurred in the field of communication through devices, machines and software has also impacted the comic genre in many ways. Until last decade, comic joke books were published, and people used to read them to laugh. The first change in that technique came through the use of text messages in mobile phones in the early 2000s and then when WhatsApp subscribers boomed after 2010.⁹³

In the field of comic performance, particularly in the genre which brought the 'new clowns' into limelight, the internet played a significant role. Cinema and TV brought a kind of comedian whose fame, stature and wealth would befit the traditionally dominant stars of the popular culture industry. The Internet brought new kinds of possibilities as a medium, where new comedians started posting their live videos on the internet, and that held the promise to lead

⁹² An anonymous WhatsApp text joke.

⁹³ <https://www.quora.com/When-was-Whatsapp-launched-released-in-India>

their careers to hitherto unscaled heights. The difference here lay in the fact that star comic actors and television comedians were chosen by producers or TV judges, but new clowns started being chosen directly by online spectators of their YouTube performances. The number of views accumulated became the deciding factor in place of judges and producers (See Page145).

Television did nothing, but it is our phone that has brought the real change and reached. WhatsApp, YouTube and Google, they have changed India. Whether you call it good or bad, they have done it. It has connected to the people at a mass level, where a person sitting in Rai Bareilly is offended because of AIB roast, this was impossible ten years ago.⁹⁴

National award-winning writer and comedian Varun Grover came to Mumbai to become a writer. Varun Grover wrote comedy for almost a decade for television shows and finally started performing in open mic performances and became the lead writer of the first Indian comedy based YouTube channel, 'Jai Hind' (with its tagline 'TV show on the internet') in 2009. He said, "I found no more, my type of comedy on television, which talks against the establishment and questions power [sic]."⁹⁵ As lead writer of the first comic YouTube channel, Varun introduced the show in the following way:

Okay! I will be honest, brutally honest. There is no respect for the writers. They are even less respected than Zardari in Pakistan and Amar Singh in his own house. And there is no respect for internet also as people say, 'Are you Guys crazy? What is this TV show on the internet?' Moral of the story, there is no better place than the internet for a writer.⁹⁶

The television and cable channels played a significant role in the circulation and 'popularity' of comedy in India. However, the emergence of social media brought a radical change in the field of comic performance. On 11 May 2011, *ADWEEK* (an American weekly) reported that Facebook had surpassed 667 million users.⁹⁷ In October 2012, Facebook had one billion users, and in less than five years later on 27 June 2017 Facebook users numbered two billion.⁹⁸ The statistics point to the fact that the time from 2012 to 2017 is more crucial, which brought one billion new users on Facebook., The number of users is stable now, but change continues albeit gradually as people invest in social media sites.

⁹⁴ In an interview with me on 11 November 2017 at Yash Raj Films studio in Mumbai.

⁹⁵ In a personal interview on 11 November 2017 at Yash Raj Films studio in Mumbai.

⁹⁶ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eM_55mm-KRM

⁹⁷ <https://www.adweek.com/digital/facebook-surpasses-677-million-users-more-traffic-trends-and-data-at-inside-facebook-gold-may-2011-edition/>

⁹⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/zuck/posts/10103831654565331>

Recently, I asked my friend Nikesh about our mutual journalist friend and Facebook addict Vishnu. Thoroughly anti-Facebook, Nikesh sarcastically replied, “Vishnu has left his place and shifted to Facebook, getting hold of him in the real world is impossible.”⁹⁹ People are spending long hours on social media. However, the question is, what they are up to on these sites. The obvious answer is that they are living their virtual life. Most people use social sites to chat, share their personal views and socio-political news with their virtual friends on social media. However, the most shared content on social media sites happens to be of the comic kind. Comic content is shared in the form of text jokes on messaging apps, cartoons, memes, GIFs, Vines, video clips on these social sites but live comic performances shared on YouTube (YouTube performance) is its most popular form.

First of all, this raised the demand for more comic performances on YouTube. Second, it also led to changes in the content of live comic performances and other comic videos made for social media like *Gangs of Social Media* (2013),¹⁰⁰ a parody of the film *Gangs of Wasseypur* (2012).¹⁰¹ The video was dubbed over the scenes of the film in the context of Valentines Day, where gangs of ‘singles’ and ‘the committed’ are fighting to maintain their relationship status on the social site Facebook. The parlance that they employ in voice-overs includes Hash tag, Like, Share, Comment, Poke, Spam, Mutual Friends, Tag, Facebook Account, Block, Upload among others and is a sign of how the virtual world has inundated the real one.

The video is the best example to show that not only does comic content influence social media but also how social media’s debates, term and dominant subjects decide the subject of comic videos and performances (See chapter 3, YouTube Performance). The most shared content on the internet is usually related to the comic genre because it is impossible to make someone feel tragic about something until knowing the subject and their situation completely. Comedy, on the other hand, sits diametrically opposite to it in his regard. The comedy lies in the tragedy itself. It is understood that human life is tragic; full of curiosity, struggles and achievements. We tend to see things in a story as a part of a big story—that of life’. Comedy, jokes, humour is a part of that story. However, the joke cannot be a story in itself. A Joke or comic piece is a take on the story of one’s life. Therefore, a joke is supposed to be short with a more prolonged effect, quite like the earlier granddaughter joke. It tells the story of living in 2018 where a teenager cannot even imagine life without the internet. Only a joke can create a

⁹⁹ On a telephonic communication with my friend Nikesh on 15 January 2018 at 10:00 p.m.

¹⁰⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d8-jhpAlOkc>

¹⁰¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j-AkWDkXcMY>

prolonged effect and still manage to tell it in three lines. Varun Grover says about the ideal joke, “An ideal joke has very short setup and a vast punchline or punchline without any setup.” On being asked what setup is, he explains it through a joke:

On a railway platform.

PASSENGER ONE: There is news that a train has derailed from its line [tracks] on Sunday.

PASSENGER NUMBER TWO: Wow! That is great news! At least we are safe for office days.”¹⁰²

Grover considers this joke best to define a joke. What Passenger One, said was the setup and what the Passenger Number Two said was the punchline. This is how he elucidated:

How did this joke work? So, as I told you the news, you get everything related to it because as an Indian you know the condition of Indian Railways, that news of accidents and derailment weekly fare because it happens every week and if it has happened today, so, no need to worry for the next five days [sic]. However, if I tell the same joke to a foreigner with the same information, they may not get it because he does not know this background. So, I am forced to explain all the facts. My setup will increase, and punchline will become too short.”¹⁰³

Grover does not consider a joke with a long setup and a short punchline to be an ideal joke. Which is true in case of genre itself because comedy is possible for a short duration. It becomes tedious if a single joke takes a long time or a single comic performer goes on for a longer time. Compared to tragedy then, comedy as a genre takes shorter time which marks its strength. We can also understand it through different examples of daily soaps, films, theatre and online web series that take more time to build tragedy in comparison to comedy. i.e., *The Game of Thrones* (2011-2018)¹⁰⁴ that is about the fight for capturing the iron throne of Westeros (an imaginary place of the western world) in a fantasy medieval age, *Narcos* (2015-2018)¹⁰⁵ which is based on the rise of drug smuggling in Colombia in the 1980s and *Sacred Games* (2018-)¹⁰⁶ based on Vikram Chandra’s 2007 novel of the same name are all testimonies to the length required for build-up by other genres.

¹⁰² In interview on 11 November 2017 at Yash Raj Films Studio in Mumbai 4:00 p.m.

¹⁰³ In interview on 11 November 2017 at Yash Raj Films Studio in Mumbai 4:00 p.m.

¹⁰⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BpJYNVhGf1s>

¹⁰⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U7eINhHwgBU>

¹⁰⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mVz5Jv7ZbPc>

In comparison, there are very few long running comic series. When a US-based web magazine published an article listing the best ten comic series of 2016, either they referred to games format on YouTube, or they referred to YouTube channels or to series like *7 minutes in Purgatory*¹⁰⁷ in which stand-up comedians perform for 7 minutes before a camera in a room all alone.¹⁰⁸ In the same manner, Indian web series, i.e. *Permanent Roommates* (2014),¹⁰⁹ *Pitchers* (2015),¹¹⁰ *#LoveBytes* (2015),¹¹¹ *Bang Baja Barat* (2015),¹¹² *Baked* (2015),¹¹³ *Tripling* (2016),¹¹⁴ and *Chukyagiri* (2016)¹¹⁵ cannot truly be counted as part of the comedy genre. They involve elements of romance and often combine tragedy and comedy. Their subjects are about open relationships, entrepreneurship, problems in ‘love marriages’, student life in Delhi University and embarking on a trip with your siblings.¹¹⁶

One cannot watch these series all the time because, as I mentioned earlier, watching tragedy demands time. One cannot watch it while working in the office and studying in the library. So, for short entertainment that fit into small breaks while working in the office or studying in the library, people started watching short videos like trailers of upcoming films, news, information related to science, nature and the human body. Meanwhile, the demand for comedy in the form of memes, vines, and videos was generated, and people started watching live comic performances that were being webcast by individuals on YouTube (Figure Vines, See Page 55). The YouTube performances showed performers performing in pubs, clubs, halls, malls, college events or even atop trees.¹¹⁷

Above The statistics mentioned earlier detailing the skyrocketing growth of social media sites in the first half of the 2010s with WhatsApp, Facebook and, most importantly, YouTube brought new clowns into existence (See Page 31). Hence, my case studies also lie in the first half of the 2010s. Though these mediums of entertainment and new performances developed in the twenty-first century has led to a negative effect on the native indigenous performances as written by Shanbag (See Page: 20), comic performer Sanjay Rajoura says, “Internet is such

¹⁰⁷<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-kXg1lrb2FE>

¹⁰⁸<https://www.pastemagazine.com/articles/2016/12/the-10-best-comedy-web-series-of-2016.html>

¹⁰⁹https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GRc_m8zQU0

¹¹⁰<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xcUHB9n8Kws>

¹¹¹<https://youtu.be/K2S0BdoQPZ0>

¹¹²<https://youtu.be/Of7BgZlHoo4>

¹¹³<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NHsIEwVLKbY>

¹¹⁴<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MfKNEC9xcE8>

¹¹⁵https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oOpjKw7c6g&list=PLubYfn69uVF79_3DsGcfATB86nx2Fv3Ap

¹¹⁶<http://www.cosmopolitan.in/life/news/a8214/web-series-you-should-check-out-right-noww/>

¹¹⁷https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VbiAtiQv_tw

a huge fish that it will not even let television live longer. Internet will hegemonise all mediums ever produced.”¹¹⁸ In the context of small performances becoming extinct his argument was similar to Sunil Shanbag’s.

The condition of native performances is poor because there is no programme to save them from big fishes of the internet and its performances. Though these emergent performances of the internet will also go into extinct with the time and somebody else will be talking about ‘new clowns’ in the same manner as we are talking today about *Tamasha* and *Nautanki*.¹¹⁹

I asked Rajoura if he thought that the clown had gone into residual because of new clowns and if they need immediate patronisation. He replied:

Yes, definitely! They need it like the puppeteers. The puppeteers are almost extinct. The government, we are seeing today, have no interest in the people’s culture. Neither have they had any interest in the intellectualism, [on the] contrary they want to destroy it. So that is the reason all this is being ruined, and this will continue [sic].¹²⁰

Comic Performers of Past and Present

After discussing the role of cinema, television and the internet, let us shift our gaze at the performers. To make a detailed analysis of the performers and their comic techniques, I factored their backgrounds regarding the region they were natives of, their religion, caste, class, and gender. I chose sixteen people who represented film comic actors, stand-up comedians and television comic stars from the last century and new clowns: stand up comedians of the twenty-first century to represent the different trends of the twentieth and twenty-first century.

Regional Backgrounds, Language and its Implications

In the twentieth century, the comic performers represented diverse regions of India: Noor Mohammed Charlie was born in Gujarat, Uma Devi, known more commonly as TunTun, was born in Uttar Pradesh and brought up in Punjab, Johny Walker was from Indore (Madhya Pradesh), Mehmood was from Bombay, and Johnny Lever was from Andhra Pradesh.

In comparison, the comic performers of the twenty-first century are mostly from North India—Raju Srivastav is from Uttar Pradesh, Kapil Sharma was born in Punjab, Sunil Grover

¹¹⁸ In personal interview taken on 17 August 2017 at his house in Delhi at 40:40.

¹¹⁹ In personal interview taken on 17 August 2017 at his house in Delhi at 41:05.

¹²⁰ In personal interview taken on 17 August 2017 at his house in Delhi at 42:02.

is from Haryana, Bharti Singh belongs to Punjab. There is also a growing trend of the new generation performers belonging to urban backgrounds. Bhat and Joshi are from Mumbai, while Rahul Ram was born and brought up in Delhi. Ram still lives in Delhi while Rajoura belongs to the NCR belt and lives in Ghaziabad. Grover was born in Himachal but brought up in Dehradun and Lucknow (UP), Shyam Rangeela is from Rajasthan. Zakir Khan's ancestors moved to Indore (Madhya Pradesh) from Rajasthan. Zakir himself was born in Indore but has spent a long time in Delhi. He is known for using a dialect of Delhi based Hindi in his comic pieces.

I read this regional or urban-non-urban background as significant for the content and form of the comic acts. Representing the north Indian Hindi belt, the current crop of comic actors signify regional identity markers vis-à-vis the older more diverse group of actors who even if they performed in Hindi had stronger, diverse regional affinities which were apparent in their performance or style.

I read this as a marked identification not only with the Hindi language but also the cultural milieu of indigenous humour very typical of the north Indian Hindi belt. This may also be intricately connected to the large Hindi speaking population that becomes the consumer and audience of this comedy, particularly on the online platforms and television. This has also led to comic actors who previously performed in English but are also lapsing into Hindi language comedy and adopting the style which goes with the language. For example, Bhat and Joshi are from Bombay, and they performed exclusively in English in the beginning. Now, most of their content is produced in Hindi. According to Bhat, "There was a time when most of our content was only in English but now that time has gone. I think, now our videos are watched by two million, three million and five million people."¹²¹ The large audience base he attributes to their adoption of Hindi and the north Indian culture which comes with its linguistic style.

The dominance of Hindi in the entertainment market is nothing new and has been an integral trait of Indian demography. However, with ever increasing population, its significance is now even more pronounced. More than 53 per cent people among speakers of 122 languages (of languages with at least 10,000 native speakers) speak Hindi.¹²² What is of essence is that adopting the Hindi language also entails infusing a particular style of enunciation, dialects,

¹²¹Interview with Tanmay Bhatt in Mumbai on 27 October

¹²²<https://qz.com/239073/these-four-charts-break-down-indias-complex-relationship-with-hindi/>

pronunciation, body expressions and, cultural idioms and vocabulary which has become the selling point of these comic performances.

The writer of film *Kuldip Patwal: I didn't do it* (2018), Rahul Ramchandani elaborates, "Even Hindi stories are not being written in Devanagari, but it is written in Roman abugida [sic]. In Bollywood, they talk in English, write in English but make Hindi Films."¹²³ The Greek-Swedish actress Elli Avram was the host of *The Great Indian Laughter Challenge* (2017).¹²⁴ In the show, transmitted virtually and on television, she seemed to deliver her dialogues with consummate ease as though she was fluently conversant with the Hindi language. On 2nd October 2017, however, on the set of the performance, I saw that Avram knew neither her dialogue all nor much Hindi. Avram read her script in Roman Hindi from a teleprompter, situated behind the seats of the judges of the show. She is used as an 'eye candy' in conformity with the dominant ideas of 'beauty' and 'exoticness'. The producers employ each and every trick to pander their shows to achieve a higher TRP (Television Rating Points). Nowhere in the Hindi film industry, is this more exemplified than in one of the most celebrated actors, the half British Katrina Kaif. Still, as far as comedy is concerned, their accent is used as laughter evoking technique to employ the motif of the 'bimbo'.

In the context of stand-up comedy, such pre-scripted texts for women-hosts goes against the very concept of the genre as stand-up comedy is akin to talking with your audience and the choice of the language is final and interwoven in the presentation, dialogues, pauses and expressions. If a comedian fails to connect to their spectator or audience in a live performance, then all purpose is lost. Even if most Indians do not speak Hindi, most of them understand it. English is popular and aspirational but is limited to a small class and cultural mooring. That is the reason that influenced AIB to produce their content in Hindi.

Class

In the same mode of analysis, one finds that most of the performers before the 1990s came from working class families. Noor Mohammed Charlie used to repair umbrellas in his childhood. Uma Devi lost her parents at an early age. She was raised by a conservative Punjabi uncle, who did not allow her to study. Johnny Walker moved to Bombay with his parents

¹²³ In an interview with me during Mumbai Film Festival 2017.

¹²⁴ <http://www.hotstar.com/tv/the-great-indian-laughter-challenge-joke-sabha/15308/the-new-laughter-season-is-here/1000190263>

because the textile mill, where his father worked was shutdown, Walker worked as a vegetable vendor and used to leave for Pune at 11:00 p.m. to buy vegetables to sell them in Bombay the next morning. In an interview, he said that he sold stationery, grass, fruits and “all sorts of 50 rupees business” before becoming a bus conductor at BEST.¹²⁵ Mehmood was the son of a junior artist in the Hindi Film Industry. His father Mumtaz Ali was a stage actor and dancer. Mehmood started working as a child junior artist in films. He worked as a driver for film director P.L. Santoshi. He also started working in Filmistan Studios as a junior artist on a monthly salary of 180 rupees.

We can easily discern a marked shift after the 1990s. Raju Srivastava emerged as a star in the twenty-first century field of comedy. His botanist father, Ramesh Chandra Srivastava, was a poet and was well known by his stage name Balai Kaka. Famous for his ‘observant comedy’ Raju's main comic pieces mostly talk about rural, middle-class people. In contrast, the new crop of comic actors is from a far higher socio-economic background. Kapil Sharma was born in the family of a head constable of Punjab Police in Police line area of Amritsar. Sunil Grover’s father was the manager in a bank in Sirsa, Haryana. Bharti Singh lost her father in her childhood. According to Singh, she was a National level Rifle shooter and archer in her college days.¹²⁶ Shooting and archery require an investment that puts these pursuits beyond the reach of most Indian people. Tanmay Bhat's mother Jaya Bhatt is a bank officer in Mumbai. Rohan Joshi was born in a multi-cultural family (Gujarati and Marathi) is a ‘South Bombay Boy’ (A loose term used to refer to the prosperous residents of South Mumbai). Rahul Ram’s parents were academics. Varun Grover was born to an Army Engineer father and schoolteacher mother in Himachal Pradesh and was brought up in Dehradun and Uttar Pradesh. The performers who came after the 1990s started coming from middle-class or upper-class families. It would be a rarity today to find comic performers from working class or subaltern backgrounds.

Cultural Capital

capital can present itself in three fundamental guises: as *economic capital*, which is immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the forms of property rights: as *cultural capital*, which is convertible, on certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the forms of educational qualifications: and as *social capital*, made up of social obligation (‘connections’), which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the form of a title of nobility (Pierre Bourdieu 1986:242).¹²⁷

¹²⁵ <https://www.outlookindia.com/magazine/story/return-of-the-wit/203681>

¹²⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=13JsoXpQbrs&pbjreload=10>

¹²⁷ The Forms of Capital- *iitk.ac.in*:16 http://home.iitk.ac.in/~amman/soc748/bourdieu_forms_of_capital.pdf

In *The Forms of Capital*, Bourdieu divides cultural capital into three forms, and then *Cultural Capital* is again divided into three categories. *Embodied State*: long lasting dispositions of the mind and body, i.e., dialect and accent; *Objectified State*: in the form of cultural goods, i.e., electronic devices and technological products like the iPhone, MacBook and other luxurious or aspirational items; and finally, the *Institutionalised State*: education qualifications, like academic degrees (The Forms of Capital- *marxist.org*).

1. Embodied State that has long lasting dispositions of the mind and body like dialects and accents
2. Objectified State that is in the form of cultural goods like electronic devices and other luxurious or aspirational goods.
3. Institutionalised State in the form of educational qualifications viz, academic degrees (The Forms of Capital- *marxist.org*). Bourdieu argues that cultural capital changes power dynamics among societies. Like Marx, he argued that capital forms the foundation of social life and dictated one's position within the social order (Cultural Capital- *routledgesoc.com*).¹²⁸ In my view, the art of the comedians is the example of both: the embodied and institutionalised states of cultural capital.

The qualifications or the institutionalised state of the twentieth-century Indian comic was miserable in comparison to present new clowns. Johnny Lever quit school while he was only in class seven. Johnny Walker could not study after class six. Tun Tun did not get any schooling. Noor Mohammed Charlie was a child labourer and hated school. The new clowns of the twenty-first century do not just bank on their embodied capital. They enjoy the institutionalised state of cultural capital in the form of academic degrees prior to entering the field of comedy. Kapil Sharma did his higher education from Khalsa College, Amritsar and used to teach drama in the same college. Sunil Grover obtained a bachelor's degree in Commerce from Guru Nanak College, Sirsa and a master's degree in theatre from Punjab University, Chandigarh. Bharti Singh was a national level rifle shooter and archer in her college days. Tanmay Bhat has a bachelor's degree in Mass Media from R.D National College, Bandra. Rohan Joshi attended Asian College of Journalism. Rahul Ram is an alumnus of the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Kanpur and a PhD holder from Cornell University, New York. Varun Grover studied at IT-BHU [now known as IIT (BHU) Varanasi]. Sanjay Rajoura obtained a master's degree from Birla Institute of Technology. Zakir Khan is a college dropout

¹²⁸<http://routledgesoc.com/category/profile-tags/cultural-capital>

but earned a diploma in sitar. Shyam Rangeela has completed his schooling and did a three-year diploma course in animation from Jaipur.

It was the embodiment of their talents, viz, mimicry, imitation and clowning, by which the actors of the twentieth century could shine as comedians. Their profession in acting changed their class composition, and their comic talent dictated their position within the society as comedians or comic stars. As Becker says, “Ability or talent is itself the product of an investment of time and cultural capital” (qtd. in Bourdieu *The Forms of Capital* p 41).¹²⁹This embodied state of cultural capital and talent of a comedian can be understood under the given term ‘habitus’ by Bourdieu in his book *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977). The habitus consists both the hexis (the tendency to hold and use one’s body in a certain way, such as posture and accent) and habits (more abstract mental habits, schemes of perception, classification, appreciation, feeling and action) (*Outline of a Theory of Practice* 87).¹³⁰ Though his usage of habitus was explained through a division of three types of body; a basketball player, a street man and a person born in elite society (198), this can apply just as well in the context of comic performers or any other performer.

Birth culturally inclines most of the new clowns in the context of objectified and institutionalised forms of cultural capital because they come from an ‘upper class’ or ‘upper middle-class’ background. They may fail into the embodied state of stand-up comedians, which require a different cultural capital or different kind of embodiment to transit humour. Bourdieu writes,

As everybody knows, priceless things have their price, and the extreme difficulty of converting certain practices and certain objects into money is only due to the fact that this conversion is refused in the very intention that produces them, which is nothing other than the denial (Verneinung) of the economy (*The Forms of Capital- iitk.ac.in*:16).¹³¹

This difference of objectified and institutionalised cultural capital among older comic actors and new clowns makes it clear that the third (embodied state of cultural capital), which was the only talent of the previous comedian is achievable to an individual who has objectified and institutionalised cultural capital. Practice can teach them the nuances by which they could become comedians by participating in the ‘open mic performances’ that are held by the clubs,

¹²⁹<https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/fr/bourdieu-forms-capital.htm>

¹³⁰ Bourdieu P. ‘Outline of a Theory of Practice, Cambridge University Press, 1977.

¹³¹http://home.iitk.ac.in/~amman/soc748/bourdieu_forms_of_capital.pdf

pubs and cafes to earn a profit while purporting to provide a space for aspiring stand-up comedians (See chapter 3). This difference also shows an interdependency between the new clowns and their objectified and institutionalised cultural capital. The belonging of new clowns to a particular section of society having objectified and institutionalised cultural capital makes it clear that the ordinary person the street cannot exchange their embodied cultural capital into profit because their comedy (clowning, mimicry and imitation) is not required anymore by spectators having objectified and institutionalised cultural capital. Therefore, it amounts to the denial of the talent of clowning.

Gender

Regarding their education and cultural capital, there lies a wide chasm between the comedians of the two centuries. In the context of gender participation, however, there is hardly any change. Beyond women's participation in the profession, there are few critical changes I see in comediennes to mention. In the twentieth century, there was a minimal percentage of women comediennes in comparison to men in Indian comedy, viz, Uma Devi Khatri (1923-2003) who was the first comedienne in the twentieth century, Leela Mishra (1908-1988) Manorama (1937-2015) Shubha Khote (1940-present) Preeti Ganguly (1953- 2012) Guddi Maruti (1959- Present) were the most popular of them.

Uma Devi was the first Indian comedienne. She left her house at the age of 23 and ran away to Bombay to become a singer. She threatened to jump into the sea if music director Naushad Ali did not accede to her demand of giving her work Naushad became her groomer and provided her work. Naushad also suggested her to act in films. Her debut film was Babul (1950) in which she was chasing Dilip Kumar, and both fell over a cot. In this way, she was named 'Tun Tun' by Dilip Kumar. She used the name as an asset or as cultural capital because it seemed suitable for her bulky body. In an interview in 1998, she compared herself to an elephant.¹³² Tun Tun acted in 245 movies from 1950–1990 and made money and fame as a comedian.

Bharti Singh (1985-present) is a contemporary star comedienne with regard to money and fame. A second runner-up like Raju Srivastava, she did not win *The Great Indian Laughter Challenge* Season-4 that ran in 2008. Comedian Suresh Albela became the winner but the second runner-up of the show, Bharti Singh, became a star.¹³³ She returned to Amritsar after

¹³²<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xg-MoJmdKRg>

¹³³<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=13JsoXpQbrs>

failing to win the show but received recognition all over India because of the popularity of her television character. Bharti was famous for her stage character 'Lalli.' After the show, she was offered a series of performances. She performed her first stand-up in JW Marriott hotel, Mumbai for one lakh rupees. In an interview, she shared that first, they offered Fifty thousand rupees per show for a series of six shows.¹³⁴ However, she was shocked at the amount offered, so she dropped the call. However, she was called back soon afterwards, and the person on the line apologised and offered her one lakh rupees per show. After this, she participated in many television shows, i.e., *Comedy Circus: Mahasangram* (2010),¹³⁵ *Comedy Circus Ka Jadoo* (2010),¹³⁶ *Comedy Circus Ke Taansen* (2011),¹³⁷ *Comedy Circus Ka Naya Daur* (2011)¹³⁸ and she also hosted the show, *Comedy Nights Bachao* (2015).¹³⁹ In 2015, she bought a Mercedes-Benz car for one crore rupees. In 2017, she appeared in *The Kapil Sharma Show* (2017)¹⁴⁰ and *The Great Indian Laughter Challenge* (2017).¹⁴¹

Uma and Bharti have a similar bodily appearance in the context of their weight. However, there is a difference of time; Uma Devi took the stage name Tun Tun, but Bharti cannot be referred with the same connotation because of contemporary social unacceptance that such names carry. Though comedy is still going around with the same notions of body shaming in which one is targeted and ridiculed for being over-weight, the likes of Bharti, Tun Tun, Preeti Ganguly and Guddy Maruti, used it as their cultural capital to transmit it into economic prosperity.

Shubha Khote was the most celebrated comedian of the 1960s and 1970s. Mehmood used to refer to her as his best comic partner though she used to portray the role of a 'dumb' woman. So, in place of making fun of others, the woman herself was the subject of generating humour in her films and comedy. Men directed them, and men wrote the script or dialogues.

All the comediennes of the twentieth century were stars in their time. Still, being part of the film industry, they did not make as much money as Bharti makes as a stand-up comedian in

¹³⁴<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=13JsoXpQbrs>

¹³⁵<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F3OdWTsVI9E>

¹³⁶<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=16rF3bcnIGA>

¹³⁷<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ROBBYGjkNY0>

¹³⁸<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fh7KDxmTiUw>

¹³⁹<https://www.voot.com/shows/comedy-nights-bachao/1/360658/the-epic-roast-of-mika-singh-&-sohail-khan/356266>

¹⁴⁰<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lpdJb5eWq0Q>

¹⁴¹<http://www.hotstar.com/tv/the-great-indian-laughter-challenge/15245/who-will-be-the-laughter-king/1000200037>

these last ten years. The reason is that comedy is an independent art form and allows one to create a performance circuit, instead of waiting for roles and negotiating payments. Others in the field today are Aditi Mittal (1987-), Sumukhi Suresh (1987-) and Mallika Dua (1989-) and are not aspirants for film roles. Either they perform on the stage, or they make videos (vines) for their internet viewers (Figure Vines, p56). Their comedies talk of the exclusion of women, the portrayal of women in a specific manner and exhibiting women as eye candies. Their performances have been dealt with in detail in the next chapter.

Themes of Performances

By mentioning the changes that have come about in the field of comedy in the last hundred years, I tried to establish the subject. Now, to look at all the comic hosts and performers of my case studies, viz, *The Kapil Sharma Show*, *AIB Knockout* and *Aisi Taisi Democracy*. I trace their career graphs to understand their on and off-stage personas I intend to give a short introduction of their co-actors and genres. Then I will go onto discussing their emergence as popular comedians — in their own words. Some of the interviews were taken from the YouTube as it is accepted as an archive.

The Kapil Sharma Show can be described as staged encounters between comic actors/hosts and celebrities, where they are introduced, entertained and ridiculed in front of live audience. The show has a scenic backdrop of a house with the comic hosts being its inhabitants and other neighbourhood characters joining in during the show. This comedy show is a theatrical performance that is performed on a stage in which a set is made like a proscenium theatre. On the stage, a set of a house is made, and there is a proper seating arrangement in the manner of a proscenium theatre. Kapil Sharma performs the role of Kappu Sharma, the owner of the house. He lives with his Grandmother /Pushpa Nani (Ali Asgar). In his neighbourhood, Dr Mashoor Gulati (Sunil Grover) runs the 50-50 Hospital. Bumper and Lottery (Kiku Sharda and Rochelle Rao respectively) are two nurses at the hospital. Chandu (Chandan Prabhakar) is a tea maker in near Kappu's house. All these characters are fictional. Men impersonate women on the stage, but no women impersonate men.

Varun Grover, Sanjay Rajoura and Rahul Ram constituted *Aisi Taisi Democracy* in 2014. Varun and Sanjay use 'dick jokes,' swears and apply billingsgate in their comedy but with a conscious intention to make fun of the urban elite classes and political leaders and to question the institution of the family in their comedy. On the other side, Rahul runs the band *Indian Ocean* which plays live music during the comic performance. He sings political songs in which

he uses lines like, *Is Desh Ke Yaaro Lag Gaye Hain, Bade Mote- Mote Lag Gaye Hain* (This country is being fucked every day).

In *AIB Knockout*, the performers made fun of each other. All jokes were based on very personal issues and the personal background of the other performers. Most of them were being targeted for the complexion of their skin, sexuality, and education, i.e., Ashish Shakya for being dark skinned, Karan Johar for being gay, Ranveer Singh for his changing relationship status, Tanmay Bhat for being fat, Rohan Joshi for being cute, Deepika Padukone (Bollywood Actress) for having sex with Ranveer and changing relationship status from Ranbir Kapoor to Ranveer Singh, Arjun Kapoor for being a class12 drop out and Alia Bhatt for being stupid and ignorant etc. Actor Amir Khan referred to the performance as ‘a violent event’. He said, “*Kisi Ke Rang Par Comment Karna, Kisi Ki Sexuality Par comment Karna Aur Usko Joke Banana Aur Mai Apke Saath Hansoon, Mujhe To Hansi Nahi Aa Rahi Isme*”(Commenting on someone’s complexion, sexuality and projecting it as a joke and expecting me to laugh along does not strike me funny).¹⁴²

The Emergence of New Clowns

On 5 August 2009, Jai Hind, became the first YouTube channel in the series, that claimed, “What was not possible to do on regular TV channels — we have done it on the internet. Come and celebrate intelligent, crass, crazy and topical humor all rolled into one.”¹⁴³ On 14 March 2011, The Viral Fever (TVF) came into existence with their tagline, ‘It is not TV, It is on TVF,’ All India Backchod (AIB), a slang based upon ‘All India Radio’ started their channel on 29 January 2012 (See Page 49).¹⁴⁴ It was the first time that every one of them was free to experiment, make any content and use as many billingsgates as they wanted. I see it as their intervention in the entertainment industry. There was nobody to question their content. There was no one to stop them because of low Television Rating Points (TRP). All of them were making their content to get more views, and their Unique Selling Proposition (USP) was to have a new effect, give new perspective and independent young thoughts to their viewers.

¹⁴²<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MWqsiCEk1mo>

¹⁴³<https://www.youtube.com/user/jayhindtv/about>

¹⁴⁴<https://www.youtube.com/user/allindiabakchod/about>

The first time they created an entirely different content that was more humorous and real in the form of comedy. AIB writes, “We make sketches, podcasts, web shows and other things for the internet’s validation. You can check out behind the scenes pictures, gig updates and other tidbits on their facebook: www.facebook.com/India.com/IndiaBakchod.” They were not making it extravagant, dreamlike and alienating in the method of production, which was the typecast with television. There was a sudden upsurge of shows in 2000 that were imaginary, unrealistic, fancy. Genre-wise, most of these shows were belonged to tragedy and told stories set around privileged lives in opulent bungalows, secluded from life’s grim struggles. Examples include *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi* (3 July 2000 – 6 November 2008), *Kahani Ghar Ghar Ki* (16 October 2000- 9 October 2008), *Kahin To Hoga* (8 September 2003– 16 February 2007), *KumKum – Ek Pyara Sa Bandhan* (15 July 2002 – 13 March 2009), *Kasutii Zindagi Kay* (29 October 2001– 28 February 2008). These shows enjoyed consistently high ratings until the seemingly sudden emergence of a new genre of entertainment, something because of which the popularity of these fancy daily soaps took a hit. Of course, it was the internet which provided the thrust. The soaps could not sustain their popularity and lost out to other genres. The failure of these shows at a particular time is telling about how they generated a demand for new entertainment while TV miserably failed in providing that.

