Performative retrieving of humour for socio-political subversion: stand-up comedy as a form of creative resilience

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Abstract: With the particular focus on the Indian context, this paper attempts to study the genre of stand-up comedy as a form of creative resilience, by applying the theory of Fiske’s popular culture. Through the case study of select stand-up acts of comics like Rahul Dua, Saurav Mehta, Munawar Faruqui and Kunal Kamra, this paper analyzes English and Hindi satirical stand-up comedy in India. The papers also trace the evolution and differences between both the Indian English and the Hindi satirical stand-up comedy. It explores the elements of resistance put forward by the comics with the help of the new media laughscape that has provided them with a radical space, through which they direct their process of social transformation. The paper foregrounds the radical reimagining of humour wielded as a weapon for socio-political subversion.

Subjects: Theatre & Performance Studies; Acting and Script Analysis; Improvisation

Keywords: new media laughscape; stand-up comedy; cultural critique; resistance

1. Introduction

The mediascape (Appadurai, 1996) has witnessed massive changes in the last few decades as it has successfully shifted to the new media. The new media represents the form of media that primarily includes computer technology, the internet, and smartphones. It is different from the old media such as television programs, films, magazines, and books over the performance of its audience, since the former includes an active participation and enhanced engagement in the performance on the part of the audience, whereas in the latter, the audience acts as a passive consumer of the content provided to them. The new media, therefore, provides a platform that according to Jose Von Dijck (2013) provides “creativity, foreground cultural activity, and promote the exchange of amateur or professional content” (p. 8).

This new digital space is comparatively democratic in its outlook as it has diffused the conventional distinctions between gender, race, class and ideology. It has therefore emerged as a secular platform to represent the suppressed voices on the societal front. Although the digital space also

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has its regulations, yet, it stands out from the traditional media space as it does not directly fall under the control of the government.

The emergence of new media has brought massive changes in almost all aspects of the society. One such aspect of the society that underwent a huge metamorphosis is the new emerging laughscape (Kay, 2018) i.e., the changing comic traditions worldwide especially with the coming of digital media as comedy has traced its journey from being considered as an inferior and unaccepted genre to presently, as serving a critical lens to analyze and assess everyday life. Moreover, as a genre it has proved its potential to not only deal but to also describe the absurdities of the political realities, social politics, human behavior, and institutional practices.

Kay (2018) claims that the digital platforms have “afforded a new wave of comedians” who are challenging the dominant ideological motives of the powerful by narrating the “nation using strategies of intertextuality and deconstruction.” The medium of digital media is opted by the comics to communicate the voices; since it is a mode where free speech is “gaining increasing prominence” that stands in contrast to traditional media.

The paper intends to study the genre of stand-up comedy through John Fiske’s popular culture approach, i.e., seeing it as a form of subtle resistance of the subordinate. It becomes “popular resistance” in a sense that it rejects the monolithic production of meanings of the status-quo and shows how the genre of stand-up comedy opens up space for oppositional meanings. It also traces the paradigmatic shift of the genre of humor in the Indian context and studies how it became a cultural critique over time. Centering on the Indian context and especially in line with the development of “new media”, it sheds light upon how the new wave of Indian satirical stand-up comics of both Hindi and English linguistic background are subverting the dominant power structure. The study briefly touches upon the following questions:

• How has the perception of humor evolved?
• What is stand-up comedy and how it developed?
• What is satirical stand-up comedy and how it found its roots in India?

And particularly engages with the questions:
• How can stand-up comedy, especially the satirical stand-up comedy, be analyzed in the light of John Fiske’s popular culture approach?
• How the new media acted as a nurturing force for the development of the genre of stand-up comedy, especially in India?
• What makes the Indian English and the Hindi satirical stand-up comedy different?

2. Research aims/objectives
The objective of this research is to underscore the role of new media in establishing the genre of stand-up comedy in India, especially satirical stand-up comedy and how it provided the comics with an alternative space in order to counter the homogeneous dominant narratives. The paper will analyze stand-up comedy through the lens of Fiske’s “popular culture” that focuses on the elements of resistance in the modes employed by the subordinates against the dominant.

3. Research methodology
• Descriptive study of relevant literature related to humour and stand-up comedy.
• Application of theory of Fiske’s popular culture for qualitative analysis of stand-up texts.
• Application of comparative study for the analysis of Indian English and Hindi stand-up texts. Such an analysis will help in understanding the question of language in stand-up comedy that in turn will help to map out the accessibility, relatability and differing humour literacies especially among the Indian audiences.
4. Stand-up comedy

Stand-up comedy is a comic style in which the comedians interact with a live audience along with presenting their script of funny one-liners and puns.

Mintz (1985) is of the view that stand-up comedy is one of the oldest forms of humor that existed in varied forms like fools, clowns, and jesters in the Middle Ages. He believes that the role of a comic is to unify the society as well as shape the image of the society. It is a great tool of “social and cultural mediation.” The constant appropriation and relevance to the concerned culture, makes their work similar to “contemporary anthropologist” as they trace the past and present of a culture and as a mediator critically reflects upon it. Brodie (2014) believes stand-up is an intimate dialogic art form that is “performed not to but with an audience”. It is organically interconnected to the society, which allows it to reflect back to the society in “both serious and not serious” overtones. It has a vast horizon ranging from “the most trivial details of everyday life … to the most potent political and social issues.”

“A strict, limiting definition of standup comedy would describe an encounter between a single, standing performer behaving comically and/or saying funny things directly to an audience, unsupported by very much in the way of costume, prop, setting, or dramatic vehicle.” (Mintz, 1985, p. 71)

Mintz further details the range of stand-up performances “from one-liners, verbal games involving puns, malapropisms, double-entendres, and the violation of socially acceptable language taboos to physical and prop comedy, insult comedy, parodies and put-downs of current popular culture, and of course social and political criticism” (78). About the role of stand-up comic Mintz says that he/she acts as “our comic spokesperson, as a mediator, an ‘articulator’ of our culture, and as our contemporary anthropologist” (75).

Stand-up as a performative art form stands out from other artistic forms purely on the basis of the “comic’s originality”. Where other art forms can take inspirations from each other, the world of stand-up comedy is completely driven on originality. It is the comic’s creative genius that keeps the genre afresh and ingenious, as the audience can’t laugh on the same joke twice. Thus, the comic needs to constantly revive their work in order to make it relevant and appropriate to the contemporary circumstances around them, both, to make the audience connected as well as aware about the same. The comic achieves this interconnectedness with their audience through their dialogical approach, as the comics directly address the audience throughout their performance and thus create an intimate setting by involving everyone, instead of adopting a monologist approach.

Quirk (2015) believes that comedy can generate serious debate. And stand-up comedy has become an important tool for social criticism and change. As the comedian who chooses to comment on socio-political or cultural issues contributes to change. Thus, humor becomes a crucial aspect that continues to negotiate the boundaries of values, institutions, and authority that control society. As Wertheim states:

No human society is a completely integrated entity. In any community, there are hidden or overt forms of protest against the prevalent hierarchical structure. In general, a more or less dominant set of common values can be discerned – else the society would not have sufficient cohesive power to subsist. But beneath the dominant theme, there always exist different sets of values, which are, to create degree, adhered to among certain social groups and which function as a counterpoint to the leading melody. In general, those counterpoints only manifest themselves in some veiled form – for example, in the tale, jokes, and myths, which give expression to the deviant sets of values. (qtd in Quirk, 2015, p. 14)
For Wertheim, joking is a hoax which allows an ever-present counterculture to express its opposing ideas. Capitalizing on Wertheim’s idea Zijderveld calls joking, “an important means of non-violent resistance”; for Zijderveld, joking can be a weapon. (qtd in Quirk, 2015, p. 15)

Hence, stand-up as a text, qualifies into popular culture because it contains the opportunities to oppose the system. Popular Culture as defined by John Fiske in his book Reading the Popular (Fiske, 1987) is the culture of ordinary people that is created by the masses in their interest by opposing the dominant meaning. Popular Culture becomes a terrain of struggle, where there is a constant interplay of power and resistance. The entire structure of popular culture is based on oppositional meanings and pleasures of the subordinate that would reject not only the dominant meaning but also redistribute the balance of power towards the disempowered. So, popular culture always emerges from within and below and not from without or above. It, therefore, provides opportunities for parody, subversion, invasion, and especially contradiction.

So, stand-up comics employ the use of what de Certeau (1984) calls “the art of making do” as they transform the raw materials into stories, jokes, songs, in a way which gives expressive shape to their own lived experiences. It gives voice to the “victimized dupes”, as it challenges the structure of dominance and stands against the power. Also, it includes a sense of oppositionality and a sense of difference. And it, therefore, treats the people as active agents and not merely as a “site of subjugation.”

Stand-up comics, therefore, become creative and playful critique in every society. Similarly, the stand-up comics in India, especially the satirical stand-up comics play a huge role in breaking the commonsensical construction of “truth”. And thus, provide alternative opinions on the matters most urgent and socio-politically relevant.

5. Stand-up comedy in India
Humor traditions in India can trace their roots into the philosophy of hasya as given by Bharat Muni1 in Natya Shashtra.2 However, the modern-day stand-up comedy is considered to be developed from the traditional sixteenth and seventeenth century performative art form called chakyar koothu. It includes highly refined monologue where the performer narrates episodes from Hindu epics and stories from Puranas. Sometimes, however, it is also a traditional equivalent of the modern stand-up comedy act, incorporating commentary on current socio-political events.