Mapping Careers and Changing Paths of the Performers: (Testimonies)

Kapil Sharma says of his journey:

I wanted to be a singer, but at that time many singers in Punjab were making their albums from their own pocket. I had nothing in my pocket. I used to do theatre and therefore decided to do something in acting. At that time, ‘Laughter Challenge’ entered into Indian television. Stand-up comedy was never this popular in India before. The atmosphere changed after ‘Laughter Challenge’. That was my beginning. So, I thought, let’s postpone everything and first try hard to get through the ‘Laughter Challenge’. I had heard that all these people earn good money by performing in shows. Except for this, I did not plan anything.¹⁴⁵

Zakir Khan is one among the most celebrated present Indian stand-up comedians, who joined YouTube on 5 June 2011. He echoes Varun Grover in his demonstration of how new clowns emerged at this juncture of the internet. In an interview “Meri Dastan Sunana”¹⁴⁶ that was webcast on 13 February 2018, he says:

¹⁴⁵<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C2dfHvhEotU> (1:50- 2:30)

¹⁴⁶<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OQQ1sGphUj4>

In 2009, I quit college to work in radio in the hope of Phase 3 (when a range of private radio channels was going to begin). I did a three-month course and an internship in Indore. There I was promised that I would get work. Even after nine months, I could not get an appointment letter. I decided to go to Delhi for better opportunities. There, I started living with my friend. I was living in Hauz Khas Village, and we used to have only lunch but not dinner, to save costs. I was unemployed for three years. One day someone asked me if you want a job. I realised while doing that job, how a person becomes mediocre and loses his independence. Nobody tells you that mediocrity is a requirement because there are deadlines. However, while doing the job, I also realised that I did not quit my home for this. I came to bring revolution not to write radio advertisements. So, I quit the job and left Delhi for Mumbai in the hope of bringing that revolution. I started working with AIB for ‘On air with AIB.’¹⁴⁷ In 2016, AIB organised an event ‘AIB Diwas’ and my performance went viral on social media, and it changed my life.¹⁴⁸

His YouTube channel states, ‘Zakir Khan is the quintessential launda: your friendly neighbourhood guy, a college senior, four amfriend and experienced colleague. Zakir shares his comic perspective on daily life struggles which leaves the audience wondering if they are laughing at him or themselves. With over 50 sold out shows, performances in more than 200 venues as well as shows in Singapore and Dubai, Zakir Khan has swiftly become the most sought-after comic in the country.’¹⁴⁹

Varun Grover says:

I have been writing comedy since I came to live in Mumbai in 2005. However, before that, since childhood, I was an ardent comedy viewer. When *Movers & Shakers* [1997] first started, I used to follow it diligently. Under the influence of that show, I started writing in my college days. I tried a combination of satire and current affairs. Although professionally I have been writing since 2005, I started performing only in 2009. In the first four years (after coming to Mumbai in 2005), I just wrote. When TV became flooded with comedy shows, I could not find a space where I could use the kind of comedy I was writing, where I could be allowed to question the establishment. I was not sure, what to do. There were very few live shows in Bombay at that time. It was the first ‘Open mic’ of Bombay in 2009, and I decided to try there. For the first performance, I was given a slot of two minutes in the competition of open mic. I was not confident about performing on stage, but by chance, I won the competition. Next time I was given five minutes, but now I was not in the competition. Again, I participated in the category of competition. So anyhow (after all these open mic performances), I reached the stage where I was given ten minutes to perform. Later it was increased up to twenty minutes. At least for the next three years (2009 to 2012), I was just doing ‘open mic’. I did my first professional show in 2011, but at that moment I did not feel that I was professionally into it. But, I just kept doing it. So, I consider my first professional engagement only in 2012 after which I started doing it quite frequently.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁷ <http://www.hotstar.com/tv/on-air-with-aib/6200/seasons/season-1>

¹⁴⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OQQ1sGphUj4>

¹⁴⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/user/zakirkhan208/about>

¹⁵⁰ In an interview with me on 11 November 2017 at Yash Raj Films studio in Mumbai.

Sanjay Rajoura, one of the three performers of *Aisi Taisi Democracy* is known for his aggressive, political comedy with a medium usage of billingsgates. He became famous after his live performances ‘Jaat in mood’ where he used to make fun of upper-caste, upper class, urban working ‘techs’ and engineers. Sanjay says that he does not consider himself a comedian but a satirist (See Chapter 3 for his jokes). On being asked why, he replied,

See, the point is if you go to perform onstage and people do not laugh, they do not shriek, then how can you be called a comedian? In the beginning, when I started performing, I used to focus on making people laugh. Basically, in the beginning, the stories were funny. However, as we know with time, the performer also evolves. I also felt after a while that if I have a platform, then I must use it to speak for what I have to say. So, there is no shrieking, but there are connecting dots. The person who will feel connected will at least say, ‘Wah, Kya Baat Kari Hai!’ [Well said!] They will not laugh at it. Therefore, I do not call myself a ‘comedian’. For lack of a better word, I will say ‘satirist’ because I think connecting the concept of caste to the modern phenomenon while exposing it is nothing but satire. They seem shocked. Moreover, they start thinking, ‘Oh, how can he say that?’ [During performance], I see complete silence for a moment, and then they start clapping (on my piece). As a performer, I enjoy that and when people shriek, I like that as well but a little less than the first one.¹⁵¹

Rahul Ram forms a poetic bridge between two proses (represented by Varun and Sanjay) in *Aisi Taisi Democracy*. He said:

Aisi Taisi Democracy is more social, while the political is secondary. It begins with the social, ultimately politics is run by society. So, we enjoy highlighting those absurdities. This is absurd and why this happens in our society? See you may choose a severe mode of the fight against superficiality, but Pansare lost his life. Yes, and you can also choose comedy (as a medium) to make fun of all this. At least, there are fewer chances of being murdered because you are making them laugh besides and the person who does not agree with you at least likes the joke. It is like, ‘I may not agree with your politics, but it is funny.’ So, we started doing this mainly; we were interested in highlighting the absurdity of the society. You know, that gives us pleasure also. I like doing stuff I am not good at, e.g., right now, I am acting in a film.¹⁵²

Rohan Joshi, former journalist, columnist and now known as a fourth member of AIB group. In the roast that AIB had organised, he was roasted for his ‘cuteness’. Rohan considers himself an urban, upper-class comedian who does not claim to represent all of India just because it is the part of their troupe’s name. He said:

First of all, the name ‘All India Bakchod’ is a play on ‘All India Radio.’ So, it is not, the name did not come from a political slate. All India Bakchod is supposed to be a parody of All India Radio. Because, you know what, at the end look at four of us; Khamba, Rohan, Tanmay, and Ashish. We

¹⁵¹ In an interview taken on 17 August 2017 at his house in Delhi.

¹⁵² The interview was taken at the office of Indian Ocean in New Delhi on 15 July. Rec 1, 30:20

are four, upper class, privileged, Indian boys. We have lived a very privileged life. Moreover, I think it would be very presumptuous of us to say that we speak for all India. That is not [why] we [are] named 'All India Bakchod' at all. I do not think any one person can claim to speak for all India or advocate for all India, because it is an extremely complex nation. We only put forth the values and ideals we believe should be accepted in society. Then, (the question) Is our voice an upper-class voice? Absolutely, yes. Because we are upper-class boys. However, at the end of the day, we work hard to push the values of the upper class, what we think, society would be better off having. However, you will never see us (AIB video) pushing, like, for example, 'greed' which is also an upper-class value. We are never like, 'Oh, Greed is amazing. Go crazy making money.'

So, yeah, is our voice upper class?

Absolutely, but what else could my voice be? I cannot appropriate somebody else's identity. I think it would be incredibly disrespectful to telling me story from a Dalit or queer perspective because I am none of them. I do not have the moral authority to say that I am the voice of those people. I can best be supportive, but I cannot be their voice.

We speak and represent a particular class of values, but I think everyone does. All the writing and content comes from living, authentic experiences. We try and write very authentic experiences. When I say authentic, I mean that one of the things we talk about in the office while writing [is,] 'Is this relatable?' In a sense, a lot of the best comedy in the world is based on truth. The truth is relative in comedy, an essential thing in the world about some of the best jokes are not that you are laughing, it is, you are laughing while simultaneously saying, 'So true!' Whether my mother says this or a teacher. So, in that sense, we are trying to tell an 'authentic story.'

We can only tell a particular kind of authentic story because I have not lived the life of a man who comes from Patna and has gone to IIT and maybe went to Kota or 'Super 30' [coaching institute in Patna]. My engineering experience is null. However, somehow, there are specific experiences that transcend whatever your cultural background is. So, in those spaces, we strive for authenticity. Moreover, in the places we cannot offer authenticity we do not create that content. So, we cannot make content from queer or Dalit perspective because I do not have the authenticity or the moral authority of the act. So that is why when you say [Your content only talks about the elite urban, upper and English speaking class only, not about 'All India'], of course, we speak for a small section of people. We never presume to speak for everyone.¹⁵³

Tanmay Bhat:

Tanmay Bhat talk about the foundation of his group and his journey as a comedian;

I was doing stand-up in Bombay. Vir Das used to do stand-up in Bombay. That was a time when I first saw a non-Hindi speaking comedian on the stage. I wanted to do stand up. Since my childhood, I used to listen to cassettes of Johnny Lever.

I watched Raju Srivastav, Sunil Pal etc., on TV but not live. In 2010, I saw Russell Peters first when he came to India, and there I saw Vir Das in a live performance, at that time I thought of emulating it. Somewhere, I read in 2011 that Vir Das organises open mics. I found the meaning of open mic

¹⁵³ In an interview with me at the shoot in Mumbai on 6 September 2017. Rec 1, 8:50

[translated] that any newcomer can go for it. So, I began, it went well. I did stand up comedies for two years. I worked with Vir Das.

In 2012, I met Gursimran Khamba (co-founder of AIB), when he came to Bombay to do stand-up from Delhi. Khamba was doing stand-up in a bar at Bandra. I went to meet him. We were talking after the show. So, he asked to start podcasts. I said, let's do it. So, this way, we patched up and started AIB podcasts. After doing podcasts for one and a half years, we received a call from YouTube in 2012. The partner managers of YouTube watched our live shows, and they liked it. So they called us to come on YouTube to contribute something., They said, 'Let's go on YouTube. You guys are hilarious, you will do well on stage'¹⁵⁴ So, first, we denied that. Finally, we said, fine. In the beginning, two three videos did not get any attention, but then the next video [Kalki's "it is my fault"]¹⁵⁵ got viral. Since then we are on YouTube.¹⁵⁶

Social Media and The New Clowns

Today, all almost every performer uses social media, and many of their career graphs map this transition from television into YouTube to social media. Mainly, they use social media to interact with their fans. Other than that, they share jokes, poems, performances, information about their upcoming shows, and their pictures and personal videos on their social media accounts. Social media also works as a parameter of their popularity.

Now it is time to take the four best known and most widely used social media sites to map the relation between social media and the new clowns viz, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube. However, it is a complicated process because one comedian might be famous on a site but not much followed on another site. In some cases, comedians may not even use them. For instance, Johnny Lever has 23,213¹⁵⁷ followers on Facebook, 68,815¹⁵⁸ on Twitter but he does not have either an Instagram or a YouTube account. The reality can also be understood by the fact that a struggling newcomer, twenty-three-year-old Shyam Rangeela has more Facebook followers (166,014)¹⁵⁹ than Lever. Rangeela is present on all social media accounts with 11,536¹⁶⁰ followers on Twitter, 2,573¹⁶¹ followers on Instagram and 61,868¹⁶² on YouTube. There can be no comparison between Lever and Rangeela in the context of

¹⁵⁴<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RXhmKW8rxqM>

¹⁵⁵https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8hCONg_aipY

¹⁵⁶ In an interview with on 27 October at AIB's office in Mumbai.

¹⁵⁷<https://www.facebook.com/iamjohnylever>

¹⁵⁸<https://twitter.com/iamjohnylever>

¹⁵⁹https://www.facebook.com/shyamrangeelaa/?ref=br_rs

¹⁶⁰<https://twitter.com/ShyamRangeela>

¹⁶¹<https://www.instagram.com/shyamrangeela/?hl=en>

¹⁶²<https://www.youtube.com/user/syamcomedian>

popularity because Johnny Lever is one of the first stand-up comedians of India and is known as one of the biggest comic stars of Hindi cinema.

My understanding of new clowns only includes performers of the twenty-first century. Going by performance, it is impossible to find a difference among them because it is the medium, not the performance that divides them. Sunil Pal, Raju Srivastava and Kapil Sharma were part of the same show on television (TGILC). Sunil Pal was the first winner of the show in 2005, and Kapil Sharma was the last winner in 2008. Sunil Pal could not adopt the new styles with time, but Kapil Sharma adapted the new modes of performances while doing comedy television shows. It may be so because he arrived at a time when new media was emergent and brought popularity to his television show on YouTube and other social sites as well. On the other side, Sunil Pal and Raju Srivastav, the star stand-up comedians of 2000s could not adapt to changing time and technology. Therefore, they are an essential part of the history of new clowns but are not new clowns themselves. The following table compares the popularity of these television stand-up comedians of the 2000s with the YouTube fame new clown, Zakir Khan.

The following ‘Table 1.1’ was prepared on 22 March 2018, after researching social media sites of mentioned performers.

Name	Social Media	Followers
6.Sunil Pal	Facebook	158,766 ¹⁶³
	Twitter	4,258 ¹⁶⁴
	Instagram	2,455 ¹⁶⁵
	YouTube	3,371 ¹⁶⁶

¹⁶³<https://www.facebook.com/sunilpalmumbai/>

¹⁶⁴https://twitter.com/Ratannnooraa?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor

¹⁶⁵https://www.instagram.com/sunil_pal_comedian/

¹⁶⁶<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCOX492hGZmjtLzJpOHQc1Wg/featured>

	Most watched YouTube video	3,584,213 ¹⁶⁷
Raju Srivastav	Facebook	306,400 ¹⁶⁸
	Twitter	15,895 ¹⁶⁹
	Instagram	2825 ¹⁷⁰
	YouTube	611 ¹⁷¹
	Most watched YouTube video	12,623,003 ¹⁷²
3.Kapil Sharma	Facebook	25,870,069 ¹⁷³
	Twitter	11,916,117 ¹⁷⁴
	Instagram	9,655,170 ¹⁷⁵
	YouTube	3,873 ¹⁷⁶
	Most watched YouTube video	32,979,087 ¹⁷⁷
11.Zakir Khan	Facebook	687,959 ¹⁷⁸

¹⁶⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KHHWGSgBnLU>

¹⁶⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/RajuSrivastavaOfficial/>

¹⁶⁹ <https://twitter.com/iRajuSrivastava>

¹⁷⁰ <https://www.instagram.com/rajusrivastavaofficial/?hl=en>

¹⁷¹ https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCEYIS_Vh7rfT7jlpH5sFIHA

¹⁷² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QXxktxLR2bM>

¹⁷³ <https://www.facebook.com/kapilsharmak92481/>

¹⁷⁴ <https://twitter.com/kapilsharmak9>

¹⁷⁵ <https://www.instagram.com/kapilsharma/>

¹⁷⁶ https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCS3REx_0JgqkwpcrEdeXVHw

¹⁷⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qAW2XwrlYac>

¹⁷⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/kuchhtobhizakir/>

	Twitter	664,699 ¹⁷⁹
	Instagram	539,460 ¹⁸⁰
	YouTube	1,947,558 ¹⁸¹
	Most watched YouTube video	19,398,866 ¹⁸²

Table 1.1

Zakir Khan is a prime example of a new clown with the most number of subscribers on YouTube, the main source of any new clown's popularity. But, if a popularity contest was to be decided on the maximum number of views garnered by performance, not only does Kapil Sharma beat previous television comedians, he also leaves Zakir Khan far behind. Going by the maximum number of views, Raju Srivastav comes third, above Sunil Pal but still not meeting the requisite to be called a new clown since his most popular YouTube performance was performed in the 2000s. However, Zakir's most-watched performance was YouTubized on 5 May 2016.¹⁸³ Despite being a television comedian in a mould similar to that of Raju Srivastav and Sunil Pal, Kapil Sharma has the most watched video of any Indian comic performer the performance in question having been YouTubized on 14 February 2017.¹⁸⁴ In fact, Sharma is also the twenty-eighth most followed Indian on Twitter.¹⁸⁵ On behalf of this division made by the internet and social sites, I consider only those television comic performers of the 2000s to be new clowns who are still relevant in the age of the internet. In that sense, Kapil Sharma cannot be excluded under the study of new clowns like the other television comedians of the 2000s.

Pre-social media performers do not correctly understand the psyche, vocabulary, subjects, lingual connotations and interests of the youth. The transfer of the fan base from the older

¹⁷⁹ <https://twitter.com/Zakirism>

¹⁸⁰ https://www.instagram.com/zakirkhan_208/?hl=en

¹⁸¹ <https://www.youtube.com/user/zakirkhan208>

¹⁸² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sI8vsWrD8o>

¹⁸³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sI8vsWrD8o>

¹⁸⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qAW2XwrlYac>

¹⁸⁵ <https://twittercounter.com/pages/100/india>

comedians (Sunil Pal and Raju Srivastav) to the newer comedians (Kapil Sharma and Zakir Khan) is quite evident by the trends highlighted by the above data. Older performers are trying their best to remain in the competition but feel alienated and isolated because of the emergence of social media. Their growing irrelevance is manifested in the lower numbers of their followers on social media. They are not as accepted as the newer performers and this bears out the argument that successions are often violent and cruel to those who are left out and remain as ageing actor-comedians. New media has shortened what would have been a longer screen life for them. One of the main contributors to this situation are the millennials (people reaching young and adulthood in the twenty-first century) because they form the majority of India's netizens. A 2017 report titled *Youth in India* by the Central Statistics Office, says, "India has the world's highest number of 10 to 24-year-olds, with 242 million," with the reference of Population Database of United Nations Population Division.¹⁸⁶ These 242 million millennials who consume internet services also define the new media and new technology. They have not seen a film of the bygone era nor have they been fans of television comedians because their choices do not lead them to the performances of Johnny Lever and Raju Srivastav. Millennials have hundreds of comedians to follow on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram who are younger, and like them, are millennials.

Vines

Vine is one of the most famous trends among millennials. Twitter introduced an app called Vine that allowed people to create six-second-long videos. In 2016, Twitter closed down the app¹⁸⁷ though, the word 'vine' remained in popular use for its continuous use on social media sites. In 2018, a Viner is a person who uploads their videos on social sites like Bhuvan Bam (1995-)¹⁸⁸ and Amit Bhadana (1994-).¹⁸⁹ The base of comic content makes vines funny, but they are not stand-up comedy, and actually pose a great challenge to the popularity of stand-up comic performers. Bhuvan Bam who first captured recognition as a viner with his YouTube channel 'BB ki Vines,' started in June 2015. Amit Bhadana YouTubized his first vine on 1 March 2017. He also mentioned himself as a 'Viner' on his website.¹⁹⁰ In this short span of

¹⁸⁶ http://mospi.nic.in/sites/default/files/publication_reports/Youth_in_India-2017.pdf

¹⁸⁷ <http://www.bbc.com/news/technology-37788052>

¹⁸⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCqWUj10mAEsqzcltqvwEw/about>

¹⁸⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=soDDb2QFbWA>

¹⁹⁰ <https://amitbhadana.co.in/>

time, Amit Bhadana and Bhuvan Bam have become the most famous and subscribed comic Viners or YouTubers in India.

Bhuvan Bam has 4,593,879 followers on Facebook,¹⁹¹ 1,574,038 on Twitter,¹⁹² 3,814,657 on Instagram,¹⁹³ and 6,821,228 subscribers on YouTube.¹⁹⁴ Viner Amit Bhadana has 5,293,561 followers on Facebook,¹⁹⁵ 29,581 on Twitter,¹⁹⁶ 723,561 on Instagram,¹⁹⁷ and 5,264,798 people subscribe to his YouTube channel.¹⁹⁸ Therefore, I agree with comedian Sanjay Rajoura that the internet is going to control all another medium but performances will emerge and go extinct according to time. Every day, new millennials are uploading videos of their performances and vines in the hope of becoming famous like Zakir Khan, Bhuvan Bam or Amit Bhadana. In last year Amit Bhadana became as famous as Bhuvan Bam and Zakir Khan. It means that stability or linearity has become a thing of the past. A new YouTuber can also emerge and become as famous as Amit Bhadana in short span of time.

In a way the film and television comedians were stable. If the internet has eroded their popularity it has also brought instability to the new comedians. All previous comedians were relevant for a much longer time than any recent stand-up comedian. The internet has radically affected the notions of emergent, dominant and residual in the context of comic YouTube performances. Any new comedian can be a part of the ‘dominant’ it is like a sudden jump but how long one can stay in the air? How long one can remain on the top YouTuber is totally uncertain.

Conclusion

The chapter scrutinised on the different definitions of a clown and searched for their relationship with the comic performers of the twenty-first century. Lawrence E. Mintz considers the clown a stand-up comedian but the chapter etched a new term— new clown to signify the stand-up comedians of the internet era. To justify the subject ‘clown’ in the context

¹⁹¹<https://www.facebook.com/BBkiVines>

¹⁹²https://twitter.com/Bhuvan_Bam

¹⁹³<https://www.instagram.com/bhuvan.bam22/>

¹⁹⁴<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCqwUjrj10mAEsqezcItqvwEw/featured>

¹⁹⁵<https://www.facebook.com/TheAmitBhadana/>

¹⁹⁶<https://twitter.com/search?q=iमितbhadana&src=typd>

¹⁹⁷<https://www.instagram.com/theamitbhadana/?hl=en>

¹⁹⁸https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC_vcKmg67vjMP7ciLnSxSHQ/featured

of India, I went over their history through the glances of Indian cinema and mentioned two films to trace the tragic history of a joker. The chapter describes the history of comic performance linearly. It tells how the implementation of the policies of Liberalisation, Privatisation and Globalisation brought the foreign channels on Indian television, which led to the first television stand-up comedy show, *The Great Indian Laughter Challenge*, in 2005. The chapter briefly analysed early television comic performances and the performers of the 2000s as well as the concept of a laughter challenge. I believe that this show played a significant role in the stand-up comedy of the first decade of the twenty-first century. The chapter then established the difference among the early television performers of laughter challenges and the performers (new clowns) of new media.

After selecting sixteen-star comic performers representing a duration of the last hundred years, the chapter elucidated the difference between the comic performers of the last century and those of the twenty-first century to see the change undergone by popular Indian comedy. I also went over the backgrounds (religion, class, caste, gender and education) of the performers and applied a broad understanding of Bourdieu's cultural capital to the embodied cultural capital of the comic performers.

After discussing the change and transitions from one century to another, the chapter looked at the common theme of the performances as a case study of the research. To map their career graphs and changing paths as comic performers, I chose to write their own testimonies that I collected or any other sources I could find. It is the impact of social media on new clowns that provides a conclusion. It has considerably shortened the career-length of the performers. An important contributor for that is the emergence of new possibilities for aspiring comedians that is facilitated by the recent dominance of the new media. It is discussed in the third chapter, 'New Possibilities in New Media for New Clowns'. In the previous century a comedian was an actor performing a comic role in a film, but in recent years, the meaning is defined by the supporting word— comic actor or stand-up comedian.

Chapter 2

Studio, Stadium, Stage Comedy: YouTubization of Performance

The new clowns have gained fame and recognition for their performances as clowns, and as the qualifying 'new' suggests with new techniques. In course of this chapter, I would try to unravel the new comic genre in terms of its performance and what the new techniques entail. These are comedies which are aware of its afterlife of dissemination through different technologies and the impulses of performance, and the comedy needs to keep that in mind as much as the live performance, or when they shoot for their first live performance viz *The Kapil Sharma Show*. While the previous chapter looked at their social-economic milieu of not only these performers but also their larger audience base, this chapter will try to go into the nuances of the relevant context and with an emphasis on on the internet. I will discuss the debate around television and in the process map out the shifting perspective from television to the internet. The chapter will be looking at the performances as a part of the historical facts of the performers. I will deconstruct and construct the performance to understand the trajectories of the present comic performance in India. In this chapter, I will be looking deeply into the work of the performers and take up some case studies in detail.

I will be exploring popular jokes, gestures and the subject of the performances. I will study their language, words, use of billingsgate, insults, profanities, satire in-jokes. I will discuss the concept of heteroglossia (double-voiced) in comedy. The chapter will look at the effects of the comic performances. I am going to look at the censorship in the process of telecast and webcast of performance. I wish to establish the fact that a live performance is free to perform anything in comparison to televisual and YouTube performance. For that, I am going to look at the complaints against the comic performance *AIB Knockout*. I will be asking further questions, particularly if the performances have a dialectic relation with Indian society and if they represent the economic-political character of contemporary India.

All the case studies I study are performed live in front of spectators ranging minimum of 500 people to a maximum of 4000 people. On that ground, all the performances require tools of performance analysis. The process of recording and disseminating these shows have a tremendous effect on these performances. Therefore, it cannot be sidestepped. These shows are

disseminated among people by telecast and webcast. The performances differed from each other in their content and their subject on the basis of the medium of telecasting, webcasting and choice of the subject. In that tradition, it also touches the debate around the liveness and recording of the live event.

‘Liveness’ and the Pervading ‘Televisual’ Culture

In the last century, the common assumption of performance was limited in its category of ephemerality or repeatability. The reality of performance was limited to its liveness, and in the absence of liveness, it was considered “artificial reproductions of the real” as Auslander writes, “The common assumption is that the live event is “real” and that mediated events are secondary and somehow artificial reproductions of the real (Auslander 1999:3).”¹⁹⁹ Auslander argues, “This kind of thinking persists not only in the culture at large but even in contemporary performance studies.”²⁰⁰ Although, today, what we see is the mediatization of the liveness. Today a live event is broadcast on radio, telecast on television and webcast on the internet from a cricket match to republic day parade to Prime Times. The increasing usage of compact devices like smartphones has multiplied the mediatization through its easy virtualisation, i.e., Facebook live. In 1966, a first cricket match was telecast in India and in mid-1990s primetime shows started their live telecast.²⁰¹ The first ‘Primetime Live’ was started by American Broadcasting Company (ABC) in 1989, the year of ‘the fall of the (Berlin) wall.’²⁰² On 9 November 1989, the live telecast was showing people celebrating the event. The voice-over said, “How did it come about? What were the pressures that forced this dramatic change? And, What’s next? Former (American) president Ronald Reagan (1981-1989) joins us live tonight.”²⁰³ They used to invite the audience to the show. The participants were allowed to ask questions to the guests. Almost with the same concept Indian news channel telecast unscripted (debates) as a part of their prime time. According to Auslander, “Live performance now often incorporates mediatization such that the live event itself is a product of media technologies (1999:24).”

¹⁹⁹ Auslander, Philip. *Liveness: Performance in mediatized culture*, London and New York: Routledge, 1999

²⁰⁰ Auslander, Philip. *Liveness: Performance in mediatized culture*, London and New York: Routledge, 1999

²⁰¹ <https://www.news18.com/cricketnext/news/indias-first-live-cricket-telecast-541615.html>

²⁰² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BjZ2z0mNGvI>

²⁰³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BjZ2z0mNGvI>

He borrows the term ‘mediatized’ from Jean Baudrillard, who defines it, “What is mediatized is not what comes off the daily press, out of the tube, or on the radio: it is what is reinterpreted by the signed form, articulated into models, and administered by the code (Baudrillard 1981:175-6).” Auslander makes it relatable in context of Performance Studies, ‘Mediatized performance’ is a performance that is circulated on television, like audio or video recordings, and in other forms based in technologies of reproduction” (1999:5).²⁰⁴ My sense and usage of ‘mediatization’ borrowed from Auslander. Mediatization of performances of my case studies generates new spectatorship through disseminating it amongst a vast televisual and internet audience. It aspires spectator to travel miles to watch their favourite performers live on stage, that is the achievement of the mediatised performance. Auslander considers, “There is no question that live performance and mediatised forms compete for audiences in the cultural marketplace, and that mediatised forms have gained the advantage in that competition (6).”²⁰⁵ I want to see the mediatization in that context where performers and performances both are affected from/since the beginning of the process of recording until the process of disseminating them on television and other mediums. Philip Auslander defines this mediatization under the term ‘Televisual.’ He borrows the term ‘televisual’ from Tony Fry, who defines it in his book, *RUA/TV? Heidegger and the Televisual* as,

What the televisual names is the end of the medium, in a context, and the arrival of television as the context. What is clear is that television has to be recognized as an organic part of the social fabric; which means that its transmissions are no longer managed by the flick of a switch. (1993:13)

Indeed, it cannot be managed by the flick of the switch. Television has/had a significant effect on our society since it became famous in middle-class houses. In the first chapter, ‘The Medium is the message’ of his 1964 book, ‘Understanding Media: The extensions of man’, Marshal McLuhan compares ‘television’ to civilisation and complex culture that is side by side to a tribal and simple society, “A related form of challenge that has always faced cultures is the simple fact of a frontier or a wall, on the other side of which exists another kind of society. But since TV the drive to participation has ended adolescence, and every American home has its Berlin wall” (McLuhan 1964:16).²⁰⁶ He suggests that a tribal society feels “disintegrated by a rain of psychic energy generated by civilization” (16). To understand the effect of technology (medium) he gives an example of a teenager, “(a) teenager, compelled to share the life of a

²⁰⁴ Auslander, Philip. *Liveness: Performance in mediatized culture*, London and New York: Routledge, 1999

²⁰⁵ Auslander, Philip. *Liveness: Performance in mediatized culture*, London and New York: Routledge, 1999

²⁰⁶ <http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/mcluhan.mediummessage.pdf>

city that cannot accept him as an adult, collapses into ‘rebellion without a cause’”(16). His connotation is not affirmative towards television as a medium of communication, but his writings give a sense of ‘televisual,’ to look television as a culture not just as a part of mediums of communications. According to Auslander, Cecilia Tichi in her book *Electronic Hearth: Creating an American Television Culture* (1991)²⁰⁷ suggests,

Television can no longer be seen just as an element in our cultural environment, one discourse among many, but must be seen as an environment in itself. Television has transcended its identity as a particular medium and is suffused through the culture as “the televisual (1999:2).

Today the area of ‘Televisual’ culture has broadened, or the effect which is defined by Cecilia Tichi under ‘Televisual’ has changed into something else that I call ‘YouTubization.’ Andy Lavender’s work ‘Performance in the twenty-first century: Theatres of engagement’ promise to, “examine the growth of YouTube, enabling serial presentations of the self and a shared reiteration of motifs of performance” (Lavender 2017:5). For me, he extends Auslander’s ‘televisual’ debate in the context of the mediatization of performance. For Auslander, “The televisual has become an intrinsic and determining element of our cultural formation” (1999:2). In that context, YouTubization is an extended version of televisual that represent the extended role of mediatization in the twenty-first century. YouTubization does not question the usage of ‘televisual’ but emerges as extended use of technology. Marshal McLuhan writes “A new medium is never an addition to an old one, nor does it leave the old one in peace. It never ceases to oppress the older media until it finds new shapes and positions for them” (1964:158). Similarly, neither YouTubization is an addition to the televisual nor does it leave televisual in peace. YouTubization is a part of the webcast, which advocates YouTube not merely as a website but a search engine and public archive of performances. For me, both ‘televisual’ and ‘YouTubization’ represent that mediatization of the performance. So my use of YouTubization in place of televisual is to analyse the difference in the field of the mediatization of performance in 2018, it can be possible in future that some other website or medium can emerge leaving YouTubization behind like televisual. So the chapter will examine the conflict of the technology of mediatization.

²⁰⁷<https://gpreview.kingborn.net/565000/48a9737bd7364f2985bf262669b996e2.pdf>

Changing Private and Public Experience of Performance:

The Internet has changed the public and private experience of attending a performance in many ways. What television did in the age of cinema halls by bringing up a box at home to watch films, daily soaps, and performances, the internet has done same to the television by opening a space of private viewing in public space. The notion of privacy, for example, is a sociological phenomenon modified and adapted in the last few years. The technological developments and its reach to a vast population have developed a new notion of privacy, where watching something on your phone or computer screen with the earplugs may be in a public space but a private closing up of space. The importance of the subject can be understood by looking at the comic performances, i.e. *AIB Knockout* with a warning for 18+ are distributed on the internet.²⁰⁸ People watch them in private; they hold the private screening of those shows, but this private screening does not determine the space. The private screening is possible today in a public space of a railway station or a college library excluding all the people nearby. In the time of television, the whole family used to sit together to watch television. Watching the film, daily soap and performance on television was a domesticated-social experience but watching it on your own devices is a personal, private and individual experience. This can also be considered the difference between televisual and YouTubization.

Televisual and Social Environment

A TV situated in the drawing room is shared with the family and friends, where everything is socially censored or self-censored. Thereby a family could watch such programmes together as a social group. Here family as an institution also expects that the content on television will not make them uncomfortable by presenting subjects which are taboo. Comic performer Rohan Joshi told me in a personal interview, “If you notice, that what you watch (on television) with your family, does not disturb the status quo or the relationship with your family.”²⁰⁹ This discomfort and uneasiness are well described in a joke that I heard somewhere.

In early 2000, we were adolescent. Each Sunday evening film on Doordarshan was an undeclared picnic planned for every week. The whole family used to sit together to watch TV, and suddenly there was this commercial advertisement for ‘Deluxe Nirodh’ (condom) with famous Rajesh Khanna Song *Roop Tera Mastana, Pyar Mera Deewana, Bhool Koi Humse Na Ho Jaye* (in the background). Watching this commercial with our parents and siblings used to

²⁰⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3YizWAMYcls>

²⁰⁹ Interview was taken at a studio in East Andheri, Mumbai on 6 September 2017

be an embarrassment, and they used to feel the same about it. Subsequently, everyone used to make excuses to leave the space for this particular advertisement time. Once, I ran to the kitchen as an excuse to drink water. My father could not find any other reason, so he also entered into the kitchen to avoid the discomfort of the drawing room, but now what happened is that both of us were standing in the kitchen, taking water from the tap and then took it in our mouth and it was going into the throat. Now imagine us doing all this in the background of ‘Roop Tera Mastana, Pyar Mera Deewana, Bhool Koi Humse Na Ho Jaye’. Can you imagine the kind of discomfort, we faced, in the process, of avoiding one?²¹⁰

On 12 December 2017, The New York Times reported that Indian Government found the condom advertisement “indecent” (for a family audience) so the condom advertisements are limited from 10:00 pm to 06:00 am.²¹¹ ‘Ministry of Information and Broadcasting’ preferred to create a televisual culture, which prefers conservative culture over the health and life of citizens. It shows the control of Government over televisual culture in India. The television as medium needs a profit through advertisement and condom advertisements were its source of income, but because it is controlled medium, it cannot do anything which is not regulated by Government.

This is the example of forced and controlled televisual culture by the state, but the other controlled culture is also essential to establish the fact that Society and the television are interdependent. If society is progressive, democratic and egalitarian, then the family show would be subversive, ambivalent, politically sharp and vice versa. In case of a family being progressive in a regressive structure will not bring any change to the family show but can only be seen as susceptible facing all those subjects that challenge, status quo. However, the same regressive patriarchal, misogynist, casteist and religiously divided society will influence the televisual culture to produce shows that celebrate the prevailed practices of that conservative and undemocratic society.

The commencement of television in the last thirty years has affected family relations in many ways by influencing them in regard to dressing, living behaviour, and performing rituals, i.e., *Karva Chauth*.²¹² Till recent, television has influenced Hindi speaking women audience

²¹⁰ An anonymous joke.

²¹¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/12/world/asia/india-condom-ad-ban.html>

²¹² *Karva Chauth*, is a ritual festival performance. The common belief is that Hindu married women have total fast on the fourth day of Kartik Mass of Hindu lunar calendar for a long age of their beloved husband.

of North India and Northwestern India to celebrate *Karva Chauth*. A popular, fashionable, traditional, dedicated toward husband but in practice insidious, regressive, market dominated and anti-women ritual. Previously the *Karva Chauth* was first performed in the film ‘Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge’(1995), but Ekta Kapoor’s serials celebrated it as one of most important part of Indian culture, i.e. 1092 episode of *Kumkum Bhagya*.²¹³

It means television culture propagates the same environment in which it exists. Comedy is considered a subversive genre in itself, but in context of such control and censorship, it is doubtful how far it may go to disturb norms? Does it expand the boundaries of comedy or limit and restrict it? To answer all these questions regarding television performance, I will be looking at the *The Kapil Sharma Show* which was telecast from April 2016 to August 2017.

The Kapil Sharma Show

My case study *The Kapil Sharma Show* was entirely inspired from its previous show *Comedy Nights with Kapil*²¹⁴ telecast on ‘Colors TV’ from 22 June 2013 to 24 January 2016.²¹⁵ *Comedy Nights with Kapil* received the highest Television Rating Point (TRP) in the category of performance (nonfiction).²¹⁶ *Comedy Nights with Kapil* was considered an Indian adaptation of British show *The Kumars at No. 42*.²¹⁷ Though, Kapil Sharma insists that the entire concept of *Comedy Nights with Kapil* was his original idea.²¹⁸ The show was stopped from being telecast in January 2016 after a clash between Kapil Sharma and the channel.²¹⁹ Times of India published an interview of CEO of the channel, Raj Nayak on 12 February 2016, he accused Kapil Sharma of violating the contract, “It was him (Kapil), who left them and they will be glad to work with him again.”²²⁰ With minor changes in the plot, Kapil Sharma introduced *The*

²¹³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9QN0KxVJw34> at 1:40

²¹⁴ <https://www.voot.com/shows/comedy-nights-with-kapil/1/360559/kapil-introduces-his-family/350153>

²¹⁵ <https://www.voot.com/shows/comedy-nights-with-kapil/1/360559/kapil-introduces-his-family/350153>

²¹⁶ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/tv/news/hindi/Mahabharat-Bigg-Boss-Jodha-Akbar-Comedy-Nights-With-Kapil/articleshow/23210440.cms?>

²¹⁷ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iYJ_zn2W3rk

²¹⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5LqLqIAYpAQ> at 1:06:47

²¹⁹ <https://www.voot.com/shows/comedy-nights-with-kapil/1/360559/askhay-kumar-airlifts-kapil-s-family/365155>

²²⁰ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/tv/news/hindi/The-real-reason-why-Comedy-Nights-With-Kapil-was-pulled-off-air/articleshow/50807036.cms>

Kapil Sharma show on 23 April 2016 for Sony Entertainment Television.²²¹ The show received the same popularity nation-wide like the earlier show.

Kapil Sharma performs the role of Kappu Sharma, the owner of the house. He lives with his maternal grandmother, Pushpa Nani (Ali Asgar). On 24 April 2016 in the first episode of the show, Kapil Sharma informed; (from Colors TV to Sony TV), “I have moved (from Dadi) to my Naani’s place. It is Shantivan non-co-operative society, a very peaceful place.”²²² In his neighbourhood, Doctor Mashoor Gulati (Sunil Grover) runs 50-50 hospital (on the right of the set). Dr Gulati has a daughter Sarla (Sumona Chakravarti) and two nurses in his hospital Lottery (Rochelle Rao) and Bumper (Kiku Sharda). All these characters are fictional. Men impersonate women body on the stage, but no women impersonate men on the stage. If required, then other artists are also invited to the show, i.e., Sugandha Mishra, Sanket Bhonsle. All the performers play various characters in the show because almost all of them are impersonators, and mimicry artists, i.e., Kapil Sharma, Sunil Grover, Sugandha Mishra, Sanket Bhonsle and others.

Generally, the show begins with a small skit, and then celebrities are invited as the guest. Kapil interviews them, and in the process his relatives and neighbours jump into the performance to perform thoughtless slapsticks, slandering to make the guest celebrity laugh. They do impersonations, gibberish, clowning, slapstick, mimicry, dance, singing, and play games. The guests are not part of the scripted part of the performance. The show invites famous politicians, journalists, cricketers, Bollywood actors. Mostly, Bollywood actors come to promote their upcoming film to use the performance for the benefit of promoting their upcoming film.

The Kapil Sharma show is a theatrical performance performed in a studio on the designed set of ‘Shantivan Noncooperative Society.’ The set is designed like a proscenium stage where celebrity as spectators do not sit among the audience but on the stage. There is an arrangement of couches just behind the space, where the comic performer performs. The celebrities play two roles in the performance: spectator and performer. Performance is performed in between celebrity spectators and the real audience sitting in the space that is arranged for them as any

²²¹ <https://www.sonyliv.com/details/episodes/4857058593001/Ep.-1---The-Kapil-Sharma-Show---FAN-Special-with-Shah-Rukh-Khan>

²²² <https://www.sonyliv.com/details/episodes/4860437268001/Ep.-2---The-Kapil-Sharma-Show---Tiger-Shroff-and-Shraddha-Kapoor-in-Kapil's-Mohalla>

other proscenium stage in front of the stage. The studio has a seating arrangement for three hundred people. Celebrities are allowed to jump into the performance if they want. The comic performers are also allowed to jump, sit, run, talk, walk and fall all-around the celebrities. Behind the couches, for the celebrities, a set of the house (Nani's house) is built that works for entry and exit as well. On the right of the house is the 50-50 hospital and on the left of the house is Dubai Tea Stall. Tea stall leads the way to entry and exit also. The set has a seating arrangement for around 300 people. Among the audience, in the centre but at the forefront, sits the permanent guest of the show and society (Kappu's colony), Navjot Singh Siddhu.

In last two years, Kapil Sharma has been part of three shows, *Comedy Nights with Kapil* (2013-16), *The Kapil Sharma show* (2016-17) and *Family Time with Kapil Sharma* (2018). None of the performance is on view in April 2018. Each performance shut down after the star performer was involved in fights. In February 2017, while returning from their Australia tour, drunk Kapil Sharma got himself involved in a fight with his co-performer Sunil Grover on the flight, and this led to a fraction in the group.²²³ Sunil Grover quit the show with few members of the troupe and that led to the close down of the performance, telecast last on 20 August 2017.²²⁴

In 2018, Kapil Sharma came with a totally new plot of a comedy game show, *Family Time with Kapil Sharma* started on 25 March.²²⁵ Unexpectedly the show was shut down just after its third episodes on 1 April 2018.²²⁶ One of the reasons to shut the show was Kapil Sharma's fight (over a phone call) with journalist Vickey Lalwani editor of '*Spotboye, web portal*.'²²⁷ Vickey Lalwani YouTubized the entire recorded conversation on the internet. *Family Time with Kapil Sharma* also YouTubized their version after few days to establish that journalist provoked performer by repeatedly saying, *Tumhe To English Bhi Nahi Aati* (You even don't know English).²²⁸ While writing the chapter, news reports claim that the comic performer is on rest and will be back again after recovery.²²⁹

²²³ <http://indianexpress.com/article/entertainment/television/kapil-sharma-physically-assaults-sunil-grover-in-a-flight-here-is-all-that-happened-4574979/>

²²⁴ <https://www.sonyliv.com/details/episodes/5546260920001/Ep.-129---The-Kapil-Sharma-Show---Fun-With-The-Cast-Of-Daddy>

²²⁵ <https://www.sonyliv.com/details/episodes/5757946083001/Ep.-1---Family-Time-With-Kapil-Sharma---Kapil-In-A-Brand-New-Avatar---25-March-2018>

²²⁶ <https://www.sonyliv.com/details/episodes/5761807993001/-Ep.3---Family-Time-With-Kapil-Sharma---The-Damsel-in-Red---1-April-2018>

²²⁷ <https://www.spotboye.com/>

²²⁸ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fHp3l_HQu9o

²²⁹ <http://indianexpress.com/article/entertainment/television/kapil-sharma-family-time-with-kapil-put-on-hold-5132040/>

The Kapil Sharma show was not a comedy hunt show like *The Great Indian Laughter Challenge*. However, still Navjot Singh Siddhu the judge of *The Great Indian Laughter Challenge* (2005-2008) was invited as the permanent guest of the show.²³⁰ Famous for his belly laugh and self-made poetry to elaborate beauty of the female performers and personality of man actors, Navjot does same what he used to do in the past during the laughter challenge. He was given a cosy seat in the centre of the audience. His job is to praise acts, performers and guest actors and to ask and respond to the questions. In 2018, Navjot Singh Siddhu joined Kapil Sharma team for his latest show *Family Time with Kapil Sharma* (2018) as well.²³¹

The live musical band is a substitution of canned laugh and background music in the performance. They create instant sound for jokes, punch, acts of jumping, running and falling to make it more effective. They also play background music for the singer guest celebrities or any other comic performer.²³² The music band is arranged next to the right of ‘50-50 hospital.’ The role of music makes the comic performance more relatable to Nautanki of Uttar Pradesh as both are counted under the musical genre.²³³ Identical to Nautanki, *The Kapil Sharma show* begins with a skit of almost half an hour long theatrical performance.²³⁴

Kapil Sharma’s comedy is associated with the viewpoint of Indian middle class and targets a specific section of the middle class. Neither the lower nor upper class comes across as the primary subject either through the performance or the audience he addresses. This does not mean that there are no characters from other class, such as the buffalo-owner, a tea seller, doctor, inspector, teacher, married village women and others. It can be further explained through the subject of his ‘second episode.’²³⁵ The second episode was the first episode on set after its grand inauguration in New Delhi. It episode was woven around underwear, Mohan latrine centre (public toilet), flirting with girls, insulting friends and the difference between a younger couple’s honeymoon and a fifteen-year-old married couple going to the same place. In her broken Hindi, Nurse Lottery (played by ‘Femina Miss India International 2012’ Rachele

²³⁰ <http://www.hotstar.com/tv/the-great-indian-laughter-series/458/great-indian-laughter-champions-3/1000010408>

²³¹ <https://www.sonyliv.com/details/episodes/5757946083001/Ep.-1---Family-Time-With-Kapil-Sharma---Kapil-In-A-Brand-New-Avatar---25-March-2018> at 1:15

²³² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZlbHvKEmlMQ> at 1:45 to 2:52

²³³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5dIrl2S-9-tY>

²³⁴ <https://www.sonyliv.com/details/episodes/5539436600001/Ep.-127---The-Kapil-Sharma-Show---Bareilly-Ki-Barfi-Special---Part-1>

²³⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mO2Vmh93JP8>

Rao from Chennai) calls Dr Gulati and Kappu starts flirting with her and let the doctor go to the hospital. Following is the transcription of the performance.²³⁶

KAPIL: How can you leave a patient in this critical situation?

LOTTERY: What has happened to you?

KAPIL: I feel dizzy. (by making gesture of hugging her)

LOTTERY: What sort of dizziness is this?

KAPIL: A naughty one. Come to me quickly, otherwise... things will escalate.

LOTTERY: I don't understand.

KAPIL: What are you doing with that doctor? (taking her hand in his hand and taking her to a side) He is crazy. Listen to me. Quit that job. I will get you a job in a salon.

LOTTERY: A salon!

KAPIL: Yes.

LOTTERY: No, earlier I used to work in a boutique. This doctor came there and told me that sewing cloth and sewing people up, were the same thing. That is why I work here now. Why don't you join our establishment? (in her broken Hindi)

KAPIL: Even if it's not funny, it is entertaining (commenting on her Hindi but complementing her sexually attractive looks and voice). So, you used to work in a boutique earlier.

LOTTERY: Yes.

KAPIL: Then why don't you stitch a suit for me?

LOTTERY: Why not? How do you want it to be?

KAPIL: It should be... deep neck, backless. Something extraordinary.

²³⁶ <https://www.sonyliv.com/details/episodes/4860437268001/Ep.-2---The-Kapil-Sharma-Show---Tiger-Shroff-and-Shraddha-Kapoor-in-Kapil's-Mohalla> at 25:34

LOTTERY: How can men wear such clothes?

KAPIL: Well...I'm getting it stitched for you.

LOTTERY: But why should I wear a gent's suit?

KAPIL: Inject your brain with intelligence! Don't you get it? I am flirting with you! How can you not get it?

Chandan Prabhakar was the first runner-up of *The Great Indian Laughter Challeng* in 2008. In real life, Chandan and Kapil are friends since their childhood. He plays the role of Chandu Chaiwala in *The Kapil Sharma show*. Usually, they have egoistic fights in the performances, in which Chandan is insulted most of the times, and it seems in the performance that his comments are also controlled. In a scene, Kapil is flirting with Lottery (beautiful nurse of 50-50 hospital) meanwhile Chandan enters. Following is the transcription of the performance.²³⁷

CHANDU: (while making his entry on stage) Don't you (Kapil) dare! Don't you dare to say anything bad about Lottery. You cannot say anything bad to her. I am very close to her. I have known her for three years.

KAPIL to LOTTERY: But I know him (Chandu) since childhood. Stay away from him. He used to dig his nose in childhood.

LOTTERY: Eww!

CHANDU: What's the big deal about it? I am not the only one. Everyone does so.

KAPIL: Not everyone put the same finger in their mouth.

CHANDU: What was this?

KAPIL: Nothing, you ended up getting insulted.

Kapil Sharma makes fun of other characters particularly the performers. Any moment, comic performers jump out of their characters to be themselves. So when the humiliation is inflicted by Kapil Sharma (not Kappu), the humiliated is not the character it is the performer actor. The

²³⁷ <https://www.sonyliv.com/details/episodes/4860437268001/Ep.-2---The-Kapil-Sharma-Show---Tiger-Shroff-and-Shraddha-Kapoor-in-Kapil's-Mohalla> at 26:45

humiliated-smile is not a smile of the character, but the actor, i.e. Chandan in the above scene.²³⁸ In many shows, the star performer Kapil Sharma humiliates spectators for their looks, heights, colour, and clothes not action and views. Moreover, sometimes there is this mediatised effect when performers do not single out a spectator to humiliate, but the camera does so in that case. In an episode, Kapil Sharma himself (not Kappu Sharma) was making fun of skinny boys. Following is the transcription of the performance.²³⁹

KAPIL: First of all, the guys are not healthy. They are skinny. The waist does not hold their pant. The back pocket, which is supposed to be here comes down to here.

NAVJOT SINGH SIDDHU: Why talk about their underclothes? Even their faces are not worth a mention.

At that very moment camera shows a boy on the screen in close up sitting amongst the audience to justify the comment, and in that process, the boy, shown in the camera does not know that he is going to be shown as a person, whose ‘face is not even worth a mention.’ To understand it more in details through the glances of Bakhtin and Ridout I have few more examples. This part of the performance is taken from the unaired episodic footage of *The Kapil Sharma show*.²⁴⁰ It was performed live but was not telecast. Following is the transcription of the performance.²⁴¹

KAPIL SHARMA: In his full-Test match career, Azhar Bhai — Indian Cricket Player — hit 714 boundaries for four but only *Barah Chakke* (Double meaning: Six runs/transgenders). Why this racism with *Chakkas*? *Apne Chakke Kam Qun Mare?* (Why did you hit fewer sixers? Or Why did you hit fewer transgenders?)

AZHAR: I don’t like...

KAPIL: He is saying, I don’t like Chakkas (Transgenders).

²³⁸ <https://www.sonyliv.com/details/episodes/4860437268001/Ep.-2---The-Kapil-Sharma-Show---Tiger-Shroff-and-Shraddha-Kapoor-in-Kapil's-Mohalla> at 1:04:55 to 1:05:35

²³⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mO2Vmh93JP8> at 13:00 to 13:13

²⁴⁰ <https://www.sonyliv.com/details/behind%20the%20scenes/4956783328001/The-Kapil-Sharma-Show-%7C-Undekha-Tadka-%7C-Ep-2-%7C-Sony-LIV>

²⁴¹ <https://www.sonyliv.com/details/behind%20the%20scenes/4956783328001/The-Kapil-Sharma-Show-%7C-Undekha-Tadka-%7C-Ep-2-%7C-Sony-LIV> at 2:57 to 3:20

Heteroglossia defines ‘double-voiced discourse.’ The discourse of language, in which language is understood naturally not bounded by one particular single meaning but has multi-layered dimensions. Mikhail Bakhtin in his 1934 essay *Discourse in the novel* — One among four essays published in English *The Dialogical Imagination: four essays* (1975) — defines ‘Heteroglossia’ in the context of prose and poetry,

Heteroglossia, once incorporated into the novel (whatever the forms for its incorporation), is another’s speech in another’s language, serving to express authorial intentions but in a retracted way. Such speech constitutes a special type of double-voiced discourse... Double-voiced discourse is always internally dialogized, examples of this would be comic, ironic or parodic discourse. (1975: 324)²⁴²

‘Comic, ironic and parodic discourse’ is not far from each other. In Greek, Hetero means ‘Different’ and Glōssa means ‘tongue, language.’ Today the dominant usage of the word ‘Heteroglossia’ is limited to the different meanings of a word. According to the Oxford dictionary, Heteroglossia is defined by “the presence of two or more expressed viewpoints in a text or other artistic work.”²⁴³ In the above mentioned performance, Kapil Sharma uses two words: Sixer and *Chakka* (transgender) ‘Sixer’ is a boundary to achieve six runs in the cricket, and *Chakka* has two connotations ‘Sixer’ and ‘transgender’. Kapil Sharma could not stop his belly laugh as he said, “He does not like *Chakkas*.” Bakhtin writes, “The word in the language is half someone else’s. It becomes ‘one’s own’ only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent when he appropriates the word adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention” (1975: 293).²⁴⁴

It is clear, Kapil Sharma is not worried about why former Indian cricket captain could not hit less Sixer but as speaker starts populating about the transgenders by using Hindi word *Chakka* appropriates for both, but his intention is expressed in his laughter. According to Bakhtin, “the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language (it is not, after all, out of a dictionary that the speaker gets his words!), but rather it exists in other people’s mouths, in other people’s contexts, serving other people’s intentions” (293-4).²⁴⁵ My view is that the moment, Kapil Sharma broke out in laughter and all started laughing with him, that was acceptance of the meaning of the word ‘*Chakka*’ for the transgender, not ‘sixer’. Though the conversation could be perceived talking about cricket, there are different innuendo, but Azhar

²⁴² <https://www.d.umn.edu/~cstroupe/handouts/8906/Mikhail-Bakhtin-The-Dialogic-Imagination-Excerpt.pdf>

²⁴³ <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/heteroglossia>

²⁴⁴ <https://www.d.umn.edu/~cstroupe/handouts/8906/Mikhail-Bakhtin-The-Dialogic-Imagination-Excerpt.pdf>

²⁴⁵ <https://www.d.umn.edu/~cstroupe/handouts/8906/Mikhail-Bakhtin-The-Dialogic-Imagination-Excerpt.pdf>

himself joins everyone in the laughter. His giggle, guffaw, haw-haw, hee-haw made clear that the sniggerer, snort was targeting transgenders.

In the almost similar manner, Kapil Sharma targeted pregnant women. It came out beyond his intention and so was edited from the main television performance. Kapil about (newly became mother) woman said, “Normal Life *Me Ladkiyan, Kya Hota Hai Paji, Ek Bachche Ke Baad Itna Fail Jaati Hain, Kayi Baar!* — While uncontrolled laugh — Sorry, *Mai Gala Wording Use Kar Gaya*”(Usually girls expand/spread like hell after giving birth to a child... Sorry, to use the wrong word).²⁴⁶ About the intention of the words, Bakhtin says that language is not a neutral medium, but “it is populated- overpopulated- with the intentions of others”(294).²⁴⁷ So the words *Phail Jati Hain* and ‘Sorry’ are important in that context if the problem lies in saying *Phail Jati Hain* or his saying ‘Sorry’ then giggling, snickering and snorting about it is problematic. All the people around him joined in the laughter. To avoid this corpsed behaviour, he changed the topic, and in the process, it ended into insulting someone else from the audience. Just after saying “*Mai Galat Wordin Use kar Gaya*”, he said, “I heard someone saying Lara, Lara, Lara. Is there someone sells boiled egg on the street?”²⁴⁸ According to Oxford Dictionary ‘Corpse’ is theatrical slang which means, “Spoil a piece of acting by forgetting one’s lines or laughing uncontrollably.”²⁴⁹

The interesting point is not that he was joking about the postpartum period, but he corpsed and came out of the performance to say sorry and to edit this section from the telecast. Why is he sorry? Did he feel wrong about words or corpsing? It was a ‘dead step’ to say this on television. Basically, he is feeling sorry because of its recording, and he knows that it may get funnier, and women may also enjoy this, but it will not be telecast. So his concern is not that it is a highly normalised patriarchal comment on women body but the primary concern was a camera, he felt nervous using it in front of the camera. In performance, his saying sorry seems okay because he corpsed — forgot his lines — and therefore he came out of his performance but according to me, it is the best example of ‘dying on the stage’, which is different from corpsing as Nicholas Ridout in his book, *Stage Fright, Animals, and other Theatrical Problems* defines,

²⁴⁶ <https://www.sonyliv.com/details/behind%20the%20scenes/4956783328001/The-Kapil-Sharma-Show-%7C-Undekha-Tadka-%7C-Ep-2-%7C-Sony-LIV> at 4:51

²⁴⁷ <https://www.d.umn.edu/~cstroupe/handouts/8906/Mikhail-Bakhtin-The-Dialogic-Imagination-Excerpt.pdf>

²⁴⁸ <https://www.sonyliv.com/details/behind%20the%20scenes/4956783328001/The-Kapil-Sharma-Show-%7C-Undekha-Tadka-%7C-Ep-2-%7C-Sony-LIV> at 5:00

²⁴⁹ <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/corpse>

The term ‘dying’ on stage is another piece of theatrical slang, used to describe an act that is obviously failing to have its intended effect on its audience. It is usually used in the context of comedians failing to produce laughter. So to die on stage is something slightly different from corpsing, involving the unwanted absence of laughter rather than its unwanted presence (2006:134).

Family Show and Adult Comedy

In a comparison of my other case studies, I trace a similarity among *The Kapil Sharma show* and *AIB Knockout* (insult comedy) because of the presence of one individual at both performances giving same reaction to comment on her. This scene of the performance was telecast on 26 November 2016. Following is the trascription of the performace. ²⁵⁰

Kapil: Whenever an actress signs a film with Shahrukh Sir, they come with a feeling that “Oh My God! I got a chance to romance with Shahrukh Khan”. In this film ‘Dear Zindagi,’ there is no angle of romance between Shahrukh Sir and Aliya Bhatt. So, who felt more bad about it?

Shahrukh: - Basically, I used to roam around embracing her in my arms and showing as if, she is a child to me. By putting a mask of old age, I have done everything like, come to me my dear come, come here my baby (People started laughing).²⁵¹

Her reaction was similar to the insult comedy of *AIB Knockout*, Alia was mocked and ridiculed for her stupidity in the *AIB Knockout*. Gursimran Khamba while roasting Rajeev Masand (film critique) jested, “Seriously Masand, stop calling yourself a journalist. Every time you call yourself a journalist, ISIS beheads a real one. Alia in the front row has no idea, what the fuck ISIS is?”²⁵² Gursimran Khamba then goes on to make fun of Arjun Kapoor (actor) “Arjun has failed twelfth standard after that he lost a lot of weight. He is Smriti Irani in reverse. Alia! Smriti Irani... is an MP.”²⁵³ She was ridiculed again by another performer Rohan Joshi. While roasting, roast master and producer Karan Johar, Rohan said, “Karan your filmography, right, let me do this, Kuck Kuch Hota Hai, Kal Ho Na Ho, Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gum, Kabhi Alvida Na Kehna, Dude you are so obsessed with the letter ‘K’, You probably Snot Potassium.

²⁵⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RSXSq4UOAXU> at 7:00

²⁵¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RSXSq4UOAXU> at 7:00

²⁵² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3YizWAMYcls> at 19:20.

²⁵³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3YizWAMYcls> at 21:21.

Alia, don't even try.”²⁵⁴ Alia's reaction was the same, and that was a belly laugh, where she was burst of deep, loud, hearty laughter. However, the humour is different or at least the type of joke is not the same. In AIB, she is treated like an ignorant upper-class human being,²⁵⁵ while *The Kapil Sharma show* reduced her identity to that of a 'sexy' woman. Many videos on YouTube show women complaining directly to Kapil about seeing women just as eye candy.²⁵⁶

Television Show and Internet Performance

The Kapil Sharma Show was part of the popular culture, hugely popular among masses. On the other side, *AIB Knockout* (insult comedy) was for a 'special class.'²⁵⁷ A class that celebrates America as their Ideal place and have a power of consuming, American culture in India as well. *The Kapil Sharma Show* is in its essence, celebrates present status quo and so was popular among people who celebrate established norms in society. On the other side, *AIB Knockout* was criticised for using vernacular billingsgates in their show based on American theme (insult comedy).

The division of both shows can be understood by the example of the mothers of the host coming to their shows. Kapil Sharma's mother used to attend his performances.²⁵⁸ She enjoys Kapil performing and joking on patriarchal, casteist, racist subjects. He avoids any use of billingsgate in his vernacular show and uses double meaning words, sentences and gestures to create hidden meaning for creating humour. Kapil is also praised for his humour; of which he gives credit to his mother. In conclusion, Kapil's mother has no problem with anything that is performed on the stage.

Karan started the roast performance by informing the audience, “My mother is sitting in the first row. She will need an ambulance at the end of the night.”²⁵⁹ It was not a family show but an adult insult comedy performance, where Karan Johar for the first time was going to accept on camera that he is gay. The first time, he was going to kiss a man in front of 4000 people. Other performers were going to make jokes about his sex life with other men. Karan is going to discuss his sexual preferences.

²⁵⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3YizWAMYcls> at 24:47.

²⁵⁵ In a TV show 'Coffee with Karan' she could not tell the name of President of India.

²⁵⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ryPuorBv0IY>

²⁵⁷ The term is influenced from Walter Lippman, who divides society into Specialized class and bewildered heard (masses). *Public Opinion*, 1922:122.

²⁵⁸ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t65qr0Hwv_s at 17:10

²⁵⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3YizWAMYcls> at 1:57

A Television Performance and YouTube Performers

On the 59 episode of *Comedy Nights with Kapil* telecast on 2 March 2014, Bollywood actress, Kangana Ranaut entered the stage with the permanent guest of the show, Navjot Singh Siddhu. Kangana said, “Because Kapil flirts too much, so I asked Mr Siddhu, to accompany me for my security.”²⁶⁰ In Episode 136 of *Comedy Nights with Kapil* (telecast on 13 December 2014) Bollywood actress Kajol asked Kapil Sharma, “First I want to ask you about the girls, who come to your shows, why do you flirt with them so much.”²⁶¹

Sanjay Rajoura from *Aisi Taisi Democracy*, says that if he has nothing to do only when he watches *The Kapil Sharma Show*. He says, “It is misogynist, there is no doubt about it, but our whole popular culture is a misogynist; from cinema, TV to the politicians in parliament. Everywhere is misogyny. Kapil is unblessed here.”²⁶² I asked him, but he does not even use any abusive language in his show, Rajoura replies, “There is no use of it because it is abusive enough even without it.”²⁶³ Kapil Sharma represents an entire range of cultural manifestation. In a way, he is the representative of our society. I further asked Sanjay Rajoura ‘why does he not use billingsgate in his show?’ He proposes a relationship between the performance, performer and the society.

Kapil Sharma comes from a small town. He has reached a level of popularity after a hard struggle, how right this would be to blame him for all of this. I want to ask these politicians sitting on news debates according to whom, marital rape is not a crime. They are the leaders, who is Kapil Sharma- just a joker on the stage. You know the problem lies in people more than these politicians or Kapil Sharma. If the huge chunk of the population is misogynist, so they also should share the view. (Sanjay Rajoura).²⁶⁴

Sanjay Raoura’s view lead back to the earlier argument that the family shows, which is considered the representation of televisual culture is not just reflection of television culture or singular family, but it reflects the whole society in which this show exists (See Page 62). Sanjay Rajoura compares him with the joker. He thinks of him as a clown, who was made a star comedian by his audience. Of course, he is a ‘new clown.’ Rahul Ram from *Aisi Taisi Democracy* while discussing about the relation in popularity and profit in context of comedy said, “I am sure when Kapil Sharma started, he had nothing, zero negotiating power (for profit).

²⁶⁰ <https://www.voot.com/shows/comedy-nights-with-kapil/1/360559/kangana-ranaut-on-comedy-nights/378420> at 15:35

²⁶¹ <https://www.voot.com/shows/comedy-nights-with-kapil/1/360559/ddlj-celebrates-cnwk/353485> at 4:30

²⁶² The interview was taken at Sanjay Rajoura’s Delhi home on 17 August 2017.

²⁶³ The interview was taken at Sanjay Rajoura’s Delhi home on 17 August 2017.

²⁶⁴ The interview was taken at Sanjay Rajoura’s Delhi home on 17 August 2017.

Kapil Sharma has achieved a lot (by his struggle). Then it came as *The Kapil Sharma Show*. He is the highest paid, most watched and most known comedian in India.”²⁶⁵

I believe that comedy is subversive. It transgresses, it questions, and it ridicules the social hierarchies. Otherwise, comedy will fail. Therefore, some transgression can be traced in *The Kapil Sharma show* as well. Kapil Sharma makes fun of personal relations. His grandmother is an alcoholic, which is not usual. His aunt flirts with any man coming to their house again this is not acceptable social behaviour. He, himself flirts with any woman except Sarla (Dr Gulati’s daughter) in front of his family, it is not rebellious, it shows something that subverts, and that is not normal. However, while doing so, it falls into other trajectories and indirectly judges the women. He categorises them in the process as ‘good’ and ‘bad,’ ‘sexy’ and ‘fat,’ ‘beauty’ and ‘ugly.’ By putting women under moral categories which are stereotyped he then looks at them from that perspective that grandma is alcoholic, Bua is characterless, Bumper (nurse) is fat and ugly, Sarla is not sexy and beautiful.

Comedy is in itself, or it should be anti-establishment, but comedy, like *The Kapil Sharma show*, can be pro-establishment, where you make fun of old, disabled and women. You can do that, and people will laugh at it. Laughter has its process. It works like science. For example, if I make a joke on a lame person- there are possibilities that I can also laugh at it (Varun Grover).²⁶⁶

The troupe, *All India Bakchod*, to not to be part of the establishment, made a policy to avoid such situation. The policy is named ‘Punching up and Punching down.’ According to them, they see all the oppressed as ‘down’ and all the oppressors, i.e., State, Power, Politics as ‘up.’ They say that we work with a motif that we will always punch up not down. Rohan Joshi from AIB just after mentioning their policies about their comedy shared his feeling about *The Kapil Sharma Show*,

I guess you call it ‘family friendly’ for a better word in an environment, where it was not a comedy, done for the sake of transgression. It is just ‘mimicry’ and performance-based as opposed to insight based, revelation-based, or relatability based (comedy). It’s more on that when they go for the super easy topic. I think it’s a comedy that leans harder towards confirming biases as opposed to challenging them but I also think as a result of that it is a very easily accessible form of comedy. It does not require any thinking. All the thinking is pre-done for you. In that form of comedy, the jokes are watered down to the simplest, most obvious and stereotyping. As a result of that, they are easy, they are palatable, and they appeal to a large and broad family audience because they don’t disturb the status quo. If you noticed

²⁶⁵ The interview was taken at the office of Indian Ocean in New Delhi on 15 July. Rec 1, 30:20

²⁶⁶ The interview was take at the Yash Rah Film Studio on 11 November 2017.

that you watch things with your family, they don't disturb the status quo or the relationship with your family.²⁶⁷

The point that is raised here is that *The Kapil Sharma show* is performance-based comedy-performing a prescribed text, in which all the thinking is preempted for the audience. This kind of comedy used to exist in India since long before the emergence of new clowns. The use of the body is in its extreme, fighting, running, falling, jumping, chasing, thrashing, beating, slapping, teasing and colouring faces in its physical forms is rampant. The show closely follows old art forms used in *nautanki*, clowning, slapstick, gibberish, and circus. However, it is the mediatization, crew of hundreds of people, capital involved in it that makes them different from the 'clown.' To look at the technological advancement of the performance, I would like to mention the 177 episode of *Comedy Nights with Kapil*. In the webcast performance, Kapil Sharma invites himself to promote his upcoming film *Kis Kisko Pyar Karun* (2015), and Kapil Sharma entered at the set of the house.²⁶⁸ There were two Kapil Sharma on screen, insulting each other. One is a star actor who came to promote his film, and the other is the 'clown'.

The primary criticism of *The Kapil Sharma show* is its tendency of objectification of the woman's body.²⁶⁹ The limitation of women and men is shown as a natural parameter of being superior and inferior. First and foremost, he makes an explicit category of two kinds of women, one who is beautiful and the others ugly. Most of his humour about women either comes from flirting with them or by making fun of their bodies (body shaming).²⁷⁰ Tanmay Bhat from AIB finds *The Kapil Sharma show* strengthening stereotypes (Figure Stereotypes in Comedy, See Page 109).

That show is, to me, the actual abusive comedy. I think *The Kapil Sharma Show* reduces the term "wife" to someone who works in the kitchen. Every single time when Dipika Padukone comes to his show, Kapil Sharma flirts with her and says "How ugly my wife is and see her lips, how big they are? This is wrong. This is actually perpetuating the stereotype, that the housewife is always ugly. The real beauty lies in other women, outside (Tanmay Bhat).²⁷¹

Another performer from the troupe (AIB) Rohan Joshi share similar views about the show,

²⁶⁷ Interview was taken at a studio in East Andheri, Mumbai on 6 September 2017

²⁶⁸ <https://www.voot.com/shows/comedy-nights-with-kapil/1/360559/kis-kisko-pyaar-karoon/400659> at 12:20

²⁶⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2CbxHTmGRxl>

²⁷⁰ <https://www.sonyliv.com/details/behind%20the%20scenes/4956783328001/The-Kapil-Sharma-Show-%7C-Undekha-Tadka-%7C-Ep-2-%7C-Sony-LIV> at 4:51

²⁷¹ Interview was taken at the office of AIB in Mumbai on 27 October 2017. Rec, 15:46.