However, till 1980’s the stand-up comedy performances in India were simply viewed as “supporting” or “filler” acts in various performances, such as the theatrical and musical among others. The shift in the perception towards stand-up began in 1986 when Johnny Lever3 performed his set in a charity show called Hope 86. Lever thus led to the initiation of the “self-sufficient” genre of stand-up comedy that was further marked by his released audio cassette of 1980’s called Hansee Ke Hungame, in which he mimicked famous Bollywood actors of the contemporary time. His cassette became extremely popular and opened up new vistas for laughter in India.

Later, the launch of the TV shows like The Great Indian Laughter Challenge, The Great Indian Tamasha, and Comedy Circus, further legitimized the space for stand-up comedy in India. These shows garnered huge popularity among the Indian masses. But in the context of the small screen, the elements of censorship were extremely harsh on the content of stand-up comedians, as they were supposed to refrain from directly pointing or targeting at any political movement or personality on their sets. Hence, the shows were formatted in the manner of a light hearted form of entertainment, dealing with trivial matters of everyday life to ranging from topics from Bollywood.

Moreover, these shows were basically targeted at the Hindi4 speaking audience, since the medium of communication opted by the comics of these shows was Hindi. Thus, owing to subject
matters of the earlier comics, Hindi stand-up comedy developed its identity as a genre dealing with slapstick humor, humorous storytelling and mimicking.

It was Papa CJ\(^5\) and Vir Das\(^6\) who blazed the trail for the English-speaking stand-up comedy culture in India. Their exposure to the UK and US style of stand-up comedy certainly made a mark on the Indian stand-up comedy scene.

6. Stand-up comedy and the digital space

Since the issue of censorship remained adherent in the context of the traditional media, it prevented the stand-up comedians to openly exercise their right of “freedom of expression”. The comedy clubs developed in the urban cities of India not only popularized the genre of stand-up comedy but also provided the stand-up comedian with an alternative space to exercise their right of freedom of expression. These clubs also became training ground for comedians, to experiment with the material, some of which were also uploaded on YouTube. Gradually, the Indian audience became more tolerant on taking the mature jokes. With the new and improved sensibility of audiences, the stand-up comedians began to frame their sets on the issues which were less talked or labeled as taboo. In no time, we see the emergence of new comedy groups like AIB, East India Comedy, CLC, The Viral Fever, Schitzenjiggles, etc. who started investing their money and time in making sketches and their ultimate source of return became YouTube.

The developing laughscope of India is further supported by new digital platforms like Netflix and Amazon Prime Video that are also presenting the changing sensibility of the modern Indian society on the global sphere.

Netflix and Amazon Prime video were launched in India in 2016 and they provided an almost immediate platform to stand-up comedy at the national level. Although stand-up comedy was already taking off in India, owing to the platform of YouTube but with the arrival of on-demand platforms like Amazon and Netflix, the comedians were provided with new opportunities. Especially, Amazon blazed the trail in 2017 by entering into partnership with Only Much Louder (Indian artist and management company) and by launching comedy specials featuring fourteen Indian stand-up comedians. These comedy specials provide comedians with the space to experiment with different styles of humour. Further, in order to support and strengthen the position of comedians, both the platforms have assured comedians of complete freedom with no censorship in regard to their content of jokes. Nüske (2018) argues that digital media has played a major role in making comedian connect with people although due to the digital divide there exists unequal access. Albeit the digital divide, the comics use their “digital position” to constantly dismantle the narrative of the powerful and to reach out to the maximum masses. They employ various tactical measures, one of which is the tactics of the medium of language. As the choice of language on the part of the comic will ultimately decide upon who will make for the final audience. So, the language of stand-up comedy in India becomes significant owing to the country’s multilingualism.

7. The language question in India

Historically, India has remained as a multilingual country. Most of the languages in the modern-day India have their roots in the two language families, namely “Indo-Aryan” and the “Dravidian”. Although the country has recognized 22 official languages, “Hindi” and “English” continue to remain the dominant language of the country.

There exist several conflicts regarding Hindi to be replaced by English. The south and the north-east Indians object the monopoly of Hindi, and favor English. “The northern regions, on the other hand, favor Hindi because they view English as a left-over from the British rule and as a vehicle through which the English-educated elite perpetuate the rule of the northern parties” (Nüske, 18). To subdue this conflict the Parliament of India enacted the Official Language Act, 1963, “which provided for the continued use of English for official purposes along with Hindi, even after 1965 …
the Act itself was amended in 1967 to provide that the use of English would not be ended until a resolution to that effect was passed by the legislature of every state that had not adopted Hindi as its official language, and by each house of the Indian Parliament” (Languages with official status).

However, “the conflict between Hindi and English that derive from both sides claiming to be threatened by cultural imperialism, have been further fueled by Hindu nationalist movements and the rise of the BJP, as they have been putting particular effort into the promotion of the use of Hindi in recent years” (Nüske, 18). The recent remarks made by ministers like Amit Shah and Sanjay Nishad about making Hindi compulsory tell us about language politics in the country.