You know, my fundamental problem with Kapil Sharma is that the entire show is on the side of the oppressor-patriarch. It is on the side of the husband; wife is a witch, the servant is the asshole, the outside lady wants to be subjected to sexist attention and target at, which is the opposite of the genre of comedy. It is supposed to be an inversion of the conventional hierarchies. The entire point is that comedy is supposed to be the women, talking about (her husband) ‘how much it sucks that her husband thinks like shit.’ How it should logically be about the guy, working as a maid in the house going out to say, they treat me like a machine.²⁷²

Today while writing this chapter Kapil is resting at his home not just because of his bad health but also for his patriarchal misogynist behaviour. In a press conference, he argued that he commits such mistakes under the effect of alcohol.²⁷³ In another interview, he said regarding his alcoholism that “Maybe my upbringing is like this that I saw people drinking whenever they do not feel better.”²⁷⁴ He as a performer does not believe that it is the mentality and his ideology, not the alcohol. This ideology is prevalent in our society and considered normal therefore he threatened journalist Vickey Lalwani editor of ‘Spotboye, to rape his daughter.²⁷⁵ In the current scenario, in which ‘rape threats’ have been normalised and considered as normal. A Journalist Prateeksha made a video, *It is a shame that we are living in the time of Salman Khan and Kapil Sharma.*²⁷⁶

whenever I did watch the regressive comedy of Kapil Sharma, I never thought if he can go down any further, but I was wrong. He did everything in his comedy for the weaker section of the society that makes them weaker and a subject of humiliation. He ridiculed overweight people by calling them fat; he insults his co-actor (Sumona Chakravarti) for her wide lips. He told the world that women’s only job is to host guest by offering water and tea. He called them Black, ugly, cross-eyed (journalist Prateeksha).²⁷⁷

In response to this video, she was threatened again by the fans and followers of Kapil Sharma. According to me, this shows the mentality of the shows as well because comedy is supposed to subvert but what Kapil Sharma and his performance do, it strengthens the status quo. Moreover, this is proved the rape threats of the performer and his followers. Following is the screenshot of rape threats, Prateeksha received on her video (See Fig. 2.1).

²⁷² Interview was taken at a studio in East Andheri, Mumbai on 6 September 2017

²⁷³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=37vKXIoLBjg> at 3:45

²⁷⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wCnhtmulnjw> at 4:42

²⁷⁵ <https://www.spotboye.com/>

²⁷⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2CbXHTmGRxI>

²⁷⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2CbXHTmGRxI> 1:45

The screenshot shows a web browser window with three tabs: 'Signed in as Arun12_saa', 'Inbox (1,858) - arunpatel', and 'The Kumars at No. 42'. The address bar shows a secure connection to a YouTube video page. The YouTube interface includes the logo and a search bar containing 'Kapil Sharma'. Below the video player, there are several comments with their respective user avatars, names, timestamps, and text. Each comment also shows a thumbs-up icon, a thumbs-down icon, and a 'REPLY' button.

1 REPLY

spacial technology 1 week ago
tum log chutiya ho.....
25 REPLY

Akash kumar 5 days ago
chup MC BC
1 REPLY

Raju Raj Kumar 4 days ago
Are sali moti bhaisi ye apna jahil SA chehra le k bhag yha se teri to
1 REPLY

nischal parajuli 4 days ago
Tujhe v chudenge randi chup. Kapil Sahi hai
1 REPLY

nischal parajuli 4 days ago
Tu randi hai isiliye tu aisa bol rahi hai.
1 REPLY

paRvez AalaM 1 week ago
Report kro salo.....media bikau hai
16 REPLY

View all 3 replies ▾

Type here to search

Fig.2.1 Screenshot of the comments of YouTube spectators threatening journalist to rape

YouTubization of the Performance

The role of class and cultural Capital: It is evident that no society is a homogeneous group because of its division into caste, class, region, religion, urban, rural and other groups. The only consistent fact of any society is that an elite group has cultural capital that makes them different from the masses (See Page 40). In the context of the internet in India, these upper class, elite, educated social group were the first to consume jokes, comedy, shows and films on YouTube. Therefore, most comic shows emerged at the time early webcast, usually produced, planned and performed by this limited social group. Here is a list of Youtube comedians and comic channels including year in which they joined YouTube, e.g., Tanmay Bhat (2006)²⁷⁸ Abish Mathew (2007)²⁷⁹ Kenny Sebastian (2007)²⁸⁰ Biswa Kalyan Rath (2008)²⁸¹ Kanan Gill (2008)²⁸² Ashish Chanchlani vines (2009)²⁸³ The Viral Fever (2011),²⁸⁴ SnG Comedy (2011)²⁸⁵ East India Comedy (2012)²⁸⁶ *All India Bakchod* (2012)²⁸⁷ Comedy Central India Originals (2014)²⁸⁸ and others. All these individuals and groups are known today as one of the most celebrated Indian YouTube comedians and troupes. My next two case studies *AIB Knockout* and *Aisi Taisi Democracy* represent that liberal, elite, bourgeois culture of web and YouTubization. Tanmay Bhat, a member of *All India Bakchod* — Organiser of *AIB Knockout*—, says,

I think we are an upper class, elite, perceived brand that a lot more people want to aspire to be than you would imagine. So, elitism is something where people like to tag with us, and I am very happy in wearing it. Historically, the elites set the cultural trends. It is better off being an elite, who initiates the cultural trend than the other way around. Even, the street food is defined by the elite. Street food is something; the masses consume when kings used to have their snacks. The elite sets everything that is part of popular culture. Before, I used to get annoyed, when people used to say that ‘you are English speaking upper-class stigma’, but now I understand that people while saying this, still watch us, the fact is, ‘setting culture.’ Today, if I say something, it will make a headline tomorrow. Abusing Karan Johar for being elite and this and that does not make any effect. However, when he speaks, makes news

²⁷⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/user/agm777/about>

²⁷⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/user/agm777/about>

²⁸⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/user/kennethseb/about>

²⁸¹ <https://www.youtube.com/user/yokalyanyo/about>

²⁸² <https://www.youtube.com/user/knngill/about>

²⁸³ <https://www.youtube.com/user/ashchanchlani/about>

²⁸⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/user/TheViralFeverVideos/featured>

²⁸⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/user/bollywoodgandu/about>

²⁸⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/user/EastIndiaComedy/about>

²⁸⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/user/allindiabakchod/about>

²⁸⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/user/ccindiaoriginals/about>

everywhere. He sets culture; he has, the ability to set culture. That is what, the fact is, the elite always set the culture, and I am happy to be that.²⁸⁹

An English speaking urban middle and upper class has the cultural capital, which makes them elite and liberal to accept all the conversations and face all the situations in which vernacular middle class would never like to go with their arena of popular culture. I agree with Tanmay Bhat that popular culture adopts the culture of the elite, in the process, the elite sets the culture but only for the middle-class, who aspire to be part of that elite culture. All these things do not matter to an upper class, a feudal landlord, who has no reach to the cinema and these elite performances. In the same manner, the elite cannot set the culture of the working class, who has no consuming power to reach to these shows and performances and Mumbai is the best example of it, a synonym of glamour, capital and popular culture Mumbai is also known for its working-class culture. The economy determines the choice, not the elite. Elite can influence the choice if one has purchasing power, i.e. the feudal landlord. Therefore all these elite performers are used to sell products in advertisements to manipulate the choice of a person having purchasing power. This choice is manufactured through the popular culture, songs, films and lifestyle of these actor/performers.

Reach of Technology Affecting Previous Roles: Gradually a section of the television audience (vernacular speakers belonging to middle class) started using the internet, but a massive shift of change started, when JIO (an Indian mobile network operator) owned by Reliance Industries came into existence. On 1 September 2016, Indian capitalist, Mukesh Ambani announced provisions of free internet and voice call services for its consumers for three months from 5 September 2016.²⁹⁰ Within six-month, JIO crossed 100 million consumers. It was the fastest ramp-up by any mobile network in the world.²⁹¹ The policy of the network company forced other companies to prize down its data services. The television audience shifted to the web and YouTube. This reach of the internet to rural parts of the country brought vernacular performer into the light, i.e., Comedy Sonotek (2016)²⁹² Shahid Alvi (2017)²⁹³ Make Joke Of (2017).²⁹⁴ Meanwhile, some other entertainment companies emerged for the

²⁸⁹ Interview was taken at the office of AIB in Mumbai on 27 October 2017.

²⁹⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JNFbR682wyA>

²⁹¹ [https://www.worldwidejournals.com/international-journal-of-scientific-research-\(IJSR\)//recent issues pdf/2017/May/May_2017_1493734827_160.pdf](https://www.worldwidejournals.com/international-journal-of-scientific-research-(IJSR)//recent%20issues%20pdf/2017/May/May_2017_1493734827_160.pdf) P:199

²⁹² <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCMwSNiGU8BWx87MI9pYLfqA/about>

²⁹³ <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC4MhtzPISuhGUnyUs2sDqRw/about>

²⁹⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCvgteBQjoaxE0bhFkpu8qAw/about>

elite audience, i.e., Netflix (2016) Amazon Prime (2016) and others. The online entertainment companies' webcasts 'web series,' is not available for everyone but their paid subscribers only. This difference between elite and masses (old web users and new web users) is again a kind of new separation among these two classes because it cannot be abolished in a system that is to maintain it by creating new parameters. I will discuss them broadly in the next chapter (See Page 151-2, and 155), but here I intend that an individual having cultural capital, from elite section of society has way more chances and power of setting any culture (See Chapter 40).

All India Bakchod (AIB)

All India Bakchod is the name of a comic troupe and company owned by four stand-up comedians Tanmay Bhat, Gursimran Khamba, Ashish Shakya and Rohan Joshi. The troupe became famous with its abbreviated form *AIB* — name of their YouTube channel. Tanmay Bhat and Gursimran Khamba founded it in 2012 for creating Podcasts (iPod + broadcast = podcast). On January 2012, the group joined YouTube. According to performers, they used to podcast (funny recorded audio conversation) on YouTube. The channel still has its first, one minute thirty-nine-second-long podcast, YouTubized on 2 February 2013.²⁹⁵ Rohan Joshi and Ashish Shakya joined the group in late 2012. About founding group Tanmay Bhat says,

I met Khamba in Bombay in 2012. He came to Bombay to do stand-up comedy from Delhi. We hooked up and started AIB. Khamba was doing stand-up in a Bar at Bandra. So, I went to meet him up after the show. He suggested to start podcasts. I said, let's do it. So, this way Podcast began. We did podcasts for one and half year. Then a call came from YouTube in 2012 saying "Let's come on YouTube. You guys are very funny; you do well on stage." So, first, we were like No, No. The partner managers of YouTube watched our live shows, and they liked it. So, they asked us to come on YouTube to contribute something. Finally, we said, fine. In the beginning, two three videos did not get any attention but then the next video, Kalki's '*It's Your Fault*'²⁹⁶ got viral. Since then we are on YouTube.²⁹⁷

²⁹⁵ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=igS_qGWmy3Y

²⁹⁶ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8hCONg_ajpY

²⁹⁷ Interview was taken at the office of AIB in Mumbai on 27 October 2017.

On 6 February 2013, the group YouTubized their first visual video ‘*AIB trolls Bollywood: Alia Bhatt*.’²⁹⁸ In the beginning, the group used to create funny videos about films, actors, the audience in cinema and cricketers, i.e. ‘*Sanjay Dutt GPS*,’²⁹⁹ ‘*Shit Indians Do In Theatres*’³⁰⁰ and ‘*Sachinocalypse – Future of Sachin Fans*.’³⁰¹ ‘*Rape: It’s Your Fault*’ was a black humour video YouTubized on 19 September 2013, in which actress Kalki Koechlin was sarcastically questioning women for the crimes done with them by men.³⁰² The YouTube channel of AIB has won two YouTube awards ‘Silver Play Button’ (awarded to the channel having 100,000 subscribers) and ‘Gold Play Button’ for having more than 1,000,000 subscribers.³⁰³

On 20 December 2014, AIB organised the controversial insult comedy performance, ‘*The AIB Knockout*.’ Tanmay Bhat after finishing his performance at the stage of roast performance said, “Ladies and gentleman at AIB we always push the envelope in the genre of comedy. We did that with the ‘*AIB trolls Bollywood: Alia Bhatt*’³⁰⁴ or with our first ‘*video with Yash Raj*’³⁰⁵ and today with *insult comedy*.”³⁰⁶ AIB has its content unit, *Vigyanpanti* since 2015. Economic Times published on 8 November 2017 that *Vigyanpanti* comprises nine writers, excluding the founding members.³⁰⁷ The group does not consider themselves political. Rohan Joshi said,

Over the last four years, we have built a brand, and this thing is not just about politics. I will put it in this way, more than political; we are a social troupe. Sometimes we happen to be at the intersection of social and politics because of the social values that we believe in, which then automatically become a political issue.”³⁰⁸

Rohan said, “politics is not in the DNA of AIB, and if it would be considered political then *Aisi Taisi Democracy* is way more political than us.”³⁰⁹ *Aisi Taisi Democracy* is the third case study of the chapter still the question is how political AIB is from *The Kapil Sharma Show*? How less political they are from *Aisi Taisi Democracy*? Where exactly do they exist in the

²⁹⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uBwfDO52En0>

²⁹⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v9HlIXkl0bo>

³⁰⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-jM-t7YoqkY>

³⁰¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8gRlBE7lOfo>

³⁰² Kalki Koechlin is French Actress known for her different work in Indian Cinema and winner of National Film Awards.

³⁰³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i0Ma4Kw3kCQ>

³⁰⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pfHxl46KyZM>

³⁰⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E-H3BIJ2BFE>

³⁰⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3YizWAMYcls> at 43:49.

³⁰⁷ <https://brandequity.economicstimes.indiatimes.com/news/media/meet-the-next-gen-of-aibmeet-the-next-gen-of-aib/61538919>

³⁰⁸ Interview was taken at a studio in East Andheri, Mumbai on 6 September 2017

³⁰⁹ Interview was taken at a studio in East Andheri, Mumbai on 6 September 2017

genre and field of Indian comedy? I believe their one live performance *AIB Knockout* replies to all these questions.

AIB Knockout

AIB Knockout is referred to as ‘roast’ and ‘insult comedy.’ The two-hour-long gala event show was performed on December 20, 2014, and YouTube’d on 28 January 2015. The ‘YouTube Performance,’³¹⁰ started with the ‘Warning Adult Content 18+ ONLY.’

Roasting is a comedic Art Form that originated in 1949 in New York and has been adopted across the world since. Performed live at the NSCI (Worli, Mumbai) in front of four thousand people - edited for YouTube. The following video is filthy, rude and offensive. You know like... A ROAST (Disclaimer shown before the performance).³¹¹

The poster for the performance advertised, “Insult comedy, No holds barred, One night only: All profit goes to charity” [sic].³¹² The two-hour long performance raised 40 lakh rupees for charity. This was the ambivalent part of the insult comedy, organising it to help poor people - not to make a profit. This is moralising the ‘immorality,’ I count it as a good tactic for such an event, which, indeed did something new in Indian comedy. The central attraction of the performance was “Bollywood’s biggest Stars (Ranveer Singh and Arjun Kapoor) getting roasted by India’s Top Comedians” [sic]. Among 11 performers, ‘Aditi Mittal’³¹³ was the only woman performer, but she was the co-author of the show with ‘Abish Mathew.’³¹⁴

Bollywood producer Karan Johar was the ‘roastmaster’ (host or master of ceremonies) of the performance.³¹⁵ He began the show with another warning, “All right so, those of you, who don’t know, how it really works, (how the roast works?) some horrific foul things are gonna be said tonight. I am not kidding. I truly, I am not. Those easily offended and even really

³¹⁰ I am borrowing term ‘YouTube Performance’ from Andy Lavender

³¹¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3YizWAMYcls>

³¹² <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/society-the-arts/story/20150302-aib-lawyer-interview-karuna-nundy-free-speech-humour-817616-2015-02-20>

³¹³ Aditi Mittal was one and only female comedian in the show. As well as being part of the show as a roaster, she was the writer of the performance. Aditi Mittal is the oldest comic performer on YouTube since 5 July 2006. <https://www.youtube.com/user/dyslexiasoftware/about>

³¹⁴ Abish Mathew is the second oldest comedian after Aditi Mittal on YouTube since 15 June 2007. He along with Aditi Mittal was the writer of this performance. Abish on his channel broadcasts interviews of other comedians with Bollywood actors. <https://www.youtube.com/user/agm777/about>

³¹⁵ **Karan Johar** is a film director and producer. His Wikipedia page shows him as a producer of the event but Tanmay denies the fact. Invited as roastmaster in show, he, first time declared his sexuality in a public place as a gay homosexual man in front of 4000 people and camera.

difficult to offend, you should leave right now!”³¹⁶ The warning was clear and loud (added in YouTube performance also). In the two hours long-running show, performers roasted each other by insulting, abusing and commenting on their colour, size, weight, gender, work, affair, qualifications, and religion. By doing so, they were generating humour, which is a common theme of insult comedy. The audience or spectators were also insulted. Johar as Master Roaster roasted the audience, “Tonight it is not about these losers, no it’s not. Tonight, we celebrate the fact that once again an audience has paid way too much money (Rs. 4000) to watch another two-hour long piece of shit with Ranveer Singh and Arjun Kapoor’s faces on it. So, let the filth begin!”³¹⁷

What comprised the filth?

The show began with the introduction of the host, "A pilot, a sailor, an actor, a model, an architect, are all men he would happily fuck. Please welcome to the stage, Karan Johar."³¹⁸

GURSIMRAN KHAMBA: “Seriously Karan! Director, producer, writer, and actor. You are like four guys in one, exactly how you like it!”³¹⁹

ASHISH SHAKYA: “Parineeti Chopra is not here tonight as we told her she will get fucked by ten dudes in front of 4000 people, Karan Johar is here for the same reason.”³²⁰

GURSIMRAN KHAMBA: “Ashish Shakya is so black his girlfriend gives him a blowjob, every time she craves for Kala- Khatta.”³²¹

ROHAN: “Ashish Shakya is so black, he should be sitting in Swiss bank.”³²²

TANMAY BHAT: “It is not cool that so many people came here and makes a joke about you being ugly It’s not cool. Ashish, you are the hottest guy in AIB, all right. You are the hottest guy in AIB because black absorbs more heat, scientifically, he is the hottest guy is all I am saying.”³²³

³¹⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3YizWAMYcls> at 1:25

³¹⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3YizWAMYcls> at 4:27.

³¹⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3YizWAMYcls> at 20:47

³¹⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3YizWAMYcls> at 20:47

³²⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3YizWAMYcls> at 11:45

³²¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3YizWAMYcls> at 20:36.

³²² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3YizWAMYcls> at 27:15.

³²³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3YizWAMYcls> at 40:47.

KARAN JOHAR: “I am not saying that Ranveer Singh does shit films, but truly the last good thing that he was in was Deepika Padukone.”³²⁴

ASHISH SHAKYA: “Ranveer, you did an ad for Durex. It’s the first time; I saw a condom being endorsed by a STD.”³²⁵

RAGHU RAM: “In ‘Lootera’ (2013), Ranveer digs a really long underground tunnel somewhere in Bengal. I like that film, and it only goes to prove how remote, dangerous or smelly, if there is a hole, Ranveer Singh will enter it.”³²⁶

RAJEEV MASAND: “Ranveer, you are so slutty, every time I start a rumour about you turns out, it’s already true. Your cock travels faster than the speed of gossip man.”³²⁷

TANMAY BHAT: “Ranveer you are such a slut that if you fuck a chick with Ebola, she will die of Aids first.”³²⁸

ROHAN JOSHI: “Tanmay Bhatt, ladies and Gentleman, Tanmay Bhatt is so fat. His small intestine is his large intestine, and his large intestine is Mukesh Ambani.”³²⁹

RAGHU RAM: “Congrats, on putting up, this fuck-all show. No wonder you put it in town otherwise our friend Rohan would never be here, you towny bastard. He is so towny, he thinks ‘Malad’ (located in North Mumbai) is something lawyer say in court.

ADITI MITTAL: “Speaking of Dildos, Ranveer is here, and Deepika is dating Ranveer as we all know. It’s great. Deepika as a woman I want to say, thank you. You are taking one for the team.”³³⁰

GURSIMRAN KHAMBA: “Honestly we wanted to get Ranbir Kapoor for the show, but we could only manage Ranveer, which is also, what Deepika did. So, I guess it’s fine; I guess it’s, it’s okay.

³²⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3YizWAMYcls> at 8:57.

³²⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3YizWAMYcls> at 12:50.

³²⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3YizWAMYcls> at 17:10.

³²⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3YizWAMYcls> at 37:53.

³²⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3YizWAMYcls> at 43:04.

³²⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3YizWAMYcls> at 26:05

³³⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3YizWAMYcls> at 35:05.

KARAN JOHAR: “Arjun, not a lot of people know this man, but you flunked the twelfth standard that means technically you are not even qualified to be a bus conductor, which is really sad because I think you would have sold way more tickets as a bus conductor.”³³¹

GURSIMRAN KHAMBA: “Arjun, I think your greatest role so far has been your career and Arjun regardless, you failed 12th standard.”³³² (As Khamba stopped, Arjun Kapoor, became quite annoying by roasting him on the same thing repeatedly and started abusing, “Ya Ya Ya, Mai Fail Ho Gaya, Ma Ki Chut, Kuch Naya Likh Ke La Na, Bhosdike.”³³³ Karan came to make Arjun sit back to his chair.)

These two jesters have been mentioned above in the section of *The Kapil Sharma Show* while comparing similarity in between of *The Kapil Sharma Show* and *AIB Knockout* but still require in this section as well (See Page 73). Alia Bhat was present there as a spectator and was roasted like Deepika Padukone.

GURSIMRAN KHAMBA roasting RAJEEV MASAND: Seriously Masand, stop calling yourself a journalist. Every time you call yourself a journalist, ISIS beheads a real one. Alia, in the front row, has no idea, what the fuck ISIS is?”³³⁴

ROHAN JOSHI roasting KARAN JOHAR, “Karan your filmography right, let me do this, Kuch Kuch Hota Hai, Kal Ho Na Ho, Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gum, Kabhi Alvida Na Kehna, Dude, you are so obsessed with the letter ‘K,’ You probably Snot Potassium. Alia, don’t even try.”³³⁵

GURSIMRAN KHAMBA: “Abish Mathew is so catholic once he is done masturbating, it takes three days for his dick to resurrect.”³³⁶

ROHAN JOSHI: “Abish Mathew is such a virgin that in five days, he is going to give birth to Jesus. Unfortunately, Abish Mathew is also so ugly, that Jesus doesn’t love him, but he just wants to be friends.”³³⁷

³³¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3YizWAMYcls> at 9:45.

³³² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3YizWAMYcls> at 9:45.

³³³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3YizWAMYcls> at 21:24.

³³⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3YizWAMYcls> at 19:20.

³³⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3YizWAMYcls> at 24:47.

³³⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3YizWAMYcls> at 20:00.

³³⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3YizWAMYcls> at 26:26.

ADITI MITTAL: “Abish if a girl has sex with you, she becomes a virgin again. You are literally a hymen repairman.”³³⁸

KARAN JOHAR: “She is only here because we needed one girl on the panel so that Ranveer Singh has someone to jerk off to.”³³⁹

ABHISH MATHEW: “Aditi Mittal is one of the top comics in the country... oh, wait I’m sorry I got the wrong, Aditi Mittal has been on top of most of the comics in the country.”³⁴⁰

KARAN JOHAR: “What a great night! Ranveer Singh, Arjun Kapoor, me, you get three stars for 4000 bucks. Rajeev Masand usually charges five lakhs for that. Don’t laugh Rajeev; I have the receipt.”

Performance and / versus Law

The show created a huge sensation on social media including mainstream media. It went viral instantly, and people started discussing it on social media. There were mixed views about the performance. On 2 February 2015, the twitter handle of the group tweeted, “News sources have informed us that the *AIB Knockout* will be subjected to some manner of official inquiry. At this point, we have no further details, but when we do, we’ll keep you in the loop.” Next day the video was deleted from the official YouTube channel of AIB. Tanmay Bhat told me, “After the show, we had sixteen FIR against us.”³⁴¹ The controversial show has two sides to the story. It was loved by English speaking urban elite youth but offended a section of feminists, law professors, lawyers and social activists.

On 10 February, Bombay High Court held hearing on the PIL filed by a law professor, Sharmila Ghuge,³⁴² against the YouTube performance. The PIL was registered ‘Under Article 226 of the Constitution of India for taking suitable Action for maintaining Public Dignity,

³³⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3YizWAMYcls> at 34:00.

³³⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3YizWAMYcls> at 32:48.

³⁴⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3YizWAMYcls> at 31:00

³⁴¹ Interview was taken at the office of AIB in Mumbai on 27 October 2017.

³⁴² Sharmila Ghuge holds a doctorate in law and works as a full time faculty in ‘Jitendra Chauhan College of Law’ , Ville Parle (West), Mumbai.

Order and taking action against the Culprits in accordance with law.”³⁴³ On 10 February 2015, The Hindu reported,

The petitioner, a law professor, has sought guidelines for a screening mechanism to keep a check on obscene and vulgar videos uploaded on YouTube.³⁴⁴ According to the PIL, “the film stars have made a deliberate attempt to lower the dignity of women by showing their insensitive attitude towards the most heinous crime of rape by passing several jokes on rape and gang rape enjoying the flavour of humour for the most unfortunate act any women can ever face in her life. Not only this, cracking jokes on gays, race, rape, Ebola and making homophobic jokes is an absolute insult not only to women but all the individuals.”³⁴⁵

The law professor writes, “the video of the show after been uploaded on YouTube, has attracted more than 10 million viewers in just a span of three days.”³⁴⁶ The court said, “only those who are defamed can file a defamation suit,” the petitioner argued, “This has crossed the limits of morality. The language used is such that it crosses the limit of decency. It is obscene to the core, and it particularly affects the minds of the youths.”³⁴⁷ The PIL advocates, “The way to express something or to say something should be a decent one. It should not affect the morality of the society adversely.”³⁴⁸ The PIL argues, “the show did not even spare the respected Prime Minister, Mr Narendra Modi from the dirty jokes.... This act showing disrespect to the Prime Minister of the nation under the banner of comedy should not be tolerated and accepted as humour.”³⁴⁹

Advocate Ms Abha Singh filled another complaint in Bombay court on behalf of Social Activist, Santosh Daundkar. The petition called performance, “pre-scripted, pornographic, vulgar and obscene programme.”³⁵⁰ On 12 February 2015, The *Hindu* reported, “Metropolitan Magistrate’s Court, Girgaon ordered the Tardeo Station to file an FIR against 14 people including all the performers and president and secretary of National Sports Club of India (for giving the stadium to held performance) under the IPC Section of 294 and 509 (for speaking vulgar, obscene and pornographic words before a large number of women audience in a public

³⁴³ https://www.scribd.com/doc/255231825/Anti-AIB-draft-PIL#fullscreen&from_embed

³⁴⁴ <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/aib-controversy-bombay-high-court-seeks-centres-say/article6878460.ece>

³⁴⁵ <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/aib-controversy-bombay-high-court-seeks-centres-say/article6878460.ece>

³⁴⁶ https://www.scribd.com/doc/255231825/Anti-AIB-draft-PIL#fullscreen&from_embed No. 6

³⁴⁷ <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/aib-controversy-bombay-high-court-seeks-centres-say/article6878460.ece>

³⁴⁸ https://www.scribd.com/doc/255231825/Anti-AIB-draft-PIL#fullscreen&from_embed No. 11

³⁴⁹ https://www.scribd.com/doc/255231825/Anti-AIB-draft-PIL#fullscreen&from_embed No. 17

³⁵⁰ <https://www.firstpost.com/living/aib-roast-police-register-fir-against-actors-complainants-lawyer-says-show-was-pre-scripted-2096563.html>

event), Section 67 and 66A of the Information Technology Act, 2000 (For having putting up obscene, pornographic and vulgar show on the internet) and others.”³⁵¹ In an interview, Ms Abha said that even, “spectators, who were paid to laugh on these vulgar jokes should come under the inquiry of FIR”³⁵² Before all this an FIR was already filled in the Bund Garden police station in Pune against AIB Roast.³⁵³

Professor Sharmila Ghuge and Advocate Abha Singh (on behalf of Santosh Daundkar) ignored all the warnings, the concept of ‘insult comedy.’ Oppositely took all the insults, words, gestures in its most cruel meaning, i.e., relating ‘fuck’ (sexual intercourse) to rape. The performer did not perform any rape joke according to my research. However, rape joke exists, and American comedian George Carlin used to joke on rape. While performing ‘rape joke’ for his ‘*Doin’ It Again*’ show in 1990, he says, “I believe you can joke about anything, it all depends on how you construct the joke? What the exaggeration is? Because every joke needs, one exaggeration.”³⁵⁴

AIB filed an intervention application against the PIL of Ms. Sharmila Ghuge, proposing, “We (AIB) oppose this petition. It was a humorous show for a private audience. None of the private audience found it offensive. The language was excessive, but within the bounds of humour”³⁵⁵ They (petitioner) also ignored the loud & clear announcement of the host in the beginning of the YouTube performance, “Those easily offended and even really difficultly offended, you should leave right now!”³⁵⁶ They watched it till the end and researched all the billingsgate in the performance, heard them, again and again, and in the last transcribed it like me. Later both argued that they could not even watch it till the end because of its offensiveness. Ms Sharmila Ghuge also informed in her petition that “A written complaint has been filed (against the performance) on 2nd February 2015 by Mr Akhilesh Tiwari, President of Brahmin Ekta Seva Sanstha, Mumbai.”³⁵⁷

³⁵¹ <http://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/mumbai/mumbai-court-orders-fir-against-aib-roast-show-bollywood-stars/article6887082.ece>

³⁵² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dwgOQwD4NAo>

³⁵³ <http://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/mumbai/mumbai-court-orders-fir-against-aib-roast-show-bollywood-stars/article6887082.ece>

³⁵⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fwMukKqx-Os> at 1:05

³⁵⁵ <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/aib-controversy-bombay-high-court-seeks-centres-say/article6878460.ece>

³⁵⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3YizWAMYcls> at 2:34.

³⁵⁷ https://www.scribd.com/doc/255231825/Anti-AIB-draft-PIL#fullscreen&from_embed No. 18

Freedom of Speech in context of comic performance

The basic argument of the complainant intended to ban the roast and punish all the performers because they are ‘ruining the clean image of Indian culture’. An important point made was that ‘the show did not even spare the respected Prime Minister’ and ‘by showing their insensitive attitude towards the most heinous crime of rape by passing several jokes on rape and gang rape.’ makes it important to discuss the law in the context of performance. It makes important to discuss ‘Article 19 (1) (A) of the constitution of India 1949’ in context of the comic performance. According to the Oxford dictionary, “The power or right to express one’s opinions without censorship, restraint or legal penalty is known as Freedom of Speech.”³⁵⁸

Article 19 (1) (A) is a fundamental right given by the Indian constitution, “All citizens shall have the right to freedom of speech and expression.” The constitution also imposes reasonable restrictions under the ‘Article 19 (2) “in the interests of the sovereignty and integrity of India, the security of the State, friendly relations with foreign States, public order, decency or morality or in relation to contempt of court, defamation or incitement to an offence.”

In the context of Freedom of Speech, the reference of Professor Anand Pradhan³⁵⁹ is significant. He argues that the freedom is required, when, it is curtailed or denied. In that sense People are divided into the minority (having a view) and majority (having view). The right is for the minority not for the majority because the majority already has a majority (in view) on its side. It is for the one (minority) having a different opinion from others (majority). The ‘right’ is required so that the minority could not be forced by the majority to be part of them. Mostly majority having homogeneous opinion wants to shut up the minority to impose their authoritarian, autocratic and homogeneous view.’³⁶⁰ It happens in two ways: one, silencing minority on the argument that if the minority can subscribe their ‘right to freedom of speech and expression’ so the majority can subscribe their right by beating them up or by abusing them or by breaking their offices because they also have the same right as a citizen. In context of such incidents, Rohan Joshi said,

³⁵⁸ https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/freedom_of_speech

³⁵⁹ Dr. Anand Pradhan is Associate Professor of Feature Communication and Development Journalism. <http://www.iimc.nic.in/FacultyProfiles.aspx>

³⁶⁰ In a telephonic interview taken on 12 May 2018 at 8 o’clock.

Are we scared? Of course! Do we sometimes make a decision based on commercial interest? (we know that we cannot say this because our office will be broken) Of course! Because at the end of the day we have salaries to pay. We have bills to pay. We have our lives to live. We understand that we don't exist in a vacuum, but within that, we still try to be as truthful to what we want to say. You are asking me, honestly yeah; It's scary what happened to Gauri. I am scared. Today I will think twice to make certain kind of jokes but not tomorrow or day after tomorrow. You cannot be permanently afraid beyond a point.³⁶¹

Secondly, it is most common and relatable in this case by feeling offended, so they file FIRs against the individual or minority. In this method, they do not subscribe to 'the right to freedom of speech and expression, Article 19 (1) (A) but mostly uses Article 19 (2) to force their opinion on the minority. In that case, the minority forced themselves to self-censor their views. With the purpose of not offending majority, which establishes that there is no 'freedom of speech.' Tanmay Bhat asserts:

Basically, since we are popular, we cannot say what we want to. This was not always the case. The law is the punishment here in India. Therefore, Indian celebrities can't take any political stand. Once you reach a certain reach certain popularity, you cannot have a political opinion in this country without getting harassed for it. It is very simple. Now, we are immensely popular but if anything comes out of our mouth, few people, out there somewhere, may complain or fill an FIR against us. So, it's very difficult, being a popular artist, which is why Amir Khan cannot speak. Shahrukh Khan cannot give any political statement. George Clooney (Hollywood actor) gave a speech against Iraq war on the stage of Oscar awards. This will never happen in India. The Indian public, after looking up at their celebrities, thinks that these people don't have a right to have an opinion. And the law is the punishment. Anyone registering any complains anywhere, and the policeman thinks, 'if I register the complaint, the Movie star will be coming to my police station. I will be taking pictures with him and will remain in the limelight as well because Media will be following it.' So that is the case with us. We still have cases. People filed cases against us now and then. It is forced self-censorship. We have censored ourselves because who is going to bother fighting cases your whole life. So, after the roast, we had sixteen FIRs against us.³⁶²

Still 'Free speech' cannot be the sole justification, Anand Pradhan says, "usually liberal falls in the trap of 'Free Speech' advocating 'absolute free speech' without any restrictions. In that case, they usually avoid 'hate speech' because that is also part of the 'Free Speech'."³⁶³ The restrictions are required, but they should be to democratise society. It should be to save human

³⁶¹ Interview was taken at a studio in East Andheri, Mumbai on 6 September 2017

³⁶² Interview was taken at the office of AIB in Mumbai on 27 October 2017.

³⁶³ In a telephonic interview taken on 12 May 2018 at 8 o'clock.

morals not for ‘moral policing.’³⁶⁴ Getting offended by ‘hate speech’ is different from getting offended by a silly joke that warns in its beginning that “Those easily offended and even really difficultly offended, you should leave right now!”³⁶⁵

AIB- Advocating Free Speech:

I hope, people stop getting so offended, about things that don’t matter, that’s the most important thing. There are better things to get angry about. Then the fact is that some people consensually get together and consensually abuse each-other in an environment and context, where everybody was present and understood that the whole thing happened in the spirit of fun. And I don’t think you should be the one to decide, if that what happened, I don’t think any external force should decide, whether it is legitimate or not. For me, as an artist, to do that is the problem, either it is *the roast* or *The Vagina Monologues* or whatever gets stopped for these reasons. So overall argument about all those things that there should be no third party or arbiter who gets to tell you that and then harass you on the grounds of that (Rohan Joshi from AIB).³⁶⁶

On 8 May 2018, The Indian Express published a report that main roast of the performance, “actor Ranveer Singh and Arjun Kapoor have approached the Bombay High Court seeking quashing of the FIRs lodged against them in Mumbai and Pune in 2015.”³⁶⁷ The petition states, “The complaint and FIR have been initiated wrongfully, mischievously, with ulterior motives, and in complete violation of the spirit of Freedom of Speech.... The material alleged as obscene by the complainant does not arouse any lustful, impure or lecherous (thoughts). Merely because slang and vulgar language are used, does not become obscene...”³⁶⁸ In an interview for India Today, on 20 February 2015, supreme court lawyer, Karuna Nundy (lawyer of ‘AIB) said in the context of *AIB Knockout*, “Criminal ‘obscenity’ is restricted to sexual displays with the intent to titillate, not vulgarity with intent to make people laugh.”³⁶⁹ She says, “Roasts are a new thing in India, it is comedy in which people make insulting jokes about each other- the AIB Roast does not perpetuate discrimination, it actually minimizes it.”³⁷⁰

³⁶⁴ Moral Police is a blanket term used to refer right wing vigilante groups, which acts to enforce a code of morality in India

³⁶⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3YizWAMYcls> at 2:34.

³⁶⁶ Interview was taken at a studio in East Andheri, Mumbai on 6 September 2017

³⁶⁷ <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/firs-against-aib-knockout-event-ranveer-singh-and-arjun-kapoor-move-hc-plead-freedom-of-speech-5068188/>

³⁶⁸ <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/firs-against-aib-knockout-event-ranveer-singh-and-arjun-kapoor-move-hc-plead-freedom-of-speech-5068188/>

³⁶⁹ <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/society-the-arts/story/20150302-aib-lawyer-interview-karuna-nundy-free-speech-humour-817616-2015-02-20>

³⁷⁰ <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/society-the-arts/story/20150302-aib-lawyer-interview-karuna-nundy-free-speech-humour-817616-2015-02-20>

Why was the roast so outrageous? In a truly liberal country, the roast would not make the news like in America where there are five roasts every year. It never makes the news in the truly liberal country. India is not a liberal country which is why the reason was movie stars came to it because it was so exciting because it has never been done. Because the idea that someone will sit and make jokes about you on a public platform is rare, and hence it is exciting (Tanmay Bhat).³⁷¹

It was the journey of roast performance that was readily accepted by the spectators but became a controversy as it was uploaded on YouTube. This was an encounter between the performance of ‘special class’ (what AIB calls ‘private audience,’ See Page: 90) with the audience of *The Kapil Sharma Show* the audience of the status quo, the audience of the middle class. Tanmay Bhat compares Indian democracy vis-à-vis America to check its democratic institution. Though, according to me by putting America as his inspiration makes it more explicit that this was a performance for the elite class and it backfired when it was taken to the mass. After 2016, there are online spaces for the elite class in India, where they can easily consume such elite profanity (See Page: 151-2 and 155) but beyond those spaces, they still face censorship, FIRs and trolling.

Trollers:

In a video *Sexual Abusive Trolling of Women on Social Media* student activists Shehla Rashid Shora, actress Rajshree Deshpande, journalist Neha Dixit and student Ratna Priya Mishra from Ramjas College talked about how they are being trolled on social media in a high misogynist manner.³⁷² They accused the trollers of doing so. The troller is a term to define people, who work for IT cells of any political party. Today almost every mainstream political parties are running their IT cells. The IT cells work to create propaganda for their appointed party. According to a report published in Outlook on 10 December 2017 headlined, “BJP Govt Spent A Whopping Rs 3,755 Crore On Its Advertisements In 3.5 Years.”³⁷³

On social media, the trollers popularly known under the umbrella term ‘Bhaqts’ that include people having blind faith in right-wing Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). To silence the minority voices, they are notoriously known to give sadistic and misogynistic abuses and threatening women to rape them. The member of the censor board, Ashok Pandit (from BJP) had tweeted after the roast that, “Johar could have easily shown his position while performing sex to his mom at home instead of making it public. #AIB Porn

³⁷¹ Interview was taken at the office of AIB in Mumbai on 27 October 2017.

³⁷² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bxTgaiEDk1c>

³⁷³ <https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/bjp-govt-spent-a-whopping-rs-3755-crore-on-its-advertisements-in-35-years-says-c/305370>

Show.”³⁷⁴ *AIB Knockout* definitely challenges the patriarchal misogynist right-wing. Moreover, the proof of this is the sixteen FIRs against the troupe.

The Audience of Insult Comedy

As I said at the beginning of the chapter no society is homogeneous. India has a population of 1.3 billion people. According to a Forbes report 2015 “The number of millionaires in India went up by over 400% during the 2000 to 2005 period, but total wealth in the country only went up by 211% during same period.”³⁷⁵ World bank report 2016 writes, “India is by far the country with the largest number of people living under the international US\$1.90-a-day poverty line, 224 million, more than 2.5 times as many as the 86 million in Nigeria, which has the second largest population of the poor worldwide. Thus, Sub-Saharan Africa has one in two of the poor worldwide, while India accounts for one in three (World Bank Report, 2016:40.”³⁷⁶ According to Hurun Global Rich List 2018, India has 131, the third highest number of billionaires in the world, “India, claiming back its third place after adding 31 billionaires.”³⁷⁷ This 211% is the growth of these millionaires those went up by 400% and 131 billionaires of the world.

It shows, how ‘up and down’ we are at the same time. This difference can be seen in the life of the people as well through their culture, lifestyle, language and the choice of entertainment. Rohan Joshi told me in a personal interview, “Look at four of us ‘Khamba, Rohan, Tanmay, and Ashish.’ We are four, upper class, privileged, Indian boys. We have lived a very privileged life. Moreover, I think it would be very presumptuous of us to say that we speak for all India. That is not we named ourselves *All India Bakchod* at all. The name did not come from a political slate. *All India Bakchod* is supposed to be a parody of All India Radio (See Page 49).”³⁷⁸ It is true that their voice, their comedy, and their event was for a particular class only. Mainly that class went to watch the show with a ticket ranging Rs. 4000 on 20 December 2014.

There is no doubt that they celebrated it, and they bought the ticket of 4000 rupees for a comic performance in a county that has the highest amount of poor people living in poverty,

³⁷⁴ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/entertainment/hindi/bollywood/news/AIB-Knockout-Outrage-over-Censor-Board-members-inflammatory-tweet/articleshow/46106992.cms>

³⁷⁵ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ranisingh/2015/11/08/new-study-finds-a-better-way-to-measure-the-worlds-richest-countries/#1595fe85075c>

³⁷⁶ Poverty and shared Prosperity 2016, Taking on inequality: 40

³⁷⁷ <http://www.hurun.net/EN/Article/Details?num=2B1B8F33F9C0>

³⁷⁸ Interview was taken at a studio in East Andheri, Mumbai on 6 September 2017

but at the same time, has 400% growth in its millionaires after 2000 to 2015. The show was held in this period only, on 20 December 2014 and because Mumbai is the economic capital of India and most of the rich people live there. Hence the performance represents the culture, language, and class and most important aspirations of those people, who could buy the ticket. The people who could embrace it, in its ephemerality. However, I do not see it as if it did only represent the culture of millionaires and billionaires because at the same time it was performed in the 21st century under the emergence of the internet. After social media, there have been many changes. So, a ticket for 4000 is not much higher to an English speaking, upper middle class, and the politically conscious audience who wants to watch such insult comedies for being a witness of the change (right or wrong). They are attracted to such shows because they represent something novel and enhances cultural capital.

There is the use of abusive language, insulting words as profanities in *AIB Knockout* but their use of such slangs is limited to create humour? By insulting someone with their consent. The basic form of such humour ‘insult comedy’ is that one person will insult the roast and roast feels offended or insulted. Either the comedian insulting roast is funny, or the roast felt insulted makes spectators laugh because it gives them pleasure. Now this taking pleasure in someone’s insult, of course, seems a regressive idea. So not only the performers who are insulting or insulted are responsible for such humour but the whole system involved in it, i.e., audience, organisers, producers, and performers. However, here I do not propose that such performances should be stopped by throwing performers into jail. That is a more regressive act than the performance in itself. So my view, in this case, inspired from comic performer Varun Grover that a joke works like science. It gives pleasure to everyone when you question power on the stage. One can create humour by abusing some poor guy on the stage also like a beggar, an old lady, a menstruating woman, Dalit, and Muslims. Then the possibilities are that the person understanding such humour very well as regressive can also laugh at it because it works like science. *AIB Knockout* does the same thing in English, what Kapil Sharma does in Hindi. However, I do not propose that *AIB Knockout* represents Indian society or its patriarchal establishment. Though they do represent upper-class millennials, who consider themselves elite to show their critical thinking and advocate for free speech without knowing the repercussions of it in a state that is majorly casteist, war mongering, religiously divided and feudal in its behavior and can change free speech into hate speech against the oppressed-divided into different sections.

In an economic(social) system like ours with such a vast difference among individuals, such performances symbolise the character of the society and its economy as well. They celebrate feudal attitude in a colonial performance (roast). It is a kind of dependency on new-colonial powers. The change of economic policies in early 1990 in India were implemented under the pressure of International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank and America. I insist that under that economic policy of Liberalisation, Privatisation, and Globalisation a development in the field of television and internet took place in the last thirty years. This change has led to these comic performers coming from the upper class and elite framework representing the same group of people for which those economic changes were brought to. They represent the liberal thinking, which signifies towards America for an ideal democracy. They live in India physically, but their mental stage is American. Here I propose that they see America and Europe in isolation. They ignore the process by which first world countries have evolved with their liberal democratic framework. Even their view of understanding Indian Society is borrowed from their mental stage (Americanisation). Therefore, they apply a form of ‘an American comedic art’³⁷⁹ of first world countries in a country like ours without understanding the repercussion of it. We have a different kind of system, social structure, culture and social relations and economy. The rich are getting richer and poor poorer. So the wealthy, liberal can perform their elite performances in a particular space a for themselves, but as they broadcast at it among the masses (that is still in the process of being democratic) backfires them with FIRs, PILs, and complaints.

Aisi Taisi Democracy

Aisi Taisi Democracy is in a sense the most political, an anti-establishment comic troupe that performs in and out of India. Varun Grover, Rahul Ram, and Sanjay Rajoura established the troupe in 2014.³⁸⁰ Varun says that their plan was to start performing before the 2014 elections, but they could not manage it because of lethargy- and no other reason.³⁸¹ The themes of their comedy are religious fundamentalism, State’s operation on its people, Government’s anti-people policies, media’s role as propaganda houses, Capitalism, urban upper middle class and power relations of family. They comment on society, economy, and politics. They generate

³⁷⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3YizWAMYcls>

³⁸⁰ I interviewed all the members of the troupe between July 2017 to November 2017.

³⁸¹ The interview was taken at Yash Raj Film Studi in Mumbai on 11 November 2017. Video:1 at 12:00

humor by their dialogues related to discrimination, exploitation, communal violence, authoritarian judgments of the court, the foolish behavior of the Indian prime minister. The group describes themselves as,

At the risk of sounding slightly immodest, *Aisi Taisi Democracy* is quite a unique show, not many people have been able to pull off music and comedy quite like us. Also, political satire is not something everyone can attempt, so that sets us apart. Also, the show and its cast format of three friends talking (to each other and the audience) sharing stories has worked in our favor (*Aisi Taisi Democracy*).³⁸²

Few times, they have also been stopped from performing in the middle of the performance. On 29 September 2016, The Quint published an article, '*Aisi Taisi Democracy is shut down in 'Sanskaari' Allahabad.*'

Trouble started when Varun began talking about how Indians are hypocrites when it comes to sex and about the lack of sex education. The mere mention of the three-letter word (sex) made a few members of the faculty uncomfortable, and they not only walked out of the show but also shut down the performer's mic and asked the *Aisi Taisi Democracy* team to leave (The Quint).³⁸³

Performers use abusive language in their performance but in a limited way. If it is required or essential for their joke, then they do not hesitate in using billingsgate. Varun Grover says that in this time, we need a comedy that questions the establishment. Rahul Ram is a singer and guitarist for the *Indian Ocean Band*; he plays songs in between the performance. Demonetization, India-Pak relationship, politicians, religious priests are the subject of their songs. Rahul makes people think, laugh and at the same time, show them the harsh reality of our societies. He plays the role of a poetic bridge in between two prose comedians Grover and Rajoura. The group suggests, "Our show is best experienced live. And video comes with its own kettle of fish (censorship, arrest warrants, etc.)."³⁸⁴ It shows the foresight of the group that they know where and what they are performing and this makes them also apart from *AIB Knockout* who are rebellious without a cause.

We are doing comedy for an entirely different purpose. We are not professional comedians. I am a musician by profession, Varun is a lyricist, scriptwriter and Sanjay Rajoura decided to take up comedy after nine years working in software industry. He used to tell stories about what happened in his corporate life and what happened to him as a 'Jat,' But his selection of stories was about the absurdities of the system. So, all three of us represent the 'Absurdities of our social and thus political and economic system (Rahul Ram).'³⁸⁵

³⁸² <https://insider.in/indian-ocean-aisi-taisi-democracy/article>

³⁸³ <https://www.thequint.com/entertainment/aisi-taisi-democracy-gets-shut-down-in-sanskaari-allahabad>

³⁸⁴ <https://insider.in/indian-ocean-aisi-taisi-democracy/article>

³⁸⁵ The interview was taken at the office of Indian Ocean in New Delhi on 15 July. Rec 1, 28:14

Rahul was friend with Sanjay Rajoura since 2006. However, he met Varun Grover on the eve of their first performance. Rahul was known to his work (songs, scripts). Rahul had also sing few songs written by Varun Grover before meeting him in person.³⁸⁶ In 2008, Rahul attended a live show of Sanjay Rajoura as a friend for courtesy; he said,

I went to Nehru place at a bar club-around six-seven comedians were performing there. All of them were speaking in English, Sanjay was the only one, who was speaking in Hindi. First, he spoke in Hindi, second, his content was excellent that made me, his fan. We went for drinks there I suggested to him that ‘there must be music in your show, like, you tell a joke and then a song, related to the subject of your joke. It is required for your comedy, in this way, it will be interesting.’ He was like, ‘ya ya ok,’ so, as usual, nothing happened after it.³⁸⁷

Howevee, this conversation was there in the sub-conscious of Rajoura. Meanwhile, Varun and Sanjay became friends in the process of performing as a stand-up comedian at different places in Mumbai and Delhi. Rahul says,

They felt good about finding each other, ‘Oh this man thinks the same as I do.’ All the shit of society we talk about. So, they discussed ‘Why should not we start something together?’ So, Varun suggested ‘Yes, but if some music element is added then it would be much better, and Sanjay said, Yes, Rahul once told me the same thing. So, let me ask him.’ Sanjay made me a call and asked me, ‘Sir, me and Varun Grover are thinking of doing something (*Aisi Taisi Democracy*), and you had suggested something like this before. Would you like to do this?’³⁸⁸

Rahul explains about all the process of managing to work together while being at different places in Mumbai and Delhi. They used to discuss their performance and songs by emails to bring changes in the script and songs. He says:

We used to mail each other and Varun used to edit, change and suggest the new lyrics, later sent us back after working on it. This change was happening continuously. So the first show we held at Epicentre Gurgaon. In an auditorium of 600, around 150 people were there, but I enjoyed it a lot. The audience also felt the same, and in June of that same year when it was held at Habitat centre, it was entirely sold out. Our show had become ‘successful.’³⁸⁹

Aisi Taisi Democracy performed around five to seven places in two months and had no idea of its future if they can continue it or not. However, as they spent time together, they started feeling a bonding. Rahul except being part of *Aisi Taisi Democracy* is popularly known as a

³⁸⁶ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z9UbiY_57Nk at 6:44

³⁸⁷ The interview was taken at the office of Indian Ocean in New Delhi on 15 July. Rec 1, 8:30

³⁸⁸ The interview was taken at the office of Indian Ocean in New Delhi on 15 July. Rec 1, 12:28

³⁸⁹ The interview was taken at the office of Indian Ocean in New Delhi on 15 July. Rec 1, 14:00

musician- singer of *Indian Ocean*, so by his personal experience, he raised an important issue regarding the difference in song and joke or music and comedy. He said,

The *Indian Ocean* can sing ‘Bande’— his trendy song from the film (Black Friday-2007)³⁹⁰- for twenty years, and whenever they do a concert everybody wants ‘Bande’. However, in the context of a joke, you cannot repeat the same joke. It is hilarious, it is not funny, but it is the truth. It is the reality that a joke, no matter how brilliantly told if you heard it once, you lose its comic element.³⁹¹

Though it can be used if you have used it in a live performance and it is not telecast or webcast yet. One can use the same joke in a different performance for a different audience, but the moment it is on the internet or television, it is gone for the performer. Now the performer cannot use the same joke ever in his live performance; if he does so, it is considered that his career is over. Contrary a singer is always expected to sing their most famous song repeatedly, and therefore the old singers of 1990s are still getting paid much higher amount than any comic performer of that time.

Rahul Ram explained that how the comedy is not just an art form or performance anymore but it is a real business. He discussed the role of the clubs and pubs in the business of comedy, he said,

The moment, they became confident about their success as showmen, they appointed the same manger ‘Dhrub’ of *Indian Ocean* to manage their troupe as well. A performer has no idea, in the beginning, what they will charge for their performance. So, the market determines the price of the performance. Later, when you are established as a group (or individual), ‘the market, your strategy, your PR and that is the role of the manager, he is your negotiator’ all these elements will determine how much you will get paid.³⁹²

He discussed three type of basic plans cash, percentage, and gate share, “At the beginning when the performer is not established, and new it is usual to choose the cash mode. However, if the troupe grows, they bargain for performing on the other mediums asking for 60-40 percent of all profits earned by tickets, where sixty in each hundred of all earning would go to performers. Some pubs provide beer at the price of the ticket as well. So there comes this method of Gate Share. Presume, *Aisi Taisi Democracy* performed somewhere let’s say ‘Canvas laugh club Mumbai,’ where two hundred people can come, and suppose the ticket costs six hundred and the show is sold out. How much? 120000 INR total. However, in this club, there is a scheme that a drink is also free with the ticket of 600 including some taxes, etc. Finally,

³⁹⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MjaWlyoRTP8> A famous song from the family.

³⁹¹ The interview was taken at the office of Indian Ocean in New Delhi on 15 July. Rec 1, 16:20

³⁹² The interview was taken at the office of Indian Ocean in New Delhi on 15 July. Rec 1, 17:00

they say this particular money, i.e., 80,000 is the cost of the card, and we give you half of the profit.”³⁹³

Performers and Performances of the Troupe

Rahul Ram:

Rahul Ram lost an eye at the age of eleven. He graduated from St. Stephen’s College, Delhi, Post graduated from IIT Kanpur and PhD in Environmental Toxicology from Cornell University (America). After completing his doctorate, he returned to and joined ‘Narmada Bachao Andolan’ as campaign coordinator. In 1993, went to jail also regarding movement. Soon, he started playing the guitar in the *Indian Ocean Band*. Rahul still performs as a singer in the band. About joining *Aisi Taisi Democracy*, he said, “I am acting in a film. not because I want to become a film actor. Just because I like doing stuff; I am not good at, e.g. I played the guitar for four years in Jagran, marriage ceremonies. I used to get 250 rupees for a night.”³⁹⁴ About himself, Rahul says,

Actually, I am an environmentalist. If one asks me, where I am on the spectrum? I am not a leftist; I am environmentalist politically. You can call me Green. So, when somebody says that ‘ISIS is the biggest threat to the world.’ I start laughing and replies, “You stupid, think first about ‘Global Warming,’ ISIS is nothing. Global warming is cancer, and you are crying on a pimple.”³⁹⁵

A song of the group sung by Rahul Ram became a massive success for the troupe (See next page). It was part of the YouTube performance webcast on 8 December 2015.³⁹⁶ The song is still relevant in the context of India- Pakistan relationship. Earlier I mentioned that Rahul intended to use music in the context of the joke to elaborate it more satirically.

The song was related to the following joke of Sanjay Rajoura about Indo-Pak relationship;

There would be no need to go to Pakistan in the recent future, we are ourselves going to transform into Pakistan. I feel angry when people from both countries say that ‘we are one’, No we are not, I find only one similarity, which is ugliness. We are equally corrupt and ugly

³⁹³ The interview was taken at the office of Indian Ocean in New Delhi on 15 July. Rec 1, 18:00

³⁹⁴ The interview was taken at the office of Indian Ocean in New Delhi on 15 July. Rec 1, 30:20

³⁹⁵ The interview was taken at the office of Indian Ocean in New Delhi on 15 July. Rec 1, 35:19

³⁹⁶ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MsvlXgYg2_A at 24:30

society. So, except the difference and respect them in place of fooling yourself Sanjay Rajoura.³⁹⁷

Singing Comedy: The song explains those violent, ugly, and corrupt similarities between both countries.

Mere Samne Wali Sarhad Pe, Kahte Hain Dushman Rahta Hai

Par Gaur Se Dekha, Jab Usko, Vo To Mere Jaisa Dikhta Hai -2

Waha Mulle YouTube Ban Karen, Yaha Pande Kissing Se Ghabrayen-2

Waha Blasphemy ka Fanda (noose) Hai, Yaha Gaye Se Koi Na Takraye

Yaha Aath Pahar Neta Mare, Waha Fauj ka Bambu Rahta Hai.

Mere Samane Wali Sarhad...

Bomb Girana Aasan Hai, Par Visa Milna Mushkil Hai

Democracy Sard Rahi Jailo Me Aur Sarkaro Me Katil Hain

Bas Do Family Ki Chadi Hai, Waha Bhutto Hain Yaha Gandhi Hain-2

Mere Samne Wali Sarha...

Ham 'me se Kaun Barda Dhakkan, Is Baat Ki Hum 'me Hod Rahi

Waha Imran Hai Container Me, Yaha Arvind Leta Road Pe Hi

Imran Bhi Hai Aur Arvind Bhi, Har Shakh Pe Ullu Rahta Hai

Mere Samne Wali Sarhad Pe Kahte Hain Dushman Rahta Hai

Par Gaur Se Dekha Jab Usko, Dono Me? Common Chutiyapa Bahta Hai.

³⁹⁷ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MsvlXgYg2_A at 22:35

Sanjay Rajoura:

Sanjay Rajoura, belong to Khandoi village of the district, Buland Shahar (Uttar Pradesh),³⁹⁸ A graduate of Delhi University, masters in computer application from Birla Institute of Technology, Mesra (Ranchi, Jharkhand), Sanjay worked as software engineer for nine years in the software industry in America. He quit his job and returned to India to try his luck in comedy. Here I am mentioning some of his jokes from his live performance performed on 2 March 2017 at Kamani Auditorium, New Delhi and one YouTube performance. His first joke was about The Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958.³⁹⁹ The act enables certain special powers to be conferred upon members of the armed forces in disturbed areas in the state of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura. Following is the transcription of his performance,

Satire of Rajoura

Let me tell you as ‘Jat’⁴⁰⁰ about my background that why do I feel, that most of the Indian men support AFSPA? Because they are used to living with it in their own house since their childhood, and that is their father. Because Father in Indian society has all the right to beat his child up anytime, he wants. Moreover, that is unchallenged; you cannot argue with him because he is your father and that is the reason Indian men demand for AFSPA.⁴⁰¹

Sanjay one side is commenting on the hegemonic and patriarchal relationship of Indian family viz comments on a draconian law AFSPA. He did not lose the narrative and fixed the next issue in the same narrative, i.e. online portal published an opinion column in May 2016, ‘*Why I am convinced that Modi’s degrees are fake.*’⁴⁰² Ultimately one subject ‘Entire Political Science’ mentioned in the degree of Indian Prime Minister was the fact to prove its fakeness because there is no subject with this name. Continue transcription of the same performance;

My father used to beat me like hell, and I failed once in a year during my graduation. Somebody told him about me failing. I was fucked up. He asked me to show the result. So,

³⁹⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mhel9Vlj5Gk> at 1:07.

³⁹⁹ [https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/applic/ihl/ihl-nat.nsf/0/23fb81e4ad23e2b3c1257682002cfdfd/\\$FILE/The%20Armed%20Forces%20\(Special%20Powers\)%20Act.pdf](https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/applic/ihl/ihl-nat.nsf/0/23fb81e4ad23e2b3c1257682002cfdfd/$FILE/The%20Armed%20Forces%20(Special%20Powers)%20Act.pdf)

⁴⁰⁰ Jat is agricultural based dominant caste in Northern India.

⁴⁰¹ The show was performed at Kaman Auditorium (New Delhi) on 2 March 2017. At 47:00

⁴⁰² <https://www.dailyo.in/politics/modi-fake-degree-row-aap-kejriwal-amit-shah-gujarat-university/story/1/10514.html>

I called some of my chichora (frivolous) friends in Shahdara to make a fake degree for me. It was so real that nobody could believe if it is fake. Besides, you know what, it was not in 'Entire Political Science'.⁴⁰³

In his comedy, Sanjay Rajoura not only touches daring subjects like Indian Democracy and India Army but put them down as normal as any other subject of the humour, i.e. following joke;

The fundamental problem with the Army is that when a man joins Army. They give him the gun and takes his brain out. Moreover, when this man is retired, they take back the gun also.⁴⁰⁴

His way of commenting on India or Indian democracy is not only political but indeed daring. By his one single joke, he comments on riots, mob lynching, capital punishment, demolitions of historical architectures by religious fundamentalists and ends the same joke again on Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi for being implicit in 2002 riots for killing thousands of Muslims in Gujrat as a chief minister of the state. Continue transcription of his performance,

India is a hilarious and entertaining country, I cannot live anywhere except India. There is no country like ours. If any person dies in any country in the world, police take his body for forensic. In India, Police takes meat from the fridge for the forensics and let body lie on the floor. Moreover, what a wicked sense of humour we have? We hanged 'Yakub Memon' on his birthday. The strange is that we made him cut the cake and wished him 'Happy Birthday.' How big a heart we have that we forgive and forget everything. We forgave 1984 (Punjab riots), we forgave 1992 (demolition of Babri Mosque) we even forgave Salman Khan, he killed people in 2002, not only him, but whoever killed people in 2002, we forgave everyone (Gujrat riots).⁴⁰⁵

Varun Grover:

Varun Grover, a graduate of Indian Institute of Technology (Banaras Hindu University), is national award winner lyricist (2016), scriptwriter and comedian. While editing this

⁴⁰³ The show was performed at Kaman Auditorium (New Delhi) on 2 March 2017. At 48:35

⁴⁰⁴ The show was performed at Kaman Auditorium (New Delhi) on 2 March 2017. At 49:53

⁴⁰⁵ The show was performed at Kaman Auditorium (New Delhi) on 2 March 2017. At 1:15:50

dissertation, his co-written Netflix show ‘Sacred Games’ is being celebrated hugely as a new step towards uncensored content. In 2005, he went to Mumbai and started working as a scriptwriter for ‘The Great Indian Comedy Show.’⁴⁰⁶ Varun Grover considers himself ‘anti-establishment comedian in process.’ He says, “Have you seen that 3D painting selling on footpaths. In which, you can see deferent pictures in one single painting, it requires just a little focus. Still, many cannot see that change in the picture. You just need to focus at a point, but the moment you see it, it starts feeling, how could not you see this before? So, it works like a switch that flips through experience. The person who is unable to see that, cannot see it even you make a thousand efforts for them. This is the process through which you understand that comedy is in itself or at least it should be anti-establishment.”⁴⁰⁷

I believe two things are essential: One what exactly you want to say? Second, what art-form you chose for that? If you chose comedy, then you must be funny. Then you are not expected to give some bold statement. Maybe you may get some applause for that because the bold statement was required at that time. But your medium is a comedy, so you are supposed to work on your comedy, on its craft. You need to understand, how to frame a joke? I have celerity about (my content and exaggeration) what I want to say. However, I still do not have confidence about my craft, if it is also that good. I think a mixture of these both things is essential. I feel I can work on that more, and I am working on it (Varun Grover).⁴⁰⁸

This continuous work on his art-form and essential element in his comedy make Varun Grover the most political, cleaver and at the same time easily understood comic performer of India. His background is from a Punjabi family of Uttar Pradesh. He still follows the Hindi of Awadh belt of North India. As a comic performer, neither he follows the aggression of Sanjay Rajoura, nor he directly goes into the conclusion. Sanjay uses a narrative to point out the issues, but Varun’s narrative in itself is the issue. If Sanjay is a satirist, then Varun is a storyteller. He takes real issues and fixes them into the story. First, he tells the fact then the punchline. He refers WhatsApp as a University, which produces research, based on rumours. Following is the transcription of his performance,

There is an entirely different chapter of cow-based rumours on WhatsApp. One among them is, ‘Rubbing cow’s back for four hours, solves the blood pressure problem’ but whose? Did you take the cow’s permission? Or just going and start rubbing her back? How can you do this to your mother? In recent, education minister of Rajasthan shared, ‘The cow is the only

⁴⁰⁶ <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1471319/reference>

⁴⁰⁷ The interview was taken at the Yash Raj Films Studio in Mumbai on 11 November 2017. Rec.,1 at 19:25

⁴⁰⁸ The interview was taken at the Yash Raj Films Studio in Mumbai on 11 November 2017. Rec.,1 at 26:25

creature that inhales oxygen and exhales the same.’ I want to know, if this is the case then why does she do this? Can you imagine, how boring this would be for oxygen? Then I don’t understand this discrimination between cow and buffalo; because Buffalo has done all the work. Mostly farmer uses buffalo dung in farming and milk for sweets and Ghee. It is our colour based racism that we give all the credit to the cow. Almost 90 per cent of milk, we use comes from Buffalo. So, buffalo does all the hard work, and cow takes all the benefits. So, what does buffalo becomes in this case? L. K. Advani!⁴⁰⁹

It was a comment on the relationship in between of Narendra Modi and Lal Krishna Advani. L.K. Advani is known to establish right-wing Bhartiya Janta Party but neither he could become Prime Minister of the country nor President. Varun compares L.K. Advani to buffalo and Narendra Modi to the cow. Here is another long story translated into English from his one performance of 2016. The story includes issues regarding National anthem, Adahar card and fake Indian culture. He does not tell jokes but a story which can make audience serious, tragic and force them to shriek with a belly laugh. Following all in this section are the transcriptions of his ten-minute-long performance.

Storytelling of Varun

Following is the transcription of his ten-minute- long performance.

So supreme court has made it compulsory to stand up for the national anthem. It is like making a rule to touch the feet of your mothers three times a day. It means, my relationship with someone will be defined by somebody else. However, I am happy that whole country is equally fucked now because before (national implementation) it was compulsory in Mumbai only. Though, the judgment is not the problem. The problem is the implementation because it is understood the police will implement the law but this time we took it in our hands that we will implement this. So, a few days back, a man was killed in Kerala for not standing up for the national anthem. The common understanding was to stand up for the nation, national flag, and national anthem but now, why am I standing? I am standing in fear of this man having lowest IQ around me somewhere. So, what is my nation now? My nation is not my nation anymore but this man because I am sure if I will not stand this man will come to beat me up. This has happened in Kerala and many other places.⁴¹⁰

⁴⁰⁹ The show was performed at Kaman Auditorium (New Delhi) on 2 March 2017. At 38:40

⁴¹⁰ The show was performed at Kaman Auditorium (New Delhi) on 2 March 2017. At 56:00

We have Mumbai Film Festival, where we watch four-five films in a day. National Anthem is played every time before the film. In the fourth or fifth time you start thinking, why am I doing this? I can still sit and watch the film or whatever because just after the anthem, I am going to watch *Sheela Ki Jawani* or worse than that. Then why do I have to tie to the motion? Still, okay fine, whatever their decision is, we are ready to accept to respect. So, I used to stand every single time. This was the fifth film of the day, but I stood, as I stood before every time. Anyhow, a woman sitting next to me did not. I looked at her with all my respect. As I turned to her, she stood up in fear.⁴¹¹

It is too difficult to watch a film at multiplexes. They show all the advertisements; I try to avoid by not watching television. After all these advertisements, an old lady comes on screen to ask to look around for a few seconds if there is any bomb? Now the first thing is why don't you ask that popcorn guy to do so? Second, why do I come here to watch a film or to find the bomb? Most importantly third, what will I do if I literally found a Bomb? Because the National Anthem is going to play next to it.⁴¹²

Then they show an anti-smoking campaign in two different languages. They tell you by introducing other people how bad smoking is. After that, the film starts. It is almost like trying to have sex with a really needy person. First, you go to her; you feel like now you are just going to have sex. However, as you reached she asked, did you take a bath? So, you went to take a bath. Then she asked to wear the dress of her choice of colour. You went to do so. Then she asked to wear her brand of deo. You went to wear that deo. Then she asked to bring '*Adhar Card*'.⁴¹³

I was thinking from my own perspective as a Punjabi, what is the core of this fake respect? There is this culture of fake respect among Punjabis. They always bow down to touch feet (to show their fake respect). I don't understand then how their belly is still not gone. You know why? The belly is there because their bowing down is not that deep from the waist; they just do it for tokenism. When you get married, you do it properly by bending from your waist to touch the feet, but slowly it changes, and bending minimises rapidly. '*Pairi Pauna*' changes into '*Lund Choona*' (touching feet changes into touching penis). So, my Tau Ji (uncle) developed some strange, mathematical rules to follow. He made a gap of three

⁴¹¹ The show was performed at Kaman Auditorium (New Delhi) on 2 March 2017. At 58:35

⁴¹² The show was performed at Kaman Auditorium (New Delhi) on 2 March 2017. At 1:00:00

⁴¹³ The show was performed at Kaman Auditorium (New Delhi) on 2 March 2017. At 1:01:15

to four hours in our mind to bow to him next. This time was not practised at the watch; it was the art of mind. For example, you must bow after getting up at dawn. Then if he disappears for the next three to four hours and meets in the afternoon, you are supposed to bow to him again. If by any chance, we meet in the evening while going to the grocery. I am supposed to bow to him again. Then while coming back if he meets then I should bow down again. So, it was very confusing. Once, I got up at midnight to drink water. I went towards the kitchen, and I saw that he was masturbating on *Punjab Kesri*. I started thinking if it is crossed for four hours. Then I saw, it is not free, what was I supposed to touch.⁴¹⁴

Recording and Dissemination of Performance:

On 2 March 2017, in middle of the performance, performer Sanjay Rajoura interrupted Varun Grover and pointed out one spectator to ask him, “Don’t record the show” Varun Grover also requested him to delete the performance from his phone.⁴¹⁵ Meanwhile, I recorded the entire (one-hour forty-minute-long) show (for the research purposes only). In the next performance on 30 August 2017, Varun Grover announced and made a joke to stop people from recording; he said, “I request you not to record the show for your own good not for ours only. In such a big auditorium it is hard to know if someone is recording. Still, I warn you not to record it because you know what; first they (Government) look for the IP address. Then they will take you. You are laughing right now, and we also have these cameras. So, all of us are going to the inside jail, together. Now there is no such big jail yet (to accommodate the whole audience). So be careful and look around yourself like that advertisement of searching bomb, if anyone is recording the show. Tell them that you do not want to go to jail.”⁴¹⁶

Why did performers come out of the performance to stop the recording? For the reason that they knew, if their performance would be YouTubized without editing, they will face a direct attack on the troupe in the form of legal cases, PIL, and complaints against them because their jokes are way more political than *AIB Knockout*. I asked Varun Grover that you people have no FIRs and another complaint against yourself because what you perform (on stage) is not available on YouTube, he replied, “This is absolutely a right assessment, and we are also aware of it. Though, we have decided that we are going to broadcast our performance. I mean, we are not in any illusion that we can continue with our performances without facing any trail.