Reflecting on the language divide in the country Nüske (2018) claims that:

There is a significant divide between the Anglophone, middle to upper class, westernized and predominantly secular urban population and the Hindi and local languages speaking, lower class, traditional and religious rural population that is caused and maintained by a number of interrelated complex vicious circles. The unequal access to broadcasting media as well as the increasing censorship of the freedom of expression of art on television in particular further intensifies the societal gap. Kumar argues that this divide has resulted into two different Indias of which the Anglophone, liberal India that views itself as a missionary of modernity has spun a well-connected network that stands at discursive odds with the traditional and religious-minded India. (Nüske, 24)

So, the choice of language of stand-up comics in India plays a significant role, as it decides upon the ultimate consumers, i.e., the target audience. Hence, the English satirical stand-up comics eventually cater to the intellectual audience, supposedly belonging to the “urban upper-class minority” as compared to the emerging Hindi satirical stand-up comics, whose target audience is both “urban and rural middle-class majority”. Thus, the two groups of comics target different ideological groups, although with the same motive on the part of the comics, but it is the “reception” on the part of audience, that makes all the difference. And eventually makes Hindi satirical comics different from the English satirical comics. Nüske (2018) argues that the choice of language in terms of English and Hindi has led to “differing humor literacies” in the country.

8. Analysis of English and hindi satirical stand-up comedy

For the analysis of satirical stand-up comedy, the researchers have chosen to analyze the stand-up texts from both YouTube and OTT platform of Amazon Prime Video. The English stand-up text is taken from the show “Comicstaan” and for the Hindi ones, select acts of Kumar Kamra and Munawar Faruqui are picked up. The selected comics of both the linguistic group cover a wide range of contemporary issues providing an alternative perspective on the same.

The select Hindi texts are Munawar Faruqui’s “Politics in India – Part 2”, which was released on the comic’s YouTube channel by the same name on 1 July 2021 and Kunal Kamra’s “Kunal Kamra Standup Comedy 2020 Part 2”, which was released on the YouTube channel of the comic by the same name on July 21 and 23, 2020. It should be noted here that the select videos are posted by the comics on their YouTube channel as short clips from their recorded live performances.

The English stand-up acts selected for the study are performed by Rahul Dua and Saurav Mehta in Episode-3 of Season-1 of Comicstaan, called “Off Topic with Tanmay”. The script of the English texts is taken from the subtitles available in the video itself. Since Comicstaan is a comedy reality show, it should be noted here that the select acts are the complete sets of the comics that were recorded live and later streamed on the platform.

Further, in the analysis, the letters used in parenthesis following the comic’s utterances designate audience’s reactions. These include the letters “I” that stands for little laughter, “L” stands for loud laughter, “a” designate minor applause, “A” designates heavy applause, “c” stands for light
cheer, and “C” stands for loud cheer. This style of transcription is taken from Nüske, who further took it from Michael Held-Hernandez.

The comic Rahul Dua from Season-1 brings forward the issue of fake news and misinformation through his set i.e., as follows:

“… Every person should have an opinion in life. But then I don’t have any opinion (L) … so even I tried to form an opinion. I got a cable connection and watched one news channel religiously for four-five days. Finally, I formed an opinion based on that channel because the anchor there was screaming that “best country, best government, bravo, Modi sir.” I said fine.

Then I switched to the next channel. Now on this channel, the lady was saying, “sad country, sad government, Mr. Modi has disappointed.” Now both these channels are broadcasted at the same time in India. These are channel no. 304 and 305. Why don’t they talk among themselves? (L) And clearly, one of them is lying for sure but with so much conviction that you can’t differentiate between true and fake. What if tomorrow I’ll form an opinion on fake news? What if I pass on the wrong information to my fans? (L) This is a vicious cycle. If you don’t have an opinion and are trying to form one, you come across fake news. Then people take offense and start fighting over social media … So, I am not forming an opinion anymore (L) … But the sad part is that people these days are forming opinions on fake news!” (“Off-Topic with Tanmay” 2018: 14:41–18:09)

Fake news is the false and misleading information that is disguised and disseminated as news. It is an “unaccountable” form of journalism which acts as a propaganda machine for the “demagogue” rather than supporting a “transparent” reportage. Reinhard Luthin (1959) defines a demagogue as “A politician skilled in oratory, flattery, and invective; evasive in discussing vital issues; promising everything to everybody; appealing to the passions rather than the reason of the public; and arousing racial, religious, and class prejudice” (p. 3).