⁴¹⁴ The show was performed at Kaman Auditorium (New Delhi) on 2 March 2017. At 1:03:40

⁴¹⁵ The show was performed at Kaman Auditorium (New Delhi) on 2 March 2017. At 1:17:46

⁴¹⁶ ⁴¹⁶ The show was performed at Sirifort Auditorium (New Delhi) on 30 August 2017. At 11:23

Although, the first thing (even to impose FIRs on us), in any case, is required watching our performance.”⁴¹⁷

The group believe that if you are indeed funny, then there are lesser chances to go to jail. According to Varun Grover, “by avoiding the use of billingsgate (deliberately used in light of my previous argument) in YouTube performance, you can easily get away with complaints because Indian people can accept subversive idea but not abusive language.”⁴¹⁸ The reason he gives is that established parameter of ‘Good and Bad’ is decided by the usage of abusive language. He said, “I don’t know about others, but I strongly believe that AIB could not face any censorship if they could erase the billingsgate from their YouTube performance. So, we will censor that billingsgate from our YouTube performance. By the way, we use very few billingsgate, and those are also gender neutral. Even though, we take them out in the process of editing. As a result, I don’t think; there was any (legal) case against us.”⁴¹⁹ This balance is delicate, and I will conclude it on a comment of Supreme Court lawyer Karuna Nundy. She said in a presentation, “Supreme court has made this extremely clear that discussion and advocacy are allowed, whether you are discussing violence (even if you according to me, advocating for violence) unless you are inciting violence.”⁴²⁰

Stereotype in Comedy

David Marc in his book *Comic Visions: Television Comedy and American Culture* write about stand-up comedy in the context of using vulgarity and their boldness, but one of his important aspects was to talk about stereotypes (1989:5-7). In his book, he indicates that comedian reinforces stereotypes either by ridiculing them or by celebrating them, i.e., caste, class, gender, look, region and others. It becomes more important in the context of present India, where ‘identity politics’ is a dominant issue. Latika —a spectator of *Aisi Taisi Democracy* — commented about the performer Sanjay Rajoura, “The guy himself kept talking about being jat (a dominant caste group) at least fifteen times on the stage and he is saying people should be this and that secular and democratic, first be one then ask other.”⁴²¹ When I told this to Sanjay, he replied, “She is right. Essentially, I used to perform a show ‘Jat in the mood

⁴¹⁷ The interview was taken at the Yash Raj Films Studio in Mumbai on 11 November 2017. Rec.,2 at 26:40

⁴¹⁸ The interview was taken at the Yash Raj Films Studio in Mumbai on 11 November 2017. Rec.,2 at 27:10

⁴¹⁹ The interview was taken at the Yash Raj Films Studio in Mumbai on 11 November 2017. Rec.,2 at 27:10

⁴²⁰ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=prS_NkGQ2ws at 10:15

⁴²¹ The show was performed at Siri Fort Auditorium (New Delhi) on 30 August 2017, Rec:Latika at 01:46

(2009)⁴²²to expose and highlight the false masochism and stupidities of Jat people. The performer should also evolve with the time, so I do not disagree with her.”⁴²³ Sanjay Rajoura considers that he reinforces social stereotypes but in the process, however, “I question those stereotypes as well” he says.

Comedy is not possible without stereotypes, but the question comes if one is only reinforcing stereotypes. I believe that I myself use stereotypes to counter far more significant issues than those stereotypes. One should not stop on stereotypes only; comedian should go beyond that (Varun Grover).⁴²⁴

I believe both the performers are right that comedians use stereotypes and it is easy for them to make people laugh by using stereotypes. Varun Grover discusses what he considers as a theory of a joke; a joke has two parts, setup, and punchline. Setup is information about any subject shared among people. If people share the common belief, culture, law, money, ritual, festival, then they have the same stereotypes. Therefore, it becomes easy for comedians to use those ‘stereotypes’ in their punches to create humour. It can be understood by a joke also.

SETUP: A person came out of his house and saw that an accident had happened nearby. Now, as usual, we Indian tend to know, what has happened? (It is not that we want to help the injured.) The guy reached the site. Nobody was allowing him to have a look at the injured because (of course) all the people gathering injured were Indians! So, true Indian person started thinking. After few minutes he screamed aloud, “*Abe Jo Mar Gaya, Mera Baap Tha, Jeete Ji To Dekh Nahi Paya, Marne Ke Baad To Dekh Lene Do*” (The dead is my dad, I could not meet him in my life at least let me see him on his death)

PUNCHLINE: People left the site, and there was this dog, died in the accident.

In the above joke ‘Indian’ is a stereotype but the joke uses a stereotype for the satire not to reinforce or strengthen the stereotype. In another way ‘Indian and True Indian’ is used to question that Indians do not care for their fellow citizen but they just want to know about the situation only (maybe to save themselves).

⁴²² <https://www.delhievents.com/2009/11/in-mood-comedy-hour-by-sanjay-rajoura.html>

⁴²³ The interview was taken at Sanjay Rajoura’s Delhi home on 17 August 2017. At 16:00

⁴²⁴ The interview was taken at the Yash Raj Films Studio in Mumbai on 11 November 2017. Rec.,2 at 01:55

Conclusion

The performance aspects of the performers who are the subjects of my research comprised this particular chapter. I take up from the performers as professional comedians and discuss their jokes, performing them, their impact and effect and try to find the reasons for their popularity. Though there are intersections, I have deliberately tried to keep the three examples and representations of three genres of comedies for description and entity separate.

First and foremost, I discuss *The Kapil Sharma Show* as conservative, even bordering on the regressive particularly in the social scenario of the family. It resonates with the typical patriarchal setup. Various social issues reveal the regressive qualities of the comedy through the gender aspect is one that takes on prominence with a very strong message that the men are superior and the women inferior. According to me, the show represents our social-political establishment, and patriarchy as an ideology is prevailing in the present structure. Secondly, Comedy as humour at any cost represents AIB knock out but does not fit for a satirist performance. In his book, *Hindi Vyangya Sahitya Aur Harishankar Parsai* Madalasa Vyas writes:

Humourist considers their success in just talking about absurd, evils, deformities prevalent in society, religion, and politics. Whereas a satirist, obscurely sees their success in vanishing all those absurdities. A satirist is aware of what is ethical or unethical whereas a humourist does not think of ethics. Humour relies on expression and satire is dependent on brainpower (1999:7).⁴²⁵

I consider *AIB Knockout* humourist and *Aisi Taisi Democracy*, satirist because Humourist cannot see the difference in morals and moral policing. As Vyas says that for a humourist only talking about absurdities is their success. So they can also find ethics as something which is related to moral policing. Nevertheless, the censorship debates around the *AIB Knockout* bring in other aspects bordering on the political. Therefore, I see it as a manifestation of neo-liberalism and specific performance genre which more violent than *The Kapil Sharma Show* has resonance with global trends, commodification and also liberalism which is neither refreshing nor can be posited as an alternative. These are two moments of a changing socio-cultural scenario; the patriarchal family trying to hold onto its social and economic hegemony and a new impulse of commodification where the conglomeration of the cultural industry viz

⁴²⁵ Dr. Madalasa Vyas, *Hindi vyangya sahitya aur Harishankar Parsai*, Vishwavidyalaya Prakashan, Varanasi, 1999.

film, television, live programme use each other for economic profit. The notion of cultural capital is another important aspect which comes with the debates around the *AIB Knockout*.

Of course, I find many anomalies in their jokes and find their language offensive. However, that feeling is limited to me as a spectator of that show, not as a researcher. As a researcher, I believe if the targeted woman enjoys the insult, I cannot advocate banning such insult but I would personally wish if they could do the same by the understanding situation of women living in rural India, in villages as farmers, workers and fighting for their rights with their husbands. Women are living in urban places as shopkeepers, fish sellers, domestic workers, students, journalists, professors, actress, and others. Then they could decide better, what should they perform? In case if they still want to perform the same joke, i.e. “Aditi Mittal is only here because we needed one girl on the panel so that Ranveer Singh has someone to jerk off to.”⁴²⁶ I don’t propose moral policing but wish for morals as researcher and satirist. The fact cannot be denied that most of the billingsgate is targeted at women. Least they can be sensitive about their choice of using them in a time when it is a part of dominant discourse and feminists in the world has fought and still fighting against it. I hope they will find some ‘Gender neutral billingsgate’ as they are enough there in quantities. So, my view is that the comedy and humour of *AIB Knockout* was just to make people laugh at any cost and for that they choose the format of ‘insult comedy.’ It was bold, daring but neither regressive or progressive. It was a comedy for the sake of comedy.

I stage my final example *Aisi Taisi Democracy* as the most progressive example, not merely as a subjective choice but how a programme which exists in the same domain as the other two can create a political comedy in the current climate in India. The political angle allows them a different status to their commercial show.

According to Oxford English Dictionary, Satire is, “The use of humour, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticise people’s stupidity or vices, particularly in the context of contemporary politics and other topical issues.”⁴²⁷ In his book, *The power of satire: Magic, Ritual, Art* (1960) Robert C. Elliott writes,

⁴²⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3YizWAMYcls> at 32:48.

⁴²⁷ <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/satire>

Satire, artistic form, chiefly literary and dramatic, in which human or individual vices, follies, abuses, or shortcomings are held up to censure by means of ridicule, derision, burlesque, irony, parody, caricature or other methods, sometimes with an intent to inspire social reform.⁴²⁸

The commonality among Vyas, Oxford and Elliott about satire is that they all propose the use of humour for a cause. Humour is used for satire. Satire is a higher stage than humour because as Vyas says, ‘a humourist considers their success in just talking about absurd’ however, ‘a satirist obscurely sees their success in vanishing all those absurdities.’ (1999:7) It is absolutely clear that satire is not about making people laugh at any cost and this fundamental difference make satirist different from a humorist. I consider *Aisi Taisi Democracy*, a troupe of satirists, whose concern is to create comedy while at the same time concerning about the society.

The culture of ‘Vyangya’ (satire) has been dominant in Hindi literature, and writers Harishankar Parsai (1924- 95) and Sri Lal Shukla (1925- 2011) are known for their pioneer work in Hindi ‘Vyangya’ literature. In performance ‘Kavi Sammelan’ is known for the art form. Varun Grover is inspired by many comic poets (Hasya Kavi), i.e. Ashok Chakradhar. *Aisi Taisi Democracy* has brought the same culture of subversion in their comedy. They use billingsgate but follow ethics as well. Varun Grover says, “We use billingsgate, but those are gender neutral.”⁴²⁹ Hence the satirists have managed to make a success of their comedy shows as much as the humorists in the same scenario, and that is critical to understand about the new clowns in town. Even a qualitative departure is marked and catches attention since the field is inundated with copies of humourists. That has become the easy way out and copies of success stories.

⁴²⁸ <https://www.britannica.com/art/satire>

⁴²⁹ The interview was taken at the Yash Raj Films Studio in Mumbai on 11 November 2017. Rec.,3

Chapter 3

New Possibilities in New Media for New Clowns

Comic performance in the twenty-first century after the neoliberal changes in India has emerged as a popular performance form and most importantly as a neoliberal market product to sell through various mediums: online, free on YouTube, paid on subscription-based streaming sites and Live, as a live performance (in pubs, malls and halls). With the changing time are emerging new performers, new styles and new techniques in the comic genre. There are anonymous numbers of YouTube channels creating comic content for its online viewership, i.e. *The Viral Fever*,⁴³⁰ *The Screen Patti*,⁴³¹ *East India Comedy*,⁴³² *BeingIndian*,⁴³³ *Random Chikibum*⁴³⁴ and others on YouTube. In the same manner, the other mushrooming performance is the dominance of individual stand-up comedians. There are uncountable numbers of stand-up comedians emerging every month. ‘Canvas Laughter Club’ published recently a list of hundred stand-up comedians.⁴³⁵ All of them, Karunesh Talwar,⁴³⁶ Abhishek Upmanyu,⁴³⁷ Manik Mahna,⁴³⁸ Sundeep Sharma,⁴³⁹ Abhijit Ganguly,⁴⁴⁰ and others are followed by lakhs of people. The changed concept of viewership indicates, an accurate number of hits of views on video by which the comedian or comedienne’s popularity is assessed. The paid subscribers of streaming sites and free subscribers of YouTube are the committed spectators of these comedians. This chapter has included the debates surrounding the changes happening in comedy in recent times. The chapter will specifically look upon the changes which happened in the second half of the present decade as a follow up of the previous chapter which gave a detailed analysis about the comic performance and performers who emerged before 2015.

⁴³⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/user/TheViralFeverVideos>

⁴³¹ https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCNyeSfUffmJXwA2_tmNG9A

⁴³² <https://www.youtube.com/user/EastIndiaComedy>

⁴³³ <https://www.youtube.com/user/BeingIndianchannel>

⁴³⁴ The group comprises comedians Rahul Subramanian and Varun Kumar, Suny Basu and Abhinay
<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC8RrHpqI7M97Lqyg9J6hSww>

⁴³⁵ <https://canvaslaughclub.com/index.php?route=information/comedians>

⁴³⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCNjUhpXnF1GcItcztJM-Ww>

⁴³⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/user/upmanyukaran>

⁴³⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/user/manikmahna>

⁴³⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/user/sundeep3march>

⁴⁴⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/user/agstandup>

In the first two chapters, I dealt with debates surrounding liveness and performance and the growing mediatization, what Auslander calls, ‘remediation’ representing one media into another, i.e., ‘televisual culture,’⁴⁴¹ This followed what I refer to as YouTubization and webcasting, tracing the changes into the televisual environment (televisual audience). I discussed how the development of new emerging mediums are changing the experience of watching the performance live and within an ‘Anti-septic’ family environment. Andy Lavender’s significant analytical insight in my context is that the digital version has to be regarded not only as an archive but a self-curated performance. Hence ‘YouTube Performances’ (Lavender, 2016: 23) opened up a new dimension in this context and helped me to develop the argument further.

In this chapter, I will deal primarily with questions of live audience who also watches the performances on YouTube to enjoy the finer nuances. Is it the fan-following which follows the performance from one media into another and where do new viewers come in and why? Live performance audiences are never as large as the media-watchers and followers. Close-ups, for example, are only possible in the virtual domain and require different gestural nuances both in terms of its recording and the performers who create these gestures. Then again, I will be going back to Lavender to divide performance into three different categories: ‘the body in performance, digitally archived; the body in performance, digitally distributed and the body performing itself’ (123). The chapter will end with the analysis of changes in what comedy as performance and product is facing and executing.

To understand relations of performance with technology and vice versa, in the hermeneutic tradition, I am going to discuss performances which I attended during the field work of my research and one YouTube Performance under three categories: live performance performed for the television audience, open mic performances and a YouTube performance (which I did not attend live). I will be writing about *The Great Indian Laughter Challenge* (2017) as the case study of ‘studio performance: performed live in a studio for the television audience. To look upon the new emerging possibilities and platforms for the new clowns, I will be discussing performances performed on stage by the beginners to attain fame by sharing it on YouTube (The Habitat: open mic). After highlighting the importance of it, I have included a YouTube performance of Kenny Sebastian and analysed his perspective.

⁴⁴¹ Auslander is quoting Bolter and Grushin and Macluhan here (2008:6).

The Great Indian Laughter Challenge: 2017

The great Indian Laughter Challenge Season- 4⁴⁴² was revived with season 5, from 30 September 2017, after nine years since 2008. The importance of the show has been discussed at length in the first chapter. The show provided a nationwide platform for stand-up comedy. The mentors and writers choose forty candidates in the auditions held all over India and called them to participate in the final round of audition to select twelve participants among them. In the performance of 1 September (telecast on 30 September, 1 October, 7 October and 8 October) mentors and judge selected the best fifteen candidates among forty candidates.⁴⁴³ On 3 October (telecast on 14 and 15 October 2017) all the fifteen candidates performed to be selected among the final twelve participants.⁴⁴⁴ In the televisual performance of 22 October, the show announced its final twelve contestants after eliminating three contestants (Shyam Rangeela, Vidushi Swaroop and Rajiv Goldy) among the fifteen.⁴⁴⁵ The selected candidates were Nitesh Shetty, Viswas, Naman Jain, Sumit Saurabh, Vignesh Pandey, Ajay Chauhan, Abhishek Walia, Gaurav Gupta, Parvinder Singh, Abhay Sharma, Mohammad Anas, and Shikha Singh.⁴⁴⁶ Most of the performers belonged to the upper caste, Hindus and male category. Amongst them, Abhay Sharma was blind, Mohammad Anas was half Muslim and half Hindu and only one comedienne Shikha Singh, which clearly shows the picture of women participation in the comic performance.

The show ‘Laughter Challenge’ is designed to select people by eliminating contestant one after another. The eliminated person from the show hardly receives any recognition while the winner receives accolades, prize money and fame. Though there are exceptions, i.e. Bharti Singh was the third runner-up in 2008 and the winner of this season ‘Abhishek Walia’ is still struggling in the pubs and auditorium circuit still waiting for assignments, and the fame promised to winners of the show. All twelve performers were divided amongst three mentors. The winner (Master of the Laughter) was going to be chosen among them in the twenty-fifth episode on the New Year’s Eve of 2018. The selection of the winner was based upon the process of retrenchment. In the first round, two performers among each team gone into ‘bottom

⁴⁴² <http://www.hotstar.com/tv/the-great-indian-laughter-series/458/unlimited-entertainment/1000008776>

⁴⁴³ <https://www.hotstar.com/tv/the-great-indian-laughter-challenge/15245/episodes/15073/9992>

⁴⁴⁴ <https://www.hotstar.com/tv/the-great-indian-laughter-challenge/15245/akshay-has-a-fan-moment/1000191605>

⁴⁴⁵ <https://www.hotstar.com/tv/the-great-indian-laughter-challenge/15245/tension-amid-laughter/1000192337> at 41:00

⁴⁴⁶ <https://www.hotstar.com/tv/the-great-indian-laughter-challenge/15245/tension-amid-laughter/1000192337> at 43:14

down' or 'danger zone.' Then all these six performers from three teams perform to save themselves, but three among them were thrown out of the show by choosing the best three performers among them before the next round. In this sequence, only five performers would be reaching the last show. In the twenty-fifth episode, telecast on 30 December 2017, Abhishek Walia became the winner of the show by winning a check of twenty-five Lakh rupees, and Nitish Shetty was the runner-up who was awarded a check of five Lakh rupees.⁴⁴⁷

On 1 October 2017, Prasun Gupta (friend of contestant Abhay Sharma, informed me that the next day (2 October) all the fifteen contestants would be rehearsing their performance on the actual set inside 'Yash Raj Films' Studio.⁴⁴⁸ Next day I reached there at 10 O'clock in the morning. Prasun came to receive me at the gate and asked me to wait for ten minutes because all the performers were attending a workshop under theatre director Rajit Kapur.⁴⁴⁹ Almost after ten minutes Prasun came back and took me to the green room of the performers on the second floor. I observed that Rajit Kapur was guiding the participant one by one on their pronunciation, pauses, body activities and facial expressions. I had lunch with the performers and made notes while talking to them. According to the performers, the first show was performed live on 1 September and telecast on 30 September 2017.⁴⁵⁰ Prasun told me about the audition round performances of 1 September that all the people present on the set including anchor, judge, mentors, and performers were acting as if it was 30 September. Production Assistant Ankur told me the reason, "To convert a day-long shoot into an hour-long performance takes minimum one week to two weeks in the process of editing."⁴⁵¹ On the set of the show, Writer and groomer (trainer) 'Rajiv Nigam'⁴⁵² shared his opinion about the changes that have come in the last ten years in the field of comedy, television, and technology. He said, "you can see for yourself, that there is no judge from the previous shows (winners of the previous seasons). All the mentors and judges are successful YouTube comedians. You realise today; TV is competing with internet not with the TRP anymore."⁴⁵³ YouTube comedians Zakir Khan,⁴⁵⁴

⁴⁴⁷ <https://www.hotstar.com/tv/the-great-indian-laughter-challenge/15245/who-will-be-the-laughter-king/1000200037> at 1:22:00

⁴⁴⁸ Yash Raj Films, is an Indian film production and distribution company.

⁴⁴⁹ Rajit Kapoor is an actor in Hindi Film Industry.

⁴⁵⁰ <https://www.hotstar.com/tv/the-great-indian-laughter-challenge/15245/laugh-along-with-akshay-kumar/1000190280> at 0:00:00

⁴⁵¹ Ankur works in television production houses. He was friend of Prasun and part was working as a part of production team of the show.

⁴⁵² Rajiv Nigam was the first runner up of the 'Laughter Challenge' in 2006.

⁴⁵³ The interview was taken on the set of *The Great Indian Laughter Challenge* at YRF Studio, Mumbai on 2 October 2017.

⁴⁵⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/user/zakirkhan208>

Mallika Dua,⁴⁵⁵ Husain Dalal,⁴⁵⁶ were the mentors, and actor Akshay Kumar was the judge of the show. Forbes's August 2017 report mentions Akshay Kumar as the tenth highest paid actor in the world.⁴⁵⁷ About this show, it provides a sense of the enormous business investments in television-comedy and is proof that comic shows can afford an actor paying him of \$35.5 million as the judge of the show. Neither channel nor actor revealed the payment he was paid, but Akshay himself mentioned several times in the performance that he was paid a huge amount. He as the judge of the show introduced its first televised episode, "Star Plus has given you a big reason to laugh with your family and me even getting paid for the same."⁴⁵⁸ A YouTube channel estimated amount of 3.5 crore rupees were paid to him for each episode.⁴⁵⁹

Around one o'clock in the afternoon, all the performers were asked to go to the set in their costume. One amongst the three studios on the ground floor, in the main building (near to cafeteria), natural lightproof studio number one, sealed with black paper and textile was allotted for the set of the 'Laughter Challenge Show'. Thousands of new modern stage lights were used to construct this set, which was made of wood, lights, plastic, mirrors and LED screens. Rajeev Nigam says, "These thousands of lights are clearly expressing that the centre of the focus is not a comedy but the set."⁴⁶⁰ A production team of 200 people was involved in managing the show. These people were also rehearsing their roles for the next day. Their work was to arrange properties of the performers, looking after the audience and helping directors, writers, groomers, judges, cinematographers, and others. It was their work not to let people come in and go out from the set, between performances. The end of rehearsals ended the working day.

The next day, on 3 October 2017, the day of the performance/ shoot, things were different from the day before. Everything was organised in a more disciplinary fashion, but it was the presence of spectators that was making performance spectacular. So, watching the same performances live second time on the stage, I realised one difference among comedians and categorised them by their comic piece; a comic piece written by a stand-up comedian and a comic piece written by his professional writer. The comedians who write their own content and

⁴⁵⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/user/mallikadua>

⁴⁵⁶ Husain Dalal is a Hindi film script writer.

⁴⁵⁷ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/natalierobehmed/2017/08/22/full-list-the-worlds-highest-paid-actors-and-actresses-2017/#30c96be83751>

⁴⁵⁸ <https://www.hotstar.com/tv/the-great-indian-laughter-challenge/15245/laugh-along-with-akshay-kumar/1000190280> at 4:05 to

⁴⁵⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AiYeALnbTNI>

⁴⁶⁰ The interview was taken on the set of *The Great Indian Laughter Challenge* at YRF Studio, Mumbai on 2 October 2017. Rec:1, 00:40

the comedians who perform on the content written by a professional writer are distinctly different and easy to identify. The channel hired professional writers, i.e., Gopal Dutt,⁴⁶¹ Varun,⁴⁶² Rajeev Nigam and others to write the comic content for the contestants of *Laughter Challenge*. I realised that the comic performers who wrote their own texts were more natural than the comic performers who were performing others' jokes or comic content. One then performs their true-life experiences and the other was performing a script written regardless if they identified with the jokes or humour and tried to use more comic techniques rather than spontaneity. I am going to mention that difference by focussing on two performances of that day that of Mohammad Anas and Rajiv Goldy. Mohammad Anas came from Delhi, his performance is important to mention here because it was a political satire and the most subversive performed on television ever by a contestant in *Laughter Challenge*. Mentor Zakir Khan said after his performance, "This was the writer's act. when a writer creates fire on the set after learning how to perform, the same fire you have created here."⁴⁶³

Following is the transcription of Mohammad Anas's performance on 3 October 2017.⁴⁶⁴

In the last act, you saw that I have a Hindu mother and a Muslim Father and I am their secular product. Now after that... It seems like yesterday when I lost my maternal uncle. So I asked my father to come to get our Passport ready Qunki *Kabhi Bhi Pardosi Mulk Bheja Ja Sakta Hai*, China! So, I reached Passport office, and Officer 'Kamal Kumar' (Kamal, Party symbol of ruling Right-Wing Party) looked at my application.

KAMAL KUMAR: Name, Mother's name, Father's name, Mother's Name? Your mother is normal Hindu but Father.... say something Beta? (Kamal Kumar making gesture of showing Muslim beard on face)

ME: Yes!

KAMAL KUMAR: So sad... Was there any compulsion due to circumstances with your mother?

ME: Yes, uncle. Basically, what happened is that my mother fell in love with my father.

⁴⁶¹ Gopal Dutt is an actor in Hindi Film Industry.

⁴⁶² Varun was a writer of the *Laughter Challenge* <https://www.hotstar.com/tv/the-great-indian-laughter-challenge/15245/akshay-has-a-fan-moment/1000191605> at 12:20 to 12:45

⁴⁶³ <https://www.hotstar.com/tv/the-great-indian-laughter-challenge/15245/akshay-has-a-fan-moment/1000191605> at 35:15 to 35:35

⁴⁶⁴ <https://www.hotstar.com/tv/the-great-indian-laughter-challenge/15245/akshay-has-a-fan-moment/1000191605> at 30:40 to 35:15

(I have heard that people are denied their visa, I was denied my passport. But I have an advantage: If not Hajj than Haridwar. *To Waha Par Mai Apne Mama Ki Asthiyan Dafna Hi Raha Tha*, I saw an angry Baba running towards me.)

BABA: What are you doing without a digger?

Me: Baba, what is your name?

BABA: Kamal Kumar.

ME: Haiin, everywhere Kamal! (A symbol of right-wing)

(Then Step by step Baba came to me, he took off my glasses, and after looking at my doe eyes he said,)

BABA: You, You are born to be an actor, a star. You must go to Mumbai.

(I found truth in his voice. Therefore, like every other successful person, I used all my money and came here with a ten rupee note. However, I did not sleep on footpaths because I don't want to be too successful. So, I was looking for a house. A house, in Mumbai, for me. So, Mr Khiladi (Akshay's nickname) finally, after trying 786 brokers, I found a house in 'Zarine Mahal Cooperative Housing Society'. Neither there was 'Zarine' (Beautiful girl), nor that was Mahal (Castle) nor any kind of cooperation. The chairman of that society was... now everybody cannot be named Kamal, (so his name was) Mohammad Kamal. *Mohammad Kamal Sahab Thode Boode The, Par Khile- Khile Rahate The, Aur Apni Kursi Par Jamkar Baithe Hue The*. So, the matter was all set).

MOHAMMAD KAMAL: Bahut Badiya, Bahut Badiya, you may enter the house after two weeks. Till then you will grow a beard as well and so the look. So, your name is this, and this is your mother... Dear your father is a normal Muslim, but your mother...

ME: Bass Uncle (That's it). Yes, my father was also forced because of circumstances. Because he also fell for my mother.

(Aside) Neither I get the house nor attention. However, I did not feel bad because I am used to being ignored since my childhood. As you know either we become popular on Eid or election. *Qunki Dekhiye Hum Do Cheezen Banane Me Na Barde Hi Mahir Hain: Biryani Aur Vote Bank*. Like every other story needs a good end so this is mine.

While performing comic-texts written by others, did the comedian tried it eluded this same level of spontaneity and issues of social experience? To mention performance in this category, I am going to describe Rajiv Goldy's performance. I choose them as my case studies as two contrasting examples, and Akshay Kumar in his banter mentioned Rajiv Goldy as a performer whose content could be written with more professional skills by the professional writers. This part is recorded in the telecast version. Akshay Kumar asked the writer-mentors to focus on the writing of the performance of Rajiv Goldy, he said, "Zakir Bhai, I will suggest you focus a little more on his writing than the other performers"⁴⁶⁵ Akshay Kumar gave this comment on the performance of Rajiv Goldy (38). His performance was about people becoming famous for creating some unique records in their lifetime.

Following is the transcription of Rajiv Goldy's performance.⁴⁶⁶

I also thought of making one record every year, but I failed my seventh standard and realised that in that situation your real parents are not real anymore. On the result day, Mummy does not ask, "oh my dear what should I cook? She asks, 'What did you cook?' I replied, 'Mummy, fail' My mom made her own record after that, fifteen slaps per minute. Everywhere Tha, Tha, Tha, it was feeling as if Diwali is being celebrated before its time. So the next day I was presented at the parent-teacher meeting. I deliberately use- 'I was presented' because even a criminal will not be humiliated in a court like I was humiliated by the teacher. My mummy clearly denied to attend the meeting and asked my father,

MUMMY: Go, he is your son.

PAPA: Did I bring him in the marriage ceremony?

(My mom one step ahead)

MUMMY: So I brought him in my dowry.

(Both started fighting. Almost after an hour, they realised that I am the one who failed.)

Now see, my bad luck, as I entered the classroom the most talented student in my class entered with his mother. There are few names, i.e., Akshay, Saksham, Daksh, Sucheta; they are born to top. If it is Rajiv then definitely he will fail. (He paused to remind the audience

⁴⁶⁵ <https://www.hotstar.com/tv/the-great-indian-laughter-challenge/15245/akshay-has-a-fan-moment/1000191605> at 27:00 to

⁴⁶⁶ <https://www.hotstar.com/tv/the-great-indian-laughter-challenge/15245/akshay-has-a-fan-moment/1000191605> at 21:15 to 26:28

that Akshay Kumar's birth name is Rajiv Bhatia) Akshay could not even wish madam; she already started,

MADAM: Akshay, very good! 98.3, very good! You did a great job.'

(I interrupted)

ME: Madam, my father is also here.

Madam: Shut up! So, what? Your father is here? You did not top but have failed. 'My father is also here' (repeating back). Akshay, my son I can give it in writing that you will definitely join IAS (Indian Administrative Services).

ME: (In curiosity) And Madam what about me?

MADAM: (In anger) Nothing! Look at his paper, seven marks in English, eight marks in Hindi, eleven in Science the highest marks are in Arts- twelve!

(My father was red with anger).

MY FATHER: But Madam, my child has done good in his exam.

MADAM: What good your child has done? He was asked to define and make a sentence of a Hindi idiom '*Muh Kala Hona*'. He has written, '*Khoob Holi Khelna*'. Not only this, look at the sentence (he wrote) '*Meri Maasi Ne Holi Wale Din Poore Mohalle Se Muh Kala Karvaya*' Is this the way? The next asked idiom was '*Naach Na Jaane Aangan Teda*' (His reply) '*Pahadi Dance*' (and sentence) '*Aksar Shimla Me Log, Naach Na Jaane Aangan Teda Karte Hain.*'

(My father had a doubt)

MY FATHER: Okay no problem Madam if he failed but he did fabulously well in the drawing.

MADAM: Sir, Aren't you ashamed. Look here, I asked your child to draw scenery.

MY FATHER: That is good.

MADAM: What good? Black Mountains, Black Water, Black Trees and Black Sky. What is this?

MY FATHER: (asked me) Dear, what is this?

ME: Papa this is a night scene.

MADAM: See! See! By the way, Can I ask you something, Sir? Did you and your wife find only us to send your night scene? Still fine, I agree if it is a night scene but at least make the moon, white.

MY FATHER: Reply dear.

ME: Papa It is the moonless night.

MADAM: See! Do you think he even has regrets? Get out!

Paaji, I just went out from there, and I took a promise myself that I would bring every topper out from the classroom. So, I became the PT teacher.

The difference among a written performance and not written performance is not always clear as it can be seen among both these performances. The first is directed at the right-wing project of 'Love Jihad' in present India. The performer, Mohammad Anas's parents, are a mixed couple, and he shared his experience of what he had to face because of having parents from two religions in contemporary India. He very smartly has used the right-wing symbol 'Kamal' (lotus) to not only question the right-wing sentiments in Hindu community, but he targeted the Muslim community as well. The name 'Kamal' is used to create humour, which has multiple meanings in-joke. The use of heteroglossia is very political and subversive in his content, which is opposite to the jokes of Rajiv Goldy. Rajiv Goldy's use of heteroglossia is a form of pervert comedy since the setup is about the school child (himself) having failed and then referring to the 'Night scene of his parents'; 'no moon night is entirely demeaning the whole set up. Neither his comedy was a sex comedy, nor he used abusive language in his comedy. So suddenly mentioning the 'night scene' to insult the child (Goldy) is a form of comedy verging on obscenity which was accepted as a genre of humour in the previous seasons of 'The Laughter Challenge' under the category of 'double meaning jokes.'

The moment of awkwardness and shame: "There is a very thin line between making people laugh and people laughing at you," Rajeev Nigam continues, "you are a comedian if you can make them laugh, but you remain a subject of humour if they start laughing at you."⁴⁶⁷

⁴⁶⁷ The interview was taken on the set of *The Great Indian Laughter Challenge* at YRF Studio, Mumbai on 2 October 2017. Rec:3, 2:30

The distinction I make between ‘laughing with’ and ‘laughing at’ refers to empathising with comedians who are making you laugh, and you develop empathy with him in this laughter vis-a-vis laughing at, which would mean that the comedian is demeaning himself to evoke a superiority complex in the audience whose laughter targets him. This resonates with Ridout’s elaboration on the laughter of shaming. To explain the effect of shame, Ridout quotes Silvan S. Tomkins’s work ‘Affect, Imagery, Consciousness, Volume 2, (1963:119)’,

Shame is an experience of the self by the self. At that moment when the self-feels ashamed, it is felt as a sickness within the self. Shame is the most reflexive of affects in that the phenomenological distinction between the subject and object of shame is lost. Why is shame so close to the experienced self? It is because of the self lives in the face, and within the face the self burns brightest in the eyes. Shame turns the attention of the self and others away from other objects to this most visible residence of self, increases its visibility and thereby generates the torment of self-consciousness. (2006:88)⁴⁶⁸

Hakim Singh was one among first forty performers selected for the last round of Mumbai Auditions.⁴⁶⁹ I met Hakim in Spanish Villa, Jogeshwari (West), on 27 August 2017, where all forty performers’ stay was arranged for the last round of audition (1 September 2017). Hakim is a farmer from Agra, Uttar Pradesh. He said, “I consider myself a comedian because my activities make my friends laughs. Therefore, after seeing an advertisement for auditions on television, I moved to Lucknow to participate in it. There I got selected for the final round and see I am here now.”⁴⁷⁰ Hakim, a thin, short man with a nasal voice, was thrilled at his selection. I brought up the issue of how the hosts often shamed people like him on stage and asked him how he felt being laughed at? He replied, “I am ready for anything they do because it is a laughter challenge. Insults are a basic need for comedy. So, I will insult them and also look forward to my insult as well. I do not care about it at all.”⁴⁷¹

On 2 October 2017 (the day of the dress rehearsal), Hakim met me inside the green room as I wished him for his selection among the last fifteen candidates, he told me that he was already eliminated and not selected for the finals. He told me that after getting eliminated he left Mumbai, but as he reached his home, the channel asked him to come back to the show. Hakim

⁴⁶⁸ Ridout, Nicholas. *Stage Fright, Animals, and Other Theatrical Problems*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006:88

Silvan, Tomkins. *Affects Imagery Consciousness: The complete Edition*. New York: Springer Publishing Company, 2008:359

<http://testrain.info/download/Silvan%20S.%20Tomkins%20PhD%20Affect%20Imagery%20Consciousness%20The%20Complete%20Edition%20v.%201%20-%20v.4%202008.pdf>

⁴⁶⁹ <https://www.hotstar.com/tv/the-great-indian-laughter-challenge/15245/laugh-along-with-akshay-kumar/1000190280> at 26:40 to 31:00

⁴⁷⁰ The interview was taken in Spanish Villa, Jogeshwari West, Mumbai on 21 August 2017. Rec, 00:00

⁴⁷¹ The interview was taken in Spanish Villa, Jogeshwari West, Mumbai on 21 August 2017. Rec, 1:45

told me that he does not know why he is being called back and what they were going to do with him. Incidentally, he will not be paid one single penny and even the cost of transport. It is a liability as he is neither a contestant of the show nor he can look after his crop and family as per the seasonal schedule. At the same time, the channel would be making a profit by shaming him on stage, and that is at his expense and free of cost. Next day, in the performance, a big box came on the stage and anchor Eli Avram invited Akshay Kumar to open the box to get his Diwali gift. Akshay after seeing Hakim asked, did you not go back? Hakim replied, I did, but I came back as your gift.⁴⁷²

Akshay made a new rule of the show. Mainly, there are two (silver and golden) bells on the height of 12 feet. If Akshay rings the silver bell it means he was happy with the performance and ringing golden bell means, the performance was superb, and the performer is out of danger zone in that round. It means he will be not eliminated in that particular round. However, the new rule was for the disastrous performance. If the judge Akshay Kumar finds a performance very poor, he will call Hakim Singh to perform on the stage. The same day, Akshay did not like the performance of Rajiv Goldy.⁴⁷³ Akshay asked Hakim to come on stage and perform. In response to it, Rajeev was hurt and insulted so to avoid the public shame; he returned Hakim from halfway to his stage entrance. In the telecast show not only, this part was edited but the whole concept of the third rule eliminated. Even the sequence of the performance was upside down. First Goldy came to perform then Akshay was introduced to his gift, Hakim Singh. However, in the live performance, it was again an insult comedy, which was related to the idea of making people laugh or letting people laugh (at You). If Hakim could perform to shame Goldy - on the stage, people would be laughing at Hakim though the effect of this laughter was to shame Goldy. Hence before the eyes of the onlooker, we saw a complex tale of exploitation, misogyny and violence through laughter unfolding.

Performers and Payment: The channel managed to accrue enough funds to pay the colossal amount to the judge Akshay Kumar. Despite the fact, contestants and performers were not paid any money except winning prizes. This is a constant woe of the actors and many a struggling actors, directors, scriptwriters and cinematographers, confessed that they received no payment, in the beginning, hoping that they would be awarded both fame and money by

⁴⁷² <https://www.hotstar.com/tv/the-great-indian-laughter-challenge/15245/akshay-has-a-fan-moment/1000191605> at 27:30

⁴⁷³ <https://www.hotstar.com/tv/the-great-indian-laughter-challenge/15245/akshay-has-a-fan-moment/1000191605> at 21:20

winning the show. On 26 May 2018, Nitesh Shetty was rejoicing that today he is being paid 70,000 rupees per live performance⁴⁷⁴ and he was paid, five lakh rupees for twenty days shoot for the dance performance *High Fever Dance Ka Naya Tevar*.⁴⁷⁵ On 27 June 2018, Abhishek Walia, the winner of the *Laughter Challenge* 2017 said, “At present, I get paid 60,000 rupees for a comedy club show and 1,00,000 rupees for a corporate show (if he gets booked by any organisation or individual).”⁴⁷⁶ In a talk show, writer-director, Anurag Kashyap said, I started writing stuff for free. The satellite television had just come in. They were doing daily soaps, but the problem with daily soaps was that they did not know how to generate so many episodes... Moreover, I was the only guy who could do that. I did not ask for credit, and I did not ask for money. So, all the daily soaps that started, starting with *Shanti* (1994)⁴⁷⁷ *Swabhiman* (1995)⁴⁷⁸ *Trikaal* (2001)⁴⁷⁹ I was part of everything, you would not see my name. My name first appeared on *Trikaal* (2001) as a kind of a dialogue writer at the end of it. So, I started doing that, and I became that guy, (people use to refer), ‘there’s that boy, he writes fast and does not ask for any money or credits.’ That is how it went on for more than a year and a half, and gradually, people start giving you money... Slowly, what happens is... I never asked for it; people started giving me money.”⁴⁸⁰

The whole film industry works on this model that you need to work for free to get paid later. Because if you get recognition, i.e., Anurag Kashyap, Kapil Sharma and Nitesh Shetty, you get unexpected fame and money. So, most of the people want to become that one lucky person. Therefore, all of them happily agree to this consensual exploitation (where they do not ask for payment in return for their work). Prasun Gupta (friend of the blind performer, Abhay Sharma) told me that their accommodation was at ‘Royal Palms colony’⁴⁸¹ in Goregaon East, a suburb of Mumbai (See Fig 3.1). He confirmed the Google image of the place that was next to the jungle.⁴⁸² According to the contestant Abhay, the place was not in decent condition, and they had no experience of staying in Mumbai. On 27 May 2018, Prasun Gupta said, “Still we had no complaint about the place, food and mosquitos but you cannot write comedy in a jungle,

⁴⁷⁴ Through WhatsApp communication on 26 May 2017 at 4:40 PM.

⁴⁷⁵ https://www.zee5.com/tvshows/details/high-fever%E2%80%A6dance-ka-naya-tevar/0-6-tvshow_762722810/high-fever-dance-ka-naya-tevar-episode-20-may-20-2018-full-episode/0-1-highfever%E2%80%A6dancekanay-season1_1147986774-episode_483103697

⁴⁷⁶ From the WhatsApp call interview on 27 June 2018 at 5:39 PM

⁴⁷⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=anOPdufe1EU>

⁴⁷⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ex9UaonDg2U>

⁴⁷⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Br6nrEVt4Fg>

⁴⁸⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iYeaVyc1Krc> at 4:35 – 5:20

⁴⁸¹ <https://goo.gl/maps/wRKmQd9ena22>

⁴⁸² <https://goo.gl/maps/wRKmQd9ena22>

you require people, society in action and other activities to write comedy. It was living in jungle experience.”⁴⁸³



Figure 3.1 Royal Palms colony on the outskirts of Mumbai

The accommodation was provided for all the forty constants from mid-August to December until the eliminated performers are reduced one by one. In this manner, there is no fixed date for how long a performer stays at the accommodation because it depends on their performance and selection to the next round. The performers were happy at least they are not asked to arrange their own stay or charged for it. They do not care about how much money or profit channel will make on their performance. It was enough to thrill them to see themselves on National Television and every single day getting thousands of new Facebook friend requests. While *The Great Indian Laughter Challenge* finished its run, amidst controversies, winner and losers, the question remains, where did the comedians come from and where did they go? One of the ways in and also way out remains the pub and café circuits. In search of new comedians, I explore an alternative space; Open Mic Performance.

⁴⁸³ Phonic interview was held on 27 June 2018 at 6:15 PM

Open Mic Performance

The development of stand-up comedy in the West was initiated by the street cafes, pubs, and comedy clubs. In the last few years of the emergence of new clowns in India, new spaces also developed with it, simultaneously. Among all, the most popular places are, ‘Canvas laughter club’ and ‘The the Habitat’. There are other spaces which are being included in the list, i.e., ‘Chull’ in Gurgaon,⁴⁸⁴ ‘Playground Comedy Studio’ in New Delhi,⁴⁸⁵ and others. Canvas Laughter Club has three clubs in India: Gurgaon, Noida, and Mumbai.⁴⁸⁶ The club organises workshops, theatre, open mic, stand-up comedy events. Amar Agrawal the owner of the ‘Canvas Laughter Club’ says, “I have been watching stand-up comedy since college (in abroad). When I came to India, I was baffled to know there are a billion people and no entertainment format beyond movies. If not for any other reason, I did it for myself.”⁴⁸⁷ In an interview in 2015, Amar Agrawal about the consumer of live stand-up comedy said;

Indian audience is still not willing to pay a ‘fair price’ for live entertainment. We started at Rs 500, and we were bleeding profusely. Under some of my advisors’ compulsion, we raised it to Rs 750, and our occupancy dropped from 80 to 16 per cent. We were forced to pull back the prices .⁴⁸⁸

It still costs 500 rupees, but it fluctuates if the performer is a star stand-up comedian. The Habitat works almost on the same method. Therefore, it was important to look at the club, the space that is the centre of comedy. On 26 September 2017, I attended an ‘open mic’ performance with the contestants of *The Great Indian Laughter Challenge* (2017) It costs 300 rupees to participate in open mic performance in 2018.

It is a fact that the rise of stand-up comedy implies *The Great Indian Laughter Challenge* (2005-08), but it is not limited to that anymore. The show has given performers, i.e., Kapil Sharma, Raju Srivastava, Sunil Pal, Bharti Singh and others, but the winner of the latest season ‘Abhishek Walia’ is not a star. Even after winning the show he continued performing in these little clubs, pubs.⁴⁸⁹⁴⁹⁰ About himself and the recent stand-up comedy, he says:

⁴⁸⁴ <https://in.bookmyshow.com/venue/chull-gurgaon/CHUL>

⁴⁸⁵ <https://in.bookmyshow.com/venue/playground-comedy-studio-new-delhi/PLCS>

⁴⁸⁶ <https://canvaslaughclub.com/>

⁴⁸⁷ <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/magazines/panache/i-was-naive-to-think-that-we-would-make-money-canvas-laugh-club-owner-amar-agrawal/articleshow/47922408.cms>

⁴⁸⁸ <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/magazines/panache/i-was-naive-to-think-that-we-would-make-money-canvas-laugh-club-owner-amar-agrawal/articleshow/47922408.cms>

⁴⁸⁹ <https://insider.in/abhishek-walia-live-feb25-2018/event>

⁴⁹⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iPcvhbrjeQs>

I started performing as a stand-up comedian since February 2017. In June 2017, I got selected for *The Great Indian Laughter Challenge*. I won the show in December 2017, but it brought me only fame for the television audience, that is not the audience of stand-up comedy. Today the pubs, clubs, hall and malls are the platform of stand-up comedy, and that has the spectators of stand-up comedy, they do not watch it at free of cost, they come with a priced ticket, and for them, I am no one. They do not know me. Therefore, now I am working for my YouTube performances because they determine my popularity as a stand-up comedian. The comedy on television is extinct; even I will say that is not even stand-up comedy. That is simply flirting with female anchor and witting around her and some sexy female judges. That is what they seek from a stand-up comedian on television. So even after winning the laughter challenge, I am struggling as a stand-up comedian.⁴⁹¹

According to Walia, Kapil Sharma was the last comic star of TV, and he (Walia) cannot become like him (Kapil) because now that kind of comedy (of Kapil Sharma) is not considered 'stand-up comedy'. There are types of comic performances, and stand-up comedy is direct communication and sharing experiences with your spectators for thirty to forty minutes. Television did not provide him with that chance.

It was just a coincidence that I won the show *The Great Indian Laughter Challenge* (2017) because I still consider myself, a newcomer. The basic process today is that any aspirant comedian performs open mic minimum for three to four years and then they get a chance to perform as a professional comic performer (Abhishek Walia).⁴⁹²

One contestant of *The Great Indian Laughter Challenge* called me to attend the 'open mic' at The Habitat, in Hotel Unicontinental. The performers wanted to have a feedback of their performance by participating in it. 'The Habitat' occupies two spaces in the hotel at first and fourth floor. I went to the fourth floor, where many people were standing in a queue to register to enter the hall. I did not register because I was asked to enter directly, so I did. It was a big black box able to accommodate three hundred spectators. I started looking for the performers in the audience, but soon I found that they were on the first floor. On the first floor, there was a tiny room which could hardly accommodate fifty people. The stage was built on the north, and the entry to the room was from the east gate. For the smokers, there was a gallery by the west door.

Europe and American experience inspired these pubs, clubs, and halls. It started in Europe in the 19th century and America in the 20th century, and India seems to have caught up with the trend (See Page 8). It is a part of being like them not to be ourselves. It is not about performance but the profit. Still, in context of Indian Stand -up comedy, the concept of the Open mic is an

⁴⁹¹ From the WhatsApp call interview on 27 June 2018 at 5:39 PM

⁴⁹² From the phonic interview on 27 June 2018 at 6:04 PM

emergent process. It is an event, in which musicians, poets, singers and mostly comedians participate. Today it has gained attention among the artist circles after some performers became famous through performing in these spaces, i.e., Ashish Shaqya, Tanmay Bhat of *AIB* and Sanjay Rajoura and Varun Grover of *Aisi Taisi Democracy*. They never participated in any television talent hunt show, i.e. *The Great Indian Laughter Challenge*. On 1 March 2017, star stand-up comedian Kunal Kamra, webcast his first comic performance ‘Patriotism & the Government’ on YouTube, which was performed at the stage of ‘The Habitat.’⁴⁹³ The one single video made him famous in a short span of time. In 2018, he is counted amongst the most celebrated stand-up comedians. Though there are very few stars in the flourishing comedy business like any other performing arts, it has inspired a number of aspirants, and these spaces open up various opportunities for those aspirants. It is similar to the film industry, where star actors are the celebrity, and the junior actors fight to remain in the struggle to be in the process of becoming a star. However, once you are a star you are economically established and then even if you are out of the race, you have earned enough money and fame, with which you can easily live your life

All these clubs, pub, and comedians are interdependent, but these spaces are built and multiplying day by day. For contemporary stand-up comedy, these spaces are equally important because it works for them as an alternative economic option. It has become for some their primary source of income. It is a lucrative business, and these clubs, pubs are in their workplace. The owner of the spaces makes a profit at the cost of the comedian. NDTV published an article mentioning a close source of *The Great Indian Laughter Challenge* (2017) that “The last few seasons were a big draw. But, this season didn’t kick off on a great note. The makers arrived at the decision after seeing the dismal TRPs (TV rating).”⁴⁹⁴ The events of open mic are gaining popularity amongst performers, and for that, performers do not require to face auditions and travel city to city to get selected so that they could perform someday on the stage. Now at least it is accessible for the performers of metro cities and the performers living nearby to these areas. They can go to participate in this event by investing an amount which is not beyond their limitations. At least they can quickly know about their capacity if they have the knack or they need to work on it for a time to get back on the stage. The website of The Habitat states, “It promotes collaboration between artists, performers, musicians, stands up comedians,

⁴⁹³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qBbpFGGakmo>

⁴⁹⁴ <https://www.ndtv.com/entertainment/akshay-kumars-the-great-indian-laughter-challenge-crew-shuffles-due-to-low-trps-1763700>

poets, theatrical Acts, technicians to create the most conducive environment for growth and learning along with mutually beneficial encounters.”⁴⁹⁵

About open mic in The Habitat, Nitesh Shetty said, “They have fifteen slots (performers) today, and every performer has paid entry charges, which is buying two hundred rupees coupon of food and beverages for two people.”⁴⁹⁶ Comedienne Vidushi Swaroop said, “The Habitat has strategised the performances. If one wants to perform here, then s/he must bring one another person with them as a viewer. Simply after buying food/drinks of four hundred rupees, one can perform on the stage.”⁴⁹⁷ The ‘Open mic’ is usually organised on weekdays especially Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday. Most of the audiences of metro cities come to these clubs on Saturday and Sunday evenings. However, on weekdays there are hardly people going to these clubs so in a way they attract the newcomers of the industry.

The clubs also exploit the popularity of the comedians particularly once they gain fame by using their club logo as a background to the stand-up performance. The logo of ‘Canvas Laughter Club’ and ‘H’ (for ‘The Habitat’) in the video, becomes significant not only for the audience but also aspirant comedians who are looking for these sites to express and be awarded for their talents. These spaces seem to be an opportunity, and the expenses seem minor compared to the expectations of what awaits at the end of the struggle and aspirations of stardom. In addition, there are also amateurs who come in and go up to perform. The website of the club advocate itself, “A home that has everything available to make it comfortable for all to create, experiment, test out their work, re-work, record and be able to present in an environment that is receptive and welcoming.”⁴⁹⁸ Of course, it is not a home but except that performers feel free to fail there because they also know that they consume the place. Moreover, they are there just to do what the website mentions.

Abhishek Upmanyu- a famous comedian who owes his popularity to the club circuit with his first YouTube performance on January 2017⁴⁹⁹- announced the rules of the open mic. Every performer is given four minutes to perform they will be reminded at three and half a minute. He said, “In case you do not finish in those thirty seconds then we slowly minimise the sound.

⁴⁹⁵ <https://indiehabitat.in/>

⁴⁹⁶ Nitesh Shetty was a selected contestant of *The Great Indian Laughter Challenge*, who later became the first runner of the show. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H_5bcvd45zk

⁴⁹⁷ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q-T51hyq_al

⁴⁹⁸ <https://indiehabitat.in/>

⁴⁹⁹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uvqD_VUZI24

Still, if you do not leave the stage, then you will be thrown out of this room, and any or all amongst spectators are allowed to do this.” I thought it is just a joke, and I expected performers are taking longer time as usual, but no performer took longer than four minutes except the host comedian himself.

Most of the performers except the contestant of the *The Great Indian Laughter Challenge* were performing the first time, and some of them were facing stage lights first time in their life. Most of the first-timers were disastrous as a comedian and a performer on the stage. Of course, they were being encouraged and goaded by the others, but they were lost and frightened on the stage. All the performers are beginning their performance by introducing their caste, region, religion and economic status. All the fifteen performers were Gujarati, Sindhi, Jain, Brahmins except three people: two Muslim Anas, Parikh and one-woman performer Deepika Devi. Parikh was on stage first time in his life. Anas was amongst the contestants of *The Great Indian Laughter Challenge*, and Deepika Devi was a housemaid. So, in this way, it is all about class and buying the coupon of performing at the stage. There is no exclusion on behalf of gender, work, caste and class but also there is a question of affordability, only people who can afford to invest their four hundred rupees — which is the daily wage of a highly skilled labour⁵⁰⁰— for performing four minutes on the stage with a two-pint beer also to be paid. To do that is not possible for a working-class woman, i.e. Deepika Devi but still the positive side is that to perform in front of an elite audience is not a dream for a working-class person. The history of comic actors shows that most of the comic actors of Indian cinema were born poor or brought up in a working-class family, i.e. Johnny Lever was brought up in Dharavi, the biggest slums of Asia. Deepika Devi came to perform from there in an elite space like ‘The Habitat’. Now, this would be answered in the future only if Open Mic could provide the same opportunity for the poor artists coming from a working-class family or not? At least at present, no single stand-up comedian is coming from a working-class family. However, exceptionally a Muslim performer ‘Zakir Khan’ (mentor of *The Great Indian Laughter Challenge*, 2017) coming from a middle-class family of Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh emerged as the first-star stand-up comedian of clubs, pubs and YouTube. Abhishek Walia says,

Today the idea of star comedian has changed from the previous decade. Today you are star stand-up comedian if you can sell 1000 tickets on your name and Zakir Khan has become that first name who

⁵⁰⁰ An order updated on 3 March 2018 by the Ministry of Labour and Employment describe 438 rupees as a minimum daily income for a ‘A’ category among Highly skilled workers and 300 rupees per day for the unskilled labour. <https://clc.gov.in/clc/node/572>

has every show houseful. Abhishek Upmanyu (the host of the open-mic at The Habitat) is the second after Zakir Khan.⁵⁰¹

There were only two MNC professionals (in open mic), five students and all the other guests were the performers and their friends including me. Most of the friend-spectators were working in private firms. I could collect all the information because the host comedian was interactive with the audience. Amongst performers, who announced their profession, were mostly engineers. 'The Habitat' is not centred around comic or any other performance. It has taken to these open mic sessions mainly to establish the space and a good example of - how to make a profit from such side activities? All the performers were familiar with the practice, and by performing there, they were consuming; 'The art of performing in the club.' All the aspiring performers find it a problematic issue because they cannot find a space to perform in Mumbai at four hundred rupees. In a sense, they are not required to book an auditorium and ask people to come to watch their performance. They are supposed to buy two beers to perform in a cosy room. Most of the performers coming to 'open mic' are new, and they want to analyse their performance, jokes, gesture and their acceptance among people. If the performers through this exercise can hone their skills and work on their wits, gags, and jokes, they do benefit in the end. They record their webcast their best-edited performance and use it for auditions. If it does go viral, it brings fortune for both: performer and space. In this way, the comic industry attains a new clown and the restaurant develops its USP.

To write about an open mic performance, I choose the below mentioned performance, which was most attentive for me that night It was performed by comedienne Vidushi Swaroop, a Brahmin from Varanasi (as she introduced herself). She performed her comic piece on her puberty and suddenly jumped on her single-parent mother (Vinita Srivastava). She joked about her mother beating her with Belan in the morning and with the bat in the night. Her four-minute piece was dedicated to her mother in which she established the masculinity of her mother. On the label of the politics of performance, her content was progressive, but the wits, gag, and jokes about them were regressive. On 27 June 2018, She, send me the first part of her performance, performed somewhere else but the same content. Following is the transcription of her performance,

Hi, my name is Vidushi Swaroop. I am sure after setting an eye on me; you will know that neither boys nor puberty hit upon me. However, generally, when puberty hits people, what

⁵⁰¹ From the WhatsApp call interview on 27 June 2018 at 5:39 PM

boys' faces are, their voice becomes heavy, they get a beard and moustache. Do you know what does a girl face? Someone enters in our life. The time it comes, first, it starts coming every month. *Maryadaon Ko Dhyan Me Rakhte Hue* (considering moral ethics) I will call it 'Mehman'(guest). The time when this guest came to me first, I was a little kid. I said, 'Haila, blood cancer' although neither I smoke nor I am named 'Mukesh'⁵⁰² I went to my mother and she gave something call 'diaper'.

MY MOTHER: Take my dear your *Mehman Suraksha Kavach* (guest saviour).

ME: Okay So this is the 'guest saviour' that makes a girl able to jump, not one, but four steps at a time. Its wings make them fly for success, job, boyfriend, medal and everything.

Though the reality is that we can not evensniff when the 'guest' comes, and they are showing us doing Gymnastics, and that is in the white cloths, be practical bro! And TV advertisements, 'Those days of the month' Dear explain? Which 'those days of the month'? Boys think about the days when they get paid. Okay, so even if we girls make a plan to go out then somehow this guest appears, '*Arre Aise Kaise Madam*' (How can you go out like this Mam?)

And you know what, at my home, there is a totally different system. If the 'guest' is there, neither I can touch pickle, nor I can enter the temple room, nor I can enter into the kitchen. It means, my family has not yet decided that what they have produced a girl or some bacteria. Even after all this Natak, if this guest is missing or does not come then other tension is what if any other guest is going to come.⁵⁰³

This is the first part of her performance, I could manage to receive from her by Prasun Gupta, who was a friend of Abhay Sharma. On 27 June 2018, I also received her confirmation about the English transcription of her Hindi performance. The other missing part from the performance was about her single mother. Even in this performance, it is evident that the subject is progressive and she makes fun of diapers and superficial advertisements of sanitary napkins. I watched this performance in a post-GST (Goods and Services Tax) period. It was the time when a large group of feminists were condemning the Government's move by considering, 'GST classification of sanitary pads as a 'luxury' item shows tax regime's male

⁵⁰² A man named Mukesh, usually projected in public advertisement of quit smoking campaign as a diseased with blood cancer cause of smoking.

⁵⁰³ This is the transcription of video performance received on 27 June 2018.

gaze.⁵⁰⁴ So performing another woman in that post GST about Sanitary pads was first maybe ignorant and then an example of ‘laughter at any cost’. The other problem in her act was to use the word ‘Mehman’ (guest) for considering moral ethics which can also be an example of creating ‘laughter at any cost’ but the set-up, she mentioned about her home, which was described in a celebratory mode was against contemporary feminist fight for their rights out and inside of their houses. After giving facts that, “in my home, there is a totally different system if the ‘guest’ is there. Neither I can touch pickle, nor I can enter the temple room, nor I can enter into the kitchen.” She could question the patriarchal values of her single mother (because her father is no more) but she chooses to go in a different direction, by comparing her to some bacteria.

Abhishek Walia, the winner of *The Great Indian Laughter Challenge* (2017), said, “aspirant comedians do not think about the effect of their jokes. They just play on satire without humour.”⁵⁰⁵ This is what was in the performance of ‘Vidushi Swaroop’ that she was talking about daring subjects, but the effects of those jokes were falling apart from the direction, which it was supposed to take. Therefore, the whole concept of this emerging open mic comedy is totally based upon a neoliberal idea of making a profit at any cost. In the same manner as the comedians being trained to create laughter at any cost in the Laughter Challenge and open mic performances.

Neoliberalism is most commonly understood as enacting an ensemble of economic policies in accord with its root principle of affirming free markets...the conversion of every human need or desire into a profitable enterprise, from college admissions preparation to human organ transplants, from baby adoptions to pollution rights, from avoiding lines to securing legroom on an airplane; and, most recently, the financialization of everything and the increasing dominance of finance capital over productive capital in the dynamics of the economy and everyday life (Wendy Brown 2015:28).⁵⁰⁶

It is ‘the financialization of everything’ that makes the goal of every cultural activity potentially ‘profit at any cost’. In the context of comedy, the newcomer aspirants are inculcated into the market logic. After the performance, Vidushi Swaroop discussed with her colleagues and said, “I need to bring some change because this single parent story is not working at all.”⁵⁰⁷ Not only her, but most of the comedian in the open mic were indifferent about their choice of subject. They do not think about their subject, content and its effect at all and

⁵⁰⁴ <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/taxing-gst-sanitary-pads-tax-regime-women/>

⁵⁰⁵ From the WhatsApp call interview on 27 June 2018 at 5:39 PM

⁵⁰⁶ Brown, Wendy. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*. London: The MIT Press, 2015

⁵⁰⁷ After performance conversation on 26 September 2017 at The Habitat, Mumbai.

therefore their choice of subject is not implied their jokes and its politics but evoking laughter at any cost by which they can finance their comedy.

Comic Performance in Twenty-First Century

One of the primary focus of research was centred around, performance from live to digital, and how the concept of popularity, stardom and politics has changed with communication technology, especially after the Web 2.0, which transformed expert- non-expert Internet consumer into Internet content producers. Andy Lavender writes, “In 2004 RSS (Really Simple Syndication: web feed) protocols made podcasting possible: the syndication of audio and video files as well as images and text” (2017:14).⁵⁰⁸

YouTube was launched on 14 February 2005 as a platform for video sharing. It has been a subsidiary of Google since 2006. Its slogan from 2005 to 2012, ‘Broadcast Yourself,’ indicates YouTube’s gearing towards solo dissemination- the creation and uploading of content by individuals, and the publishing of often banal or everyday minutiae concerning the lives of its contributors (Lavender: 121).⁵⁰⁹

Lavender see YouTube as a public archive. He writes about YouTube evolving into ‘a massive, heterogeneous, but for the most part accidental and disordered, public archive,’⁵¹⁰ and propose, “digital culture has allowed us to share our bodies more diversely than ever before” (123). The performance (in the form of YouTube Performance) presents a self that is more textured, more present and more promiscuous than was the case before the advent of Web 2.0 (125).

He sees this sharing with a theatrical dimension and proposes to think of the performing bodies, specifically about its distribution on YouTube, in at least three different ways:

1. The body in performance, digitally archived (where we can see the performance, performed in the past) (123).

⁵⁰⁸ Lavender, Andy. *Performance in the twenty-first century: theatres of engagement*. New York: Routledge, 2016.

⁵⁰⁹ Lavender, Andy. *Performance in the twenty-first century: theatres of engagement*. New York: Routledge, 2016.

⁵¹⁰ Jean Burges and Joshua Green in their book, ‘YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture, 2009’ suggest that ‘Media consumption... has moved away from being a “read-only” activity to becoming a “read-write” one’ (48). It was their view that YouTube is ‘evolving into a massive, heterogeneous, but for the most part accidental and disordered, public archive’ (89).

2. The body in performance, digitally distributed (Lavender calls it ‘YouTube Sublime-Grusin’s view- where the body is distributed faster than ever before. It can be expert, inexperienced, innovative, populist, a body in protest-sometimes all at once. He gives an example of a video-commercial product- that inspired another video – political pastiche- and the political video gets banned that inspired to create another video- interventionist protest) (124-125).

3. The body performing as itself (Lavender talks about body performing as itself for the camera and by broadcasting themselves and seeking fame.

He gives an example of Matt Harding’s ‘Me dancing’⁵¹¹ (126-128) and Nichole’s ‘Me singing’⁵¹² (129- 131). Matt Harding perform some stupid dance move on camera and Nichole performs a horrible singing, and by dancing stupidly and singing those unmusical, hardly listenable songs, both of them attained fame on YouTube. So with the help of a camera and Youtube performers, dancers, singers and comedians are presenting themselves by ‘broadcasting themselves’ in front of the world, but in the context of comedy, the YouTube has brought radical change. I have discussed the change and YouTube performances of my case studies, but now I am going to look upon a YouTube performance, which I did not attend and merely wants to take this up as an example of YouTube performance to mention in my dissertation.

YouTube Performance: Kenny Sebastian

Lavender understands YouTube as an archive and establishes the fact that the performance for the camera, YouTube and Internet is possible. Where Bodies (performances) are archived, distributed and performed (itself). I have written about two contemporary live performances: *The Great Indian Laughter Challenge* (Studio Performance) and *The Habitat* (Open mic, (Stage Performance)). The New clown represents the contemporary stand-up comedian getting recognition by broadcasting their performances in the running decade. YouTube works on this simple principle of sharing an amount of earning through advertisement with the content creator. This may be one of the reasons that the internet is flooded with comic performances. Therefore, I choose to describe a YouTube performance, which was also performed live but I find it significant because of its double significance, a performance which also talks of spectatorship and that also both the spectator of the live comedy and that in the virtual domain.

⁵¹¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7WmMcqp670s>

⁵¹² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7BVvNE78lyc>

This will answer the effect of the internet on television in the context of stand-up comedy. By this, I will discuss the change in popularity of television stand-up comedy and how the YouTube performances performed in pubs, clubs, halls, and malls are getting popular at the time of the internet.

An Ambivalent Monologue of A Comedian:

On 22 April 2018 Performer Kenny Sebastian webcast his latest performance, ‘*Why I Don’t Do Jokes About Politics in India*.’⁵¹³ About thirteen-minute-long, YouTube performance was a recorded version of a performance, performed live in Chennai, in which camera angles were added to give a different perspective and close-ups of facial expression for the benefit of the YouTube spectator. The camera perspective was the additional feature while there were no other edits, particularly in terms of its durational length. The performance was an anecdotal account of contemporary Indian comedians and its spectators to bring in the narrative as a retrospective viewpoint. Comedian Kenny talked about two types of people: haters and lovers of comedy. Following is the beginning of his YouTube performance,

There’s a positive audience that comes out and supports live comedy. It’s great. You could’ve done anything. You could’ve watched Netflix or whatever. Fought traffic. Came late, also. But, it’s okay. You came. It’s nice. There’s always a negative to this, right? You guys are supporting comedy, there’s a negative audience which hates comedy. Dude like they hate it. Not dislike. They hate jokes, okay? They will be sitting at home, and they see a joke on YouTube, and they’ll be like... (Gesture of super angry), And they get up, and their wife is like,

WIFE: What happened?

OFFENDED MAN: I’m angry.

WIFE: Where’re you going?

OFFENDED MAN: I’m going to the police station.

WIFE: Why?

OFFENDED MAN: To file a FIR.

WIFE: Are you insane?

⁵¹³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=azFe8b6yfb0&feature=youtu.be>

OFFENDED MAN: Yes.

(And they go. They wear their slippers and all. And they go to the police station.)

OFFENDED MAN: Cop!

COP: (Cop is like,) What?

OFFENDED MAN: I want to file an FIR.

COP: Of course. I'll do this; I'll file an FIR for a joke. Other important shit, I won't do. Yeah, come.

(Even the pen is angry. The pen is also ... (Gesture of super angry).⁵¹⁴

He divided audience in three types: One, who likes comedy (live Spectator), Second, who hate comedy (Online Spectator) and he mentioned spectators of YouTube performance as the third type of audience: the audience which gives feedback (on YouTube Performance). Sebastian mentioned one such YouTube spectator's comment in his YouTube performance,

I love the jokes and observations. They are very clever. Ha ha ha. But, the real question I want to ask is, "Are you aware of the massive following you have? Young people look up to you. So, my question to you, Kenneth Sebastian is...when are you going to talk about issues? The real issues, Socio-political issues. Religious issues?"⁵¹⁵

The reference to the feedback of the YouTube spectator is significant here and brings focus to the fact that the YouTube is at the end of series of reception and mediated performances, viz the live performance and its audiences; television versions and its audiences and finally the YouTube version and its audiences. A television audience is not given any option to comment upon television performance or give feedback; they can only complaint. The Indian Broadcasting Foundation (IBF) established what is known as the 'Broadcasting Content Complaints Council (BCCC) in June 2011⁵¹⁶ under which the television audience can complain about any content to IBF officials within fourteen days of its broadcast.⁵¹⁷

⁵¹⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=azFe8b6yfb0&feature=youtu.be> at 0:00:00

⁵¹⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=azFe8b6yfb0&feature=youtu.be> at 2:15 to 3:00

⁵¹⁶ <https://www.ibfindia.com/history-vision>

⁵¹⁷ <http://www.ibfindia.com/complaint-form>

The second group of spectators, which he flagged reflect the division amongst the different audience constituencies; these are the ‘haters’, the spectators who hate comedy and go to fill FIRs (In context of *AIB Knockout*) does not even attend live stand-up comedy and judge them (comedians and their jokes) on behalf of ‘YouTube performance.’ which is according to me is not a division of spectators only but it is a division between the live and YouTube performance. The spectator to the live show comes of his own accord and choice, mostly a fan of the comedian and enjoys the comedy, while those watching YouTube are self-designated watchdogs. The audience attending a live show comes after booking a ticket at the box office and paying the price, and therefore the audience of the show is the consumer of the comedy. It means the comedy is the cultural consumption, and therefore they buy the ticket for that comedy, where they enjoy subversion, insult, hurting sentiments. The audiences of live performance are a homogenous social community, by class, education, and choices of like and dislike. Contrary, to this, is the YouTube performance which is free to watch, and anyone consciously or unconsciously may watch any performance. In the process of watching comes the terms: viral and trolled. The YouTube performance going viral is different from getting trolled. Any YouTube performance is getting viral means performance is being liked, shared and praised amongst the online audience, it sometimes earns instant fame for the performer, i.e. stand-up comedian Zakir Khan and Kunal Kamra. Contrary to this is the performance getting trolled with the idea of teaching a lesson to the performer, so either the performance and a part of it is shared on social media to provoke a section of society that will surely be offended after watching it. Following is the example of such a performance from *Aisi Taisi Democracy*,

If you remember in 2015 RSS was collecting iron for the iron statue of Vallabhbhai Patel (statue of unity), remember? Yeah, so a poor Muslim man from Gujarat also came out to offer his support to RSS Cadres.