These demagogues manipulate and fabricate the content in their own interest to propagate “misinformation” (i.e., intentional dissemination of false information) and in some cases “mal-information”, which is intended to harm and create conflict in the society. Through such acts, the status-quo manages to divert the people’s attention from the “real issues.” And also, by manipulating the content in their own favor, such people white-wash their “public image” among the masses. Such actions take place through the “pro-government” channels that are both funded and managed by the ruling government through which they hegemonize the critical thinking of the people. These media channels teach us who we should love and who we should hate.

Rahul Dua’s set breaks the constructed “common sense truth” and challenges the “official narrative” produced by the news media. It can be seen from his line, where he says, “Both these channels are broadcasted at the same time in India … One of them is lying for sure.” Thus, he calls for exploring the genealogy of the situation and therefore, opens up the space for contradictions.

The comic Saurav Mehta from Season-1 takes up the issue of renaming of buildings and places by the present regime, his set is as follows:

“Tonight, I’ll be talking about the Taj Mahal. Now the thing is I recently read in the news that the UP Government has excluded the Taj Mahal from its tourism booklet. Allegedly, the UP Government is calling it ‘demountmentization.’ (A) But the decision makes sense, okay? Because the UP Government is known to hate public display of affection. And guess what that’s what exactly the Taj Mahal is (L). Now see, the booklet doesn’t have Taj but it has pictures of honorable CM Mr. Yogi Adityanath. Now with all due respect, he is beautiful (A). But is he as beautiful as Taj? Is he the right replacement for Taj? Agreed, that he’s got a better dome than Taj, agreed (L). Another politician said that the Mughals were plunderers, so we shouldn’t call them ancestors, we should call them plunderers. I mean hey, you can’t choose your ancestors! That’s like me saying, ‘No, no, I’ve not
come from apes. I’ve come from giraffe species.’ (L) No, that’s not how it works. The problem is these politicians who are very hypocritical and they confuse me a lot. So, I think they should stop confusing me. The Prime Minister of India should say it in his Independence Day speech that anything Mughal doesn’t represent India. He should go on Independence Day and say this. But it’s going to be slightly awkward because he’s gonna have to do it at the Red Fort. And you know who made the Red Fort, right? Shah Jahan!” (L, A) (“Off-Topic with Tanmay” 2018: 27:52–30:44) Saurav Mehta in his set attacks the “saffronising” policies of the present government that adheres to the “Hindutva” philosophy of V.D. Savarkar. The term Hindutva in its literal sense stands for “Hinduness”. Hindutva is an extremist ideology that promotes Hindu nationalism and therefore aims to distort the edifice of India as a secular nation by transforming it into a “Hindu Rashtra”. The creation of oppositional meaning, in this case, becomes evident after both the comics refused to accept the narrative provided by one of the MLAs of the present regime who during his public address at Sisauli village in Meerut district of Uttar Pradesh claimed that it is a matter of utter “disgrace” that Uttar Pradesh has become a site to house the “blot in the face of Indian Culture, i.e., Taj Mahal.” He further claimed that since it is built by the “traitors” it should not get any space in the “Indian history” and if the names of such traitors are enlisted in the national history, then he “guarantees” the citizens that history of the nation will be changed. And they’ll head towards their mission by excluding the Taj Mahal from the tourism booklet of the state and further by adopting the renaming politics in the country under the slogan of “gharvapri movement.” Thus, the comic rejects the divisive politics of the government and mock the creation of a pure “Hindu Rashtra” that further poses a challenge to the secularist and pluralist policies of the “democratic” India. And tries to show, how owing to such practices, the nation as a whole will ultimately head towards its hubris. The “power-bloc” is constructing the “homogenous truth” in line with Savarkarian idea of India being the “Punyabhoomi”, i.e., Holyland (refers to the origin of one’s religion) and “Pitrabhoomi”, i.e., Fatherland (refers to the origin of one’s culture) of mere Hindus and disregards Muslims as invaders and plunderers. As a result, the present regime has turned towards “erasing” (i.e., the systematic deconstruction of memory) the legacy of Mughals in creating the present identity of the rich Indian culture. Similarly, Mehta brings forward this policy of the government through his satirical line, where he says, “The Prime Minister of India should say this in his Independence Day speech that anything Mughal doesn’t represent India … but it’s going to be slightly awkward because he’s going to have to do it at the Red Fort and you know who made the Red Fort, right? Shahjahan!” Thus, he not only attacks the Hindutva ideology of the government but also points out that the real quality of “Indianness” cannot be achieved without having diversity and it is this “unity in diversity” that makes India a distinguished land.}

Now moving towards the Hindi stand-up texts, the comic Munawar Faruqui in his video “Politics in India, Part-2” takes up the issue of growing Islamophobia in the country as well as growing humanitarian crisis globally; his set is translated as follows:

“Good evening, Kolkata! So, first of all, thank you so much for coming. Since its pandemic and there are a lot of cases. Still, you guys came when even I have a lot of cases on me. Finally, one year is complete of Tabligi Jamaat … So, my name is Munawar Iqbal Faruqui, I was born and brought up in Gujarat. Survived in Gujarat (A) I put this joke on YouTube one year ago, so everyone went mad. The right-wing people were completely outraged about how could you say such things about Gujarat. So, I wrote a sequel joke to it. The sequel joke is “I think that I survived because the government is not good in completing their targets.” (C)
Well, how many of you guys are here to listen to dark, satirical or political jokes that I usually do? (L) I have bad news for you guys … I won’t do any of it. See, till it was only online hate, everything was fine … Now I will do joke on trivial matters. Only then I could be safe. You all will be anyways entertained and I’ll remain alive. Now, I’ll only focus on remaining safe. I don’t want any kind of risk.