GUJARATI MUSLIM: *Sir, Sir, Sir Ji, Ye, Ye Humara Bhi Sariya Lelo, Sariya Laye Hain, Le Lijiye, Please* (Sir, accept, my iron rods also, please)

RSS CADRE: (with surprise) “*Par Bahanchod, Tumhare Paas, Sariya Kaha Se Aa Gaya?*” (But where the fuck, you brought this *Sariya* from,)

GUJARATI MUSLIM: *Sahab Aapne Vo 2002 Me Gaand Me Dala Tha Na, Vahi Nikal Ke Laye Hain.*⁵¹⁸

This joke was written by Varun Grover, but it is not available in any YouTube performance. Jokes like this either becomes viral or they get trolled because they expose someone. They talk about someone, and they oppose someone with the use of abusive language and political power of comedy. Varun Grover said, “The people who like our comedy share our videos on social media and the people who hate our comedy also share our videos by commenting upon it, look at these big shots dare, questioning our pride.”⁵¹⁹ About a joke like this, in a live performance (which was telecasted live) he said, “A great joke is something which makes fifty percent of the people applaud, and the rest - fifty percent are sitting in shock, hurt and offended.”⁵²⁰

However, this joke is a part of the live performance that was neither telecast or webcast. Audience going to such performances at least maintain this common minimum understanding among the community that they will allow the performer to crack any joke they like. They get offended, but they will never come or protest in between the performance. In some cases, this has also happened that some disruptive groups come to attend the show with the intention to stop it. I have mentioned in the second chapter one such incident, but it is again important to mention that *Aisi Taisi Democracy* was invited to perform in a college in Allahabad in September 2016 (See Page 98). Seeing students enjoying the dick jokes, sex comedy and jokes about religious riots (jokes mentioned above) by the troops, the professors were offended and forced performers to stop the performance.⁵²¹

The comedian Kenny Sebastian is known for doing a safe comedy, i.e., What does a biscuit think when we dip it into tea, what do cats feel when we ignore them and other similar subjects. At the beginning of his YouTube performance, it seems that he is making fun of comedians, who consciously does political comedy. Therefore, his audience (which is totally different from the audience of *Aisi Taisi Democracy*) also cheered him passionately when he shared his conscious decision of doing restaurant and tea and biscuits comedy. Contrary to his previous performances, he started by mentioning people getting easily offended by a joke. Although the title of his video reads ‘*Why I Don’t Do Jokes About Politics in India*’ was not pro political

⁵¹⁸ The joke was performed in Sirifort Auditorium, New Delhi on 30 August 2017.

⁵¹⁹ The interview was taken at Yash Raj Film Studio in Mumbai on 11 November 2017. Recording, 2 at 17:47

⁵²⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GtpPgVhNvok> at 4:58 -5:10

⁵²¹ <https://www.thequint.com/entertainment/aisi-taisi-democracy-gets-shut-down-in-sanskaari-allahabad>

comedy so in that sense it was a very ambivalent performance and left to decide where his politics lie. It was difficult to comprehend which side he will take at the end: pro political comedy or pro-non-political comedy. The scenario had its own ambivalence, and one hesitates to know whether to laugh or not,

People ask me, ‘Why don’t you do jokes on religion?’ Really? ‘Coz I’m not insane. Yeah ‘Coz we’re not ready for jokes on religion. I’m sorry, guys. I know you guys think you’re damn cool and open and all. But no, buddy. You’re not. You’re not ready.’⁵²²

According to me, his whole performance was a reply to the feedback of a YouTube spectator. After commenting on his audience, he returned to reply on feedback,

Why I don’t do jokes on politics is ‘coz I am scared. That is why. It’s not like I can’t get punchlines on political jokes. It’s because I don’t want to get punched on my face. That’s why. Okay? And you’re like, ‘Kenny, you’re scared? Really, bro? You’re scared? You’re protected. You’re in Mumbai. You’re the one percent, you know, privileged class. How can you be scared?’ No, I feel scared. It’s sad when you’re in a democracy and feel scared! It’s sad, you know. You don’t believe me, right? Okay. Go to a movie theatre and don’t stand for the National Anthem. Oh... Shit got real! When you stand up and that fear... the Goosebumps come, that’s called fear, buddy. Forget that. That’s too ballsy. Just think about not standing for the National Anthem.’⁵²³

According to me, he shared the fear of present stand-up comedian in India,

That’s when I realised that I am performing for the wrong audience. You guys are nice and all. Okay. But, the thing is, you guys ask for jokes and all, but, when I go jail, none of you fuckers will come. (It was a moment when the whole audience laughed loudly). It is okay, okay keep asking. ‘Do jokes on Modi.’ Fuck you! When I go to jail, you’ll be like ‘Anyway he’s not that funny. Leave it.’ (Audience laughed again and started clapping).⁵²⁴

He made a gesture of abandoning his audience to express his first comment that he is performing for a wrong audience and because it is people who give power to their artist. So performer Sebastian ended his performance by saying,

⁵²² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=azFe8b6yfb0&feature=youtu.be> at 3:56 to 4:15

⁵²³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=azFe8b6yfb0&feature=youtu.be> at 5:34 to 6:20.

⁵²⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=azFe8b6yfb0&feature=youtu.be> at 10:35 to 11:00.

So, in closing, that's why I don't do jokes on politics. Because I like my family. I do not want to burn them. I do not want them to be crispy Medium rare is fine.”⁵²⁵

The audience was still laughing, and it went down with the ending music over laughter, but still, no judgement can be passed about this audience. I feel that this is the difference in live and online performance that you can analyse the performer but not the nature of the audience in online performance.

In context of its class analysis, of course, there is no lower middle class or lower-class audience of these shows. All the spectators of live performance who are coming for these shows are either from the upper or upper middle class. A percentage of the middle class goes to these shows after deciding if the performance is price-worthy which means its star value. Otherwise, the English-speaking middle class prefers to watch YouTube performance. If the tickets which are easily buyable for the audience of a particular class is to maintain their cultural capital, then, the question emerges of the choice of comedy. In that sense, there is an evolving culture of comedy, and it is emerging as a product in the commodified market. So discussion around, who has consumed, how many comedians? Which is, in other words, defines the consumer power of those live spectators. For attending open mic, you do not require any money to become an audience just buy one beer and attend the performance. After that, the ticket of three hundred rupees would be paid to attend the show of a newcomer comedian. Then it goes up to five hundred to seven hundred to attend a performance of star stand-up comedians like Kenny Sebastian. Now how long this stardom stays cannot be defined, because they are the first generation of new clowns. Their stardom is entirely different from the stardom of film and television comedian. However, I believe that their stardom is positively affecting the career graphs and stardom of all previous comedians of films and television

Kenny Sebastian is different from all my case studies as he is one of the rare comedians who continue with the solo genre of stand-up comedy. A solo comedian is different from a performer performing in the troupe. Varun Grover said, “Today you cannot stand alone, I feel safer when I perform with my troupe *Aisi Taisi Democracy*, and I feel frightened doing comedy alone on the stage.”⁵²⁶ Kenny Sebastian shared his fear not in an interview or by other means; he chooses to share his fear through his performance. There could be chances that he is not frightened but just making his comic piece on ‘the fear and anxiety comedians experience’, but it makes his

⁵²⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=azFe8b6yfb0&feature=youtu.be> at 12:17 to 12:35.

⁵²⁶ The interview was taken at Yash Raj Film Studio in Mumbai on 11 November 2017. Rec, 2 at 15:55

performance an important entry point to discuss aspects of censorship and violence, which has increasingly pervaded the cultural scene. It could be taken differently if he could share his view on media or by any other medium. My friend Gargee informed me about receiving a tweet from him, She told me that the performer retweeted her back on her tweet, where tweeted, “We need to stand with all those who have stood against the politicians in these times!”⁵²⁷ On which, performer Kenny Sebastian replied, “Comedian, writer, been cheering up people since 2010.”⁵²⁸



Figure 3.2, A screen shot of the online communication among performer and his fan.

Again, in online communication also, I found his comment ambivalent like his performance that takes no clear side but clearly states his present status of dialectics. A situation, Sanjay Rajaura, defines under a phase of time, when performer decides about his vision, about his side. According to Rajaura, “performer also evolves with the time.”⁵²⁹ Of course, any performer can evolve with the time, but in case of stand-up comedy, they can also choose to remain the same. According to me, Kenneth Sebastian is in that deciding phase, where he is going to decide if this is the time to take a deferent path or to remain the same without any side and joking on his previous subjects related to non-political and personal issues of upper middle class and English speaking metro residents.

⁵²⁷ Gargee’s tweet.

⁵²⁸ Kenny Sebastian’s reply on Gargee’s tweet.

⁵²⁹ The interview was taken at Sanjay Rajoura’s Delhi home on 17 August 2017. At 01:27

The Changing Concept of Spectatorship

In the age of YouTube comedy, the concept of spectatorship has changed enormously. In the last century, spectatorship was defined by the group of people attending a live performance. Counting them was limited to tickets sold, now the way of seeing, a spectator has also changed under the effect of YouTube's accurate number of viewership. Achieving an exact number of spectators was not possible before. It was never this specific as it is today in 2018 on YouTube. The hits of like, dislike, comments and subscribes- all are visible on any YouTube performance. Usually, it is that the number of views on any YouTube video is the number of its viewers. Though, there is no assurance of it because there are possibilities of artificial views also. Artificial views are defined as those which are watched by one individual playing it over and over again. Now YouTube has limited this kind of viewing up to 300 times only. Beyond three hundred, the mechanism will not work any longer. As I watched a YouTube video 'Why do YouTube views freeze at 301?', in which, Ted Hamilton, Product Manager for YouTube Analytics, explains, "YouTube database is set up to freeze the view count at 301 until YouTube employees can manually verify whether or not the views have been obtained legitimately."⁵³⁰ The shocking fact about the video itself was that it was uploaded from an account 'Numberphile' having 2.4 million subscribers, 18,1000 people liked the video and disliked by 4.3 thousand people. Still, the views on the videos are 301.⁵³¹

YouTube viewership decides not only the popularity of the performer but works as a feedback for the performance also as Kenny Sebastian discussed in his performance. In an almost similar way, the popularity of the performer can also decide the viewership of YouTube performance. So, there are two ways to look at views and popularity in the context of YouTube. One is based on the YouTubers, who gets their recognition by YouTube, they are popular because of YouTube, and they are connected to their fans and followers by YouTube, i.e. YouTuber, stand-up comedians. The other is the performer, actor, celebrity or anything but not YouTuber. They are not known to people because of YouTube. They were already famous and had a huge fan following. Their fans search for their performances. Kapil Sharma is the best example of it because people do not follow him on YouTube but they watch his performances on YouTube. Because on his personal YouTube channel (2015) he has only 3910 subscribers on 14 June 2018.⁵³² However, his shows are most popular on YouTube as well. No other stand-

⁵³⁰ https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=27&v=olkhgagvrjl

⁵³¹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=27&v=olkhgagvrjl

⁵³² https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCS3REx_0JgqkwpcrEdeXVHw/about

up comedian has any YouTube performance having more than 24 million views.⁵³³ YouTube offers two features for its users; ‘Subscribe’ and ‘Bell Icon’. By subscribing a channel, one is informed by the mail about the next video uploaded on the subscribed channel, and the bell icon (introduced in 2016) enables the subscriber to get instant notification on their electronic device about the new video.⁵³⁴ Still, there is one important issue to discuss. What does that audience, who have seen the performance, live? Do they watch it again on television or YouTube and if they do then what do they find at the end of the various mediums of the same performance?

Live to Digital

I am going to begin this discussion by a performance of a mimicry artist of *The Great Indian Laughter Challenge* in the final audition round to establish the change a spectator feels or may feel in a live performance and its televised or virtual version. This live performance was shot on 1st September 2017, and it was not televised or webcast by the channel ever, but it was leaked on YouTube on 23 October 2017. One among forty auditionees, ‘Shyam Rangeela’ performed to get selected among final twelve participants of *The Great Indian Laughter Challenge*. He imitated Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi and the judge appreciated him, Akshay Kumar (judge) passionately went to ring the golden bell for his performance. According to the rules of the *The Great Indian Laughter Challenge*, the moment an auditionee receives a golden bell, they are selected for the show. So for the live spectators, he was selected as the final participant of the show on 1st September 2017. However, for the televisual spectator, it could be known on 8 October 2017. It was televised and webcast on the given date but his there were very few glimpses of his performances without mimicry and no mention of the golden ring for him.⁵³⁵ There was some secret, something hidden and something against the rule of the show but what, it was not clear yet. On 19 October, Shyam Rangeela posted on Facebook, “Enjoy my performance in laughter challenge on 21-22 oct 8 PM... *Kyunki Iske Baad Main Aapko Laughter Challenge Me Nahi Dikhne Wala..*”⁵³⁶ On 21 October, in televisual performance, as a participant still fighting for his selection among final twelve contestants, he slipped to the bottom (danger zone of being eliminated from the show) with other five

⁵³³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Do3Owcy0F4>

⁵³⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DmimhAX5Xz0>

⁵³⁵ <https://www.hotstar.com/tv/the-great-indian-laughter-challenge/15245/akshay-mallikas-new-stunt/1000190984> at 11:23 to 12:05

⁵³⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/shyamrangeela1/posts/1422520941197419>

performers.⁵³⁷ The next day, on 22 October 2017, he was eliminated from the show and could not become a participant of the show.⁵³⁸ So, for television and online audience he did not perform any mimicry performance of Narendra Modi. Neither he received any golden bell which proves his selection among final twelve participants of the show.

In case of 'live to digital' performance, the essential difference, in this case, is that the live audience was known to the fact that Shyam Rangeela received a golden bell on 1 September 2017 during his audition. The live spectator knows that he performed a mimicry of Narendra Modi. However, on 23 October 2017, performer Shyam Rangeela shared the video of his mimicry performance performed on 1 September 2017 on his Facebook wall, which became an instant viral. That day, it was shared on every social media platform as he is known as one of the best mimics of Narendra Modi. This video became a proof of revelation of how television channels can manipulate their own decision, and that their decision sought a change in the live and its electronic version as this performance was not even part of the televised show. So, at a time when it went viral, nobody questioned the channel for manipulating its own decision by erasing performance from the slot of televised performance and most importantly refusing a golden bell winner from taking part as its final twelve contestants. On 25 October, online portal The Wire, YouTube'd an interview of mimicry artist, '*Star Plus refused to air my mimicry of Modi: Shyam Rangeela.*'⁵³⁹ He said that he felt humiliated to see his performance not being in the slot on 8 October. According to the performer, he was asked not to mimic Modi, so he decided to make a script on Rahul Gandhi, but just a day before his performance, he was stopped from mimicking Rahul Gandhi also. In those circumstances, he performed the same script without mimicking Rahul and Modi, and this performance was televised on 21 October, the day he was denigrated to the bottom six -based on that performance.⁵⁴⁰

Digital to Live

I have chosen the same performance for the opposite journey of a performance from 'digital to live' as well. The main video shared by the performer on his Facebook account was deleted soon, although, on 8 November 2017, it was uploaded again by a YouTube channel 'Technical

⁵³⁷ <https://www.hotstar.com/tv/the-great-indian-laughter-challenge/15245/team-golmaal-again-visits/1000192247> at 39:30

⁵³⁸ <https://www.hotstar.com/tv/the-great-indian-laughter-challenge/15245/tension-amid-laughter/1000192337> at 41:30

⁵³⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dDxZDARxrKg>

⁵⁴⁰ <https://www.hotstar.com/tv/the-great-indian-laughter-challenge/15245/tension-amid-laughter/1000192337> at 35:00 to 39:30

Friend’ and it has 3,388,759 views while writing the chapter on 16 June 2018.⁵⁴¹ It went instantly viral when shared first on 23 October 2017 and brought another controversy on the next day. On 24 October 2017, senior journalist, Vinod Dua (father of mentor Mallika Dua) wrote on his Facebook wall, “I am going screw this cretin Akshay Kumar for telling his co-worker Mallika Dua that “Aap Bell Bajao Mai Aap Ko Bajata Hun” at 5:26. This is his sense of humour and language. Star plus.. Wake up..”⁵⁴²

Basically, after the mimicry performance, Akshay — climbed over a stage at the height of 12 feet to, (which was itself a performance) — ring the golden bell for the performance of Shyam Rangeela, the other mentors also felt that they should also join Akshay because the performer deserved the accolade. All mentors went to Akshay, so he took a step back to let them ring the bell. Mallika Dua, was in front of the bell and the moment she took the rope of the bell in her hand and said ‘one’ to ring the bell, Akshay took her hand in his hand to make gesture of participation in the process and said, “*Mallika ji,,, Aap Bell Bajaiye, Mai Aapko Bajata Hoon*” (Mallika Ji, You ring the bell and let me ring you). Of course, this is a double innuendo which is an example of heteroglossia in comedy. So, all started laughing at it including Mallika and show went on. Prasun Gupta, a live spectator of that performance, confirmed these facts, he said, “It is clear that Mallika did not feel offended about it (on 1 September 2017) and it is visible in the video as well.”⁵⁴³ On 27 October Mallika wrote an article ‘*This is much bigger than Akshay*’ she wrote,

As I rang the golden bell for this contestant on set, I was “jest-fully” told by one of Bollywood’s biggest stars Akshay Kumar, “*Mallika Ji Aap Bell Bajaaiye, Main Aapko Bajaata Hoon.*” I ignored it and went back to shooting... Was it the single most vile act of inappropriate behaviour? NO. Was it enough to make one uncomfortable? Yes. Would the superstar be offended had someone jokingly said to his daughter ‘*Nitaara Ji, Aap Bell Bajaaiye Main Aapko Bajaata Hoon?*’⁵⁴⁴

I am very explicitly saying if this could not be leaked or webcast, the issue would not emerge ever. In the performance, I attended on 3 October, one performer’s comic piece was based on superstitions, after the performance, Akshay asked mentors, to share if they also believe in any

⁵⁴¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RRfA86PAqDA>

⁵⁴² <https://twitter.com/MallikaDua/status/923419677488848896/photo/1>

⁵⁴³ The interview was taken at the house of Shyam Rangeela in Mumbai on 8 November 2017.

⁵⁴⁴ <https://www.thequint.com/voices/opinion/mallika-dua-blog-on-akshay-kumar-sexist-comment-laughter-challenge>

superstitions?⁵⁴⁵ Every mentor shared their views, and Mallika was the last mentor, as she said, “Yes I still believe in some...” Akshay interrupted in between and said,

Mallika Ji, *Vaise Ek Baat Bataun, Aap Sab Logon Ko, Ki Ye Jitney Bhi superstitions Hote Hain. Asal Me Vo Aadmiyon Ka Kuch Bigad Hi Nahi Sakte. Saare Ke Saare, Mahila Virodhi Hote Hain. Pata Hai Qun? Qunki Aadmi Hamesha Do Nimbu Aur Ek Mirch Latka Ke Chalta Hai.*⁵⁴⁶

My view is that the part (in Shyam Rangeela’s performance) was not intended to demean Mallika. Anyhow if she found that problematic (which is not problematic according to me because his intention was not casual sexism). Then, this joke mentioned above was far worse than the previous comment on her, which is also an example of ‘casual sexism’, but she did not comment. This part of the live performance was edited from its televised show on 15 October 2017.⁵⁴⁷

The controversial performance was not telecast or YouTubized, but it was leaked. There is a relation and difference between *AIB Knockout* (my third case study) and YouTube performance of Shyam Rangeela. From *AIB Knockout*, online spectators were offended by its Youtube version, and in the performance of Shyam Rangeela, the participant is offended. Now, the question is why did Mallika ignore every time speaking at the moment during a live performance. Her comfort about speaking on facing sexism can be decided by herself, but it was decided after the video coming out in the domain. The fall out of this episode is more complex and the objection, I argue did not come from her but her father, who wrote about it after watching it online. Otherwise, double meaning jokes were frequently performed in the live show, but they were not televised or webcasted.

When something is not recorded then people behave in its ephemerality and the possibility of it getting lost, where one does not require to behave in socially acceptable language. Most of us do not record our daily life and watch to look, how did we react in a particular moment? The term ‘post-production’ defines the work and time in between the day of the performance and the day of the telecast. Their main work in the process of editing is to find the part which does not stand for television guidelines and cannot be shown to the family audience. So the recording of the show is controlled by the actor, performer, producer and comedian to decide

⁵⁴⁵ <https://www.hotstar.com/tv/the-great-indian-laughter-challenge/15245/whos-on-akshays-hit-list/1000191659> at 35:35

⁵⁴⁶ On the set of the shoot of performance at Yash Raj Film Studio in Mumbai on 3 October 2017.

⁵⁴⁷ <https://www.hotstar.com/tv/the-great-indian-laughter-challenge/15245/whos-on-akshays-hit-list/1000191659> at 35:35 to 40:20

to not let go out something, what they don't want. Because of this reason, the judge, mentor, spectators and performers were free to behave as they behave as they do in real life. The essential part of a live performance being YouTubized is different from telecast because televised is also similar to living in ephemerality. If you watch it once you cannot watch it again. Being YouTubized is different from that because it is recorded. I am not reducing liveness to the recorded, but my usage of recorded is closer to 'socially archived' where anyone can watch it again whenever they like.

Conclusion

With the changing focus of comedy and its mode of dissemination; live to television to the internet, while the form adapts itself to the divergent media it has also changed the platforms in various ways. First and foremost, the multiple forums have widened up the field in various ways, and the comedian chooses and selects his platform as do his followers and spectators. Even when the *The Great Indian Laughter Challenge* was first produced in 2005, it seemed a new and lucrative opportunity, but in its new avatar, it was in more ways than one, a loss-making enterprise and in terms of quality quite dated. I see the new popularity of the internet and also the pub-mall cultural sites as creating this perception, and this chapter has tried in many ways to engage with the reasons, causes and map the new trends of showcasing comedies and consuming-spectating comedies.

In this chapter, I have tried to trace these shifts, and changes from the revival of the *The Great Indian Laughter Challenge*, to mapping out the larger field, which as the chapter goes is fragmented and the movement of the comedians to move from one platform to the other does not follow any sequence or logic. A comedian can only be on television and occasionally on the internet (Kapil Sharma), or dominantly do a live performance *AIB* and *Aisi Taisi Democracy*, or like the examples, I brought into the chapter Kenny Sebastian and the open mic focussing more on one medium. It is, however, critical to show the options which are open for the movement and pathways and deliberate on the choices the comedian makes and how it determines the sub-genre of his comedy style.

To conclude this chapter, I would like to bring in as a continuity of *The Great Indian Laughter Challenge*, what I regard as its recent avatar, where internet determines the elimination rounds and self-curated comic performances. My reference point is 'Comedy Challenge Shows' which searches for the aspirants through YouTube and the internet. In July

2015, A YouTube channel *The Comedy Hunt* brought well-known stand-up comedians together for Comedy Hunt on YouTube'.⁵⁴⁸ They asked newcomer YouTube comedians to make any comic video and then send it on their given address. According to the organiser Gursimran Khamba, they got 1700 videos on their given address.⁵⁴⁹ Among these video entries, they selected forty videos and continued to eliminate through various rounds of performances, once again recorded and sent to the site. In the end, they invited five teams to come to Mumbai for the final round. On 30 September 2015, the YouTube official Satya declared *Random Chikibum*⁵⁵⁰ as the winner of *The Comedy Hunt*.⁵⁵¹ The YouTube Channel webcast many videos with the star YouTubers, informing newcomers about the potential use of the internet, writing comic content, editing video, using social media for sharing YouTube performance, receiving feedback of the performance and uploads it on YouTube providing important information to the new comedian.⁵⁵²

With the emphasis upon 'Amazon Prime Video'⁵⁵³ and 'Netflix'⁵⁵⁴ coming into the online entertainment market of India in 2016 is going to lead towards new changes coming into the new media developing new possibilities for the new clowns or any other audio-visual art form, i.e. film and television shows. They are the paid streaming sites and only subscribers having consumer power can be part of its virtual performances. This change has led to a platform where no censorship of state and society influencing its performances and videos. Most of the Indian performances, films and television series comprise adult content by the mainstream performers, actors and directors i.e. Karan Johar showing women masturbating on his epic title track *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Kabhi Gum* and subverting his own song from a family screening to an adult content in the film 'Lust Stories' (2018) dealing with women sexuality, released on Netflix only. These service providers are signing contracts with the performers to perform for them so that they could webcast their shows. As the role of technology is changing fast, the

⁵⁴⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f13pmAJloYI>

⁵⁴⁹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-nuxb_T7GYs at 1:44:20

⁵⁵⁰ The group comprises comedians Rahul Subramanian and Varun Kumar, Suny Basu and Abhinay <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC8RrHpqI7M97Lqyg9J6hSww>

⁵⁵¹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-nuxb_T7GYs at 1:51:00

⁵⁵² <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCdifGkL77EMTkoGBW0NrCCg/videos>

⁵⁵³ In July 2016, American electronic commerce introduced its online subscription service in India, "Amazon Prime Video India". <https://gadgets.ndtv.com/internet/news/amazon-prime-launched-in-india-amazon-video-is-coming-865290>

⁵⁵⁴ American paid subscription based streaming service introduced in India on 6 Jan 2016. <https://www.theverge.com/2016/1/6/10724112/netflix-global-expansion-russia-india>

importance, popularity, acceptance is also changing among the audience and even most important the percentage of the internet audience is also increasing with time.

In the view of my previous analysis in which I proposed that the popularity of these shows be dictated by the views on their online performances (See Page 145). However, this concept is also going through a changing phase where considering the success of performance or video on the basis of its maximum views in minimum time will be useless. The whole paradigm is going to shift from the concept of hit or flop to likeable and not likeable content. Netflix and Amazon neither rate their shows, films and performances nor they share information regarding its views. Ted Sarandos owner of Netflix said in a recent interview YouTubized on 29 June 2017,

Mainly I don't want to talk about 'ratings, people don't know how to think about success and failure. I think, when the press wants to pick winners and losers, they pick, the thing (film) that got watched by the most amount of people in the least amount of time, and that is an old paradigm. That's measuring television by overnight ratings because that's how you sell advertisements. We are not, we don't have advertisements. They (in the old paradigm) measure by opening box office because that is how the film determines the future film's revenue. We don't, that does not determine the revenue stream of Netflix. (For us) A million people watching a movie in the course of a year is the same as watching it in one day.⁵⁵⁵

In the final conclusion I would like to state that this is an ever expanding field, what I see as the transition from one medium to the other, which are still being explored and comedians are responding to them with performances most apt for the medium. This is a symbiosis process, and the field needs to be constantly researched and explored further. Both the dissertation and the chapter opens up the further scope of exploration rather than a closure.

⁵⁵⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YyFcaa-3n8I> at 10:15

Conclusion

The first objective of the research was to explore what clowning means in contemporary media and its genealogies. I try to draw a trajectory as well as make a distinction between what I regard as ‘clowns’ and ‘new clowns’ and understand the subjectivity of comedians and comics of both the past and present. Lawrence E Mintz’s work I cite to show how these connections have precedence and historical connections. On the critical realm, I often seek out what the comic traditions meant in terms of a Bakhtinian framework while the reality is my references to Nicholas Ridout and his work ‘Stage Fright, Animals, and other Theatrical Problems’ (2006)

Though the present stand-up comedy by no imagination is an extension of the Indian comic poet or mimicry artists and jokers, who were performing in the popular genre for their livelihood, I drew upon some of the commonalities while marking out the departures in this context. The recent popularity of comedy is owed to television particularly after the economic changes in the early 1990s, and subsequently, with the advent of the internet and social media sites, it assumed a different character and circulation. The debates around these technological shifts, changes in the media and its relation in terms of popular culture are my critical frameworks.

The research ties to map an analytical history to understand the rise of comedy and comic performances in this context. Through three case studies, ‘The Kapil Sharma Show’ ‘AIB Knockout’ and ‘Aisi Taisi Democracy’ I tried to draw a representative historical mapping but often to give both the larger picture included other performances and case studies. In fact, the original design of the research and the case studies selected at the outset seemed adequate, but as a changing field which is going through remarkable shifts, the trajectories had to become more and more plural, and the multiple strands of the genre of the comic had to be taken into consideration.

In the first chapter, the intent was to do a sociological study of the comedians and trace trajectories from the previous generation of who could be called ‘stand up comedians’ in a pre-television and internet age. The study was intended to follow that of Pierre Bourdieu’s study of cultural habits and cultural capital through an ethnographic method. The sources of the categories of region, religion, language, class, gender are however not based on any archive or

resource base but self-testimonies and interviews. Since the actors in my purview are already stars in their own rights, the trajectories took on a self-declaration and an autobiographical tone. I tried to create an objective sociological study while drawing references to their own self-expression and let both of them speak, sometimes in unison and sometimes in contradiction to each other.

In the second chapter, I have focussed on their performances and as comedians their techniques. I have tried to reconstruct their texts, performances, scenography and all other related aspects of their performances. While I discussed the stars and their shows I also looked at the ensemble and co-actors. The chapter traces the representative actors and performances in its nuances with the elaboration of their jokes and how or why they can be seen as a comic repertoire. I also look at what is then used for the television, the live shows, which may be formally staged or the shoot, and what is uploaded on YouTube and internet. I try to draw on the multiple levels of performance and therefore try to see how the comic actors use a variety of techniques which are effective in one of the forms or the other. I also try to understand their politics and confrontation with the State and discourses of morality. Sometimes without any intent, they become critical discourses even in the realm of the political in the public sphere. I have tried to trace these transgressions and crossing the borders.

My third chapter came up in the course of the research and took many surprises turns and twists based on the narratives emerging out of the first two chapters. I bring back shows like 'The Great Indian Laughter Challenge' (2017) as a point of departure from its previous versions to show how comic sometimes becomes anachronistic and what makes once popular shows an economic failure. I bring in some other aspects of comic performances and the larger cultural field through the open mic and also Youtube programme which actually makes its content a commentary on the current performance scenario and also spectatorship. Like the field of comedy today it actually is one of multiple and plural comic genres but also given its media and internet orientation strangely homogeneous. They are fragments picked up from the field but also in dialogue with each other.

The field cannot possibly be dealt with in a linear fashion, and no one performance can bring in all the varied aspects of its existence. Each of them, for example, has a different way of responding to such aspects as abusive language, the basis of its censorship, the linguistic connotations and its audience base. This is an ever-expanding field, and what I see as a phase of transition and new performers and performances are coming up all the time. The new culture

industry is also very fickle, and stardom itself is a temporary status. The comedians and the shows need to respond and change according to the changing social milieu, but its forms and platform shifts also require drastic re-modifications. This is a symbiosis process, and the field needs to be constantly researched and explored further. Both the dissertation and the chapters open up the further scope of exploration rather than a closure.

I propose through the course of my work that the popularity of these shows were dictated by the views on online performances. However, this notion of views and comments are also going through a changing phase where considering the success of performance or video on the basis of its maximum views in minimum time is itself not a foolproof means to discuss popularity. The whole paradigm is about to shift from the concept of hit or flop to likeable and not likeable content with the Netflix and Amazon coming into the domain.

The emergence of paid streaming sites (Netflix and Amazon) in 2016 has affected comic performances in multiple ways: one side, spectators, will soon be defined and limited by their purchasing power like other live spectators of these performances. On the other side, banning performance like AIB Knockout would not be possible because of its limited screenings for limited viewers (paid subscribers) and most importantly, performers will be paid much more than the YouTube because YouTube shares a percent amount of the profit, earned by the commercial advertisement shown on the YouTube performance of the YouTuber. In that previous method, the views on the performance were the deciding factor of the earning of the performers, but contrary to this, the streaming sites do not care about views and advertisements. They depend on the money of their subscribers, and Netflix has crossed 125 million subscribers in 2018 according to statista (The Statics Portal).⁵⁵⁶ In his letter, owner of Amazon.com, Jeffrey P. Bezos wrote on 18 April 2018, “13 years post-launch we have exceeded 100 million paid Prime members globally.”⁵⁵⁷ In India, Netflix is emerging as popular streaming site and since 2018 Netflix and Amazon both are producing Indian shows, films and stand-up comedy not for the Indian but their world audience. In that case, the arena of the audience has not shrunken for the reason of paid subscription, but it has expanded because the comic performance will be available for the world audience.

At this moment it is not possible to state what will happen to YouTube performance. How will the popularity of the comic performer be affected by this medium? Will his stardom be

⁵⁵⁶ <https://www.statista.com/chart/10311/netflix-subscriptions-usa-international/>

⁵⁵⁷ <https://www.sec.gov/Archives/edgar/data/1018724/000119312518121161/d456916dex991.htm>

limited to a class or community having the purchasing power to consume their performances on these paid streaming sites? Or else the performer will emerge as a micro-celebrity not a star anymore? How will this affect the possibilities and opportunities for an upcoming aspirant of clowning? Moreover, most importantly will the term 'New Clown' also change its meaning with the change in new media in the future?

Above all these questions the most important for research in performance studies is to look up its live performances. So, while searching for the answer to these above question, I will discuss the new techniques of bodies performing on stage and the new platforms which emerge. The material remains of the comic whatever the nature of its change through technology, the material remains of performance will allow a semblance of historical continuity and make this work relevant. The future course of work will look upon the fundamental aspects of the performing body of stand-up comedians towards the last of the second decade of the twenty-first century and the beginning of the third decade of the century. One aspect I am keen to bring in here is impersonation and representing the other gender norms that I could not look into my MPhil research because of the shortage of the time and expanse of the topic. All these still need attention and further research in this context can only make the academic field and interdisciplinary work such as mine relevant and significant.

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