Now, I’ll tell you a Hollywood joke. I’ll tell you an inception joke … so I was sleeping (l) and I had a dream. And I saw Home Minister in my dream. I saw him and went back to sleep. (l) Since we remain unhappy with each other. But he insisted on listening to him. So, I showed him my “aadhar card” and told him to go. (l) Let me sleep as I have to go on job in the morning.

“(surprisingly) You have a job?” (L)

“Have to go to find one!”

So, I asked him “what’s the matter?”

So, he said “I have a solution for the problem of lynching that Muslims are facing in India”

… I couldn’t believe my ears, for a minute I thought I was having a change of heart about him. (l) So, I asked the solution.

He said “just imagine (l) … if we legalize the Muslims to wear bomb on their chest … Then people will be afraid to attack you people. Also, it will generate employment for the unemployed youth. But this project will have to be a ‘Make in India’ one. (A) And these bombs will be delivered by Amazon. Because who could deliver them better than an American company” (C, L)

… But I had a question. So, I said “what if people learned to defuse the bomb?”

… So, he said “I have a solution to this also. Every bomb will have two wires, one will be of saffron color and the second will be of green color. So, see the saffron wire they’ll never cut and the green one will not be cut for the first time!” (C, L, A) “Politics in India, Part-2” 2021: 30–15:10

In his 15 minutes act, Faruqui has raised the questions like how the Indian Covid-19 situation was used as a weapon to instigate communal hatred and was given an Islamophobic turn. Soon the Twitter was over-flooded with hashtags like #CoronaJihad, #NizamuddinIdiots, #Covid-786, #TablighiVirus, thus exposing the religious fault lines in a sharply divided and polarized country.

Although the Tablighi were responsible for violation of social congregation rules but due to the accounts of one-sided hatred, people failed to acknowledge other events of violation of Covid-19 protocols by other sects like, “Yogi Adityanath, the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh attended a Hindu celebration a day into the lockdown. And 40,000 people in 20 villages were quarantined in Punjab state after a Covid-19 outbreak was linked to a Sikh preacher who had returned from a trip to Italy and Germany” (Coronavirus).

Furthermore, Faruqui addressed the issue of his arrest that garnered huge attention both domestically and internationally, raising questions regarding the growing intolerance and restrictive freedom of expression that is now heavily witnessed in the country. The incident made worldwide news that is evident from the headline of the BBC NEWS that read as “The Indian comic in jail for jokes he didn’t crack”. Faruqui was apparently imprisoned for 28 days because Eklaya Singh Gaud, the son of a BJP MLA from Madhya Pradesh, Malini Singh Gaud, “anticipated” that Faruqui was going to insult Hindu Gods and Goddesses in his act. And even “the police later admitted they had no evidence that the comic had done so, and that the complainant had “overheard some jokes” that the comic was preparing for the show” (Biswas). Such intolerance and backlash against artists are undermining creative freedom in India and shrinking space for creativity.
He also addressed the issue of escalating hate and prejudice against the Muslims in the country especially since the current regime came into power by hinting at the events like Gujarat riots of 2002\textsuperscript{14} to the CAA-NRC law.\textsuperscript{15} Even the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom in the year 2021 recommended that “India should be designated a country of particular concern for engaging in and tolerating systematic ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations, the world is waking up to the reality of today’s India” (Pollard). Thus, bringing to light the fact that India is ranked as among the worst in the world for religious intolerance.

The comedian is also critical of the supposedly “developed” or “super-power” countries that under the “guise” of democracy inflict unrest and destruction onto the world. Thus, the comic’s cosmopolitan approach is reflected from the fact that he criticizes the unjust activities of the powerful both on the global level and on the domestic level, thereby establishing a counter-narrative beyond the control of the “top-bottom” model of the dominant.

The comic Kunal Kamra in his video “Stand-up Comedy 2020, Part-2” takes up the issues like political entering the personal space, increasing communal hatred, fake news, to futile actions of the regime; his set is translated as follows:

“… I mean there is a limit to everything. People are getting polarized even at homes. I can’t save my home, so the country remains out of question. One should save the home first. My mother sitting at the home is telling me “Son Hindu is in danger”. (L)

I’m telling her “No mom logic is in danger” (L, C)

… but mom is like “no Hindu is in danger!”

I am explaining “no it is Bengal tiger that is in danger, they are only 1450 but humans are 1.3 billion in India. How can 80 crore people be in danger in their own country?” (L)

But my mom is like “no they are! I received a PPT”. (L, A)

It was a 9-page PPT, I read it complete, it said that Hindu is in danger, India is on the way to getting Islamized … Hindus have just one country man, where will we go?

… I read it complete and said “mom Hindu is in danger! (L) So, I am converting into Islam. (L) You can choose for yourself. I don’t want this threatened life all the time. Because ‘hamara kya hai hum to fakir aadmi hai, jhola uda ke … [we are ascetic, we’ll take our sack and] (L, A, C)

Mom didn’t get the joke, she thought I am actually converting. My mother started calling my father “what is your son saying. He is talking about changing his faith … why don’t you say anything. Day after tomorrow there is Mundan [tonsure ceremony] of Pooja’s son, what if he started reading Namaaz there? What will I say to the guest?”

“What can we do then, we’ll say he is searching for his contact lens.” (L)

“Who finds lens with close eyes?!”

They started fighting I had to remind them that Hindu is in danger. This topic of conversion is such that … well I have never seen anyone leaving faith. No! I have, but never seen them adopting other faith. If one leaves, they leave forever. And here people are claiming that the propagandas are converting people … Hey! 1.3 billion people in India, how many mainstream celebrities you know that have converted to Islam. Like not the ones who wanted to marry! They would have gone wherever this facility was available. But the one who choose the faith! You can’t even find one name, except for A. R. Rahman. But later to compensate, he made so many patriotic songs! (L) he didn’t want any risk … he
didn’t want that one day an elderly man reaching his concert and saying “I am telling there is a bomb in his harmonium (L) when this bomb will explode, he will come and chant ‘khwaja mere khwjaa’.”

Look we are not going to be one sided, ok. We are going to be rational. It’s not like that nothing good has happened in the last 6 years. It has, and you should learn to acknowledge. Don’t be completely negative. Good things have also happened as now we know how many stupids are there in our family. (A, C)

Every morning I open my family WhatsApp group and watch my uncle’s acts. As every morning he would message things like “the reality of the statue of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel. The 3000 crore rupees were spent on his statue because there is a camera installed in the eye of the statue of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel. (L) From where the Prime Minister gets report of Pakistan. (L) Then I reminded him that the statue is looking at India and [in frustration] not even looking there [Pakistan] ” L, A; “”Kunal Kamra Stand-up Comedy” 2020 Part-2” 2020: 16–5:43

The comedian Kunal Kamra talks about how the politics is intruding into the “inherently apolitical” spaces of the home in itself and how the process of polarization is entering into the domestic realms. He suggests that this is comparatively a new phenomenon that is recently observed and is gaining momentum at a rapid pace. This becomes evident from the lines “People are getting polarized even at homes. I can’t save my home, so the country remains out of question. One should save the home first.”

He points out how the notion of “Islamophobia” is being used as a weapon to perpetuate “intolerance” in the country, especially through the fake narratives and jingoism. The fake news is used as a propaganda machinery and further heat up the already divided social setups. “In India, disinformation often has an organised character, with propaganda units affiliated with parties pushing false information in order to influence the political narrative”. There is observed a huge perceptive decadence in the country as the people in their chauvinism have failed to recognize that they are being turned against each other without realizing.

The regime majorly operates through promoting communal disharmony and associates it with the religious divide in the country. Suppression and oppression are the sole criteria of the government, which even extends to the intra-religious dimensions if and when required. This selective approach of the regime can be testified from the statement of one of the spokespersons of BJP, Sudhanshu Trivedi. In his debate on “The state of war in U.P.” with AIMIM president Asaduddin Owaisi on India Today, while answering to the question of anchor Anjna Om Kashap on “whether you discriminate between Hindu and Muslim even in atrocities?” he claimed “as far as atrocities are concerned, we do not discriminate on any basis.” (Sudhanshu Trivedi 5:22–5:28). Thus, their spokesperson openly admits to oppressing people irrespective of any religion bias. Because ultimately the aim is to suppress, subjugate, divide, and keep people ignorant. And if anyone does otherwise, they are either charged with sedition, FIRs or find themselves landed in jail.

Kamra also takes about the precedential politics over the construction of statues in India as the symbolic appropriation of the political space as well as the assertion of real or imaginary discourses. He talks about the futility of spending tax-payers money on lavish statues instead of a deserving cause and takes a dig at the “illogical justifications” that were provided by the pro right-wing members over the hefty construction of the statue, which costed around 2989 Crore.

Despite the “repressive” tactics of the dominant, Kamra escapes the hegemonic “claw-back” (Fiske & Hartley, 1978) of the ruling government and through his act he not only resists against the powerful but also presents the “suppressed” narratives to the forefront.

From the above analysis of the stand-up acts, it becomes evident that there exists no distinctive difference when it comes to the political stand-up comedy either in Hindi or in English. Yet there is
a growing increase in targeting the Hindi-speaking stand-up comics over the English-speaking stand-up comics. The oppression of Hindi-speaking political stand-up comics can be observed from the recent cases of Munawar Faruqui and Kunal Kamra. The duo has faced severe outrage from the Hindutva groups and has been frequently labeled as “anti-Hindu” by the “self-appointed so-called stakeholders of the religion”.

9. Difference between hindi and English stand-up comics
The Hindi-speaking comics found themselves at more risk simply because of their “more accessibility”. According to the census of 2011, the English-speaking population comprises 10% of India whereas Hindi-speaking population comprises 44% of the total population of India. The wider reach of the Hindi speaking comics poses grave threat to the ruling government especially when it is moving towards authoritarianism. Hence, they opt for every single measure needed to curb their voices, these measures range from charging with sedition, banning their shows to even imprisonment.

Furthermore, “relatability” of content is observed more in Hindi, as compared to English, because in most of the cases, Hindi is either the first or second language, whereas English is not a native tongue in India, although it has been Indianized.

There also exists a huge disparity in the audience based on the language, since English stands as an elite language in India. So, the English-speaking audience is usually of upper-middle origins, “usually” urban based and educated. Although even Hindi-speaking population could be of upper-middle class status, yet majority of it is rural based.

Moreover, unequal access to internet has created differing “humour literacies” in Hindi and English-speaking audience as the latter used to perceive the genre more in the slapstick sense than a straightforward political satire unlike the former.

Suffice from the existing disparities the stand-up comedians are now increasingly using their position to reach out to the common masses and reflect on the misconduct of the government and express their resentment. Their increasing popularity shows that even the audience shares the same like-mindedness and resentment towards the ruling regime. This influence becomes the bone of contention between the stand-up comics and the one in power. Even though the English-speaking comics are also at the risk of being charged with sedition, as can be observed from the recent outrage over Vir Das’s video entitled “I come from two Indias”, that was a clip from his performance in the U.S. But this enraged is especially observed in case of Hindi-speaking comedians. The Hindi-speaking comics are at more risk simply because of their “more accessibility”. This reason also stands as a testament of why there exists higher number of political stand-up comedians in the English language than in the Hindi language, but the number is growing gradually.

10. Conclusion
Humor has come a long way from being considered as something derogatory to a fine skill, which has essentially proved its potential to impact the lives of the masses through its various genres, ranging from light-hearted entertainments like slapstick comedy to cultural critiques in the form of political or satirical stand-up comedy.

Stand-up comedy is observed as a skillful art of communication that implies the use of pun and satire to criticize the status quo. In many ways, stand-up becomes the people’s art; speaking up for them, giving them a voice and representing their struggle to make a place in a world that is ever-shifting, unpredictable, and so unequal. From a survival strategy to the mobilization of the masses against the authoritarian functioning of the state these creative forces characterized as “tiny resistances” of people have given new meanings and perspectives to our cultural life. Thus, stand-up comedy has proved itself to be a part of the cultural landscape that has acquired new dimensions over time and space. It has helped to shift our cognitive angle, rethinking, and reimagining the world through different eyes.
The political stand-up comics both of English and Hindi linguistic group are constantly using their position to revolutionize the humorous dimensions by breaking the “hegemonic capture” of the masses and exposing the hypocritical face of the regime. Despite facing the atrocities of the dominant and his tactics to silence the same the political stand-up comics continue to show their resistance to the establishment by constantly reminding the secular roots of the country to both its masses as well as to the ruling powers. Hence, they threaten the motives of the powerful and thus face the repercussion of the same by being charged with sedition and even imprisonment.

Stand-up comedy has developed itself far from being as an entertaining medium to being as a “popular” medium of the subordinates that holds the potential to destabilize the motives of the one in power. Stand-up comedians in India are one of those voices that continue to express their dissent and criticize the autocratic moves. They refuse to be the passive receivers of the dominant narratives and keep up the critical thinking alive in the masses. They show the “other side of the one-sided truth”. Stand-up therefore becomes the creative mode of “popular” resilience developed by the subordinate, for the subordinate. And the constant threat faced by Indian political stand-up comics be it Anglophone or Hindi comedians at the hands of the current regime stands as a witness to the power that the genre holds and the fear of the regime from the same.

11. Implication of the study
The paper is written to provide a glimpse of the works and the efforts put forward by the Indian stand-up comics, to reach to a wider number of people. It attempts to highlight the fact that how the Indian stand-up comics are coming to the forefront to voice against the growing trend of majoritarianism in the country, even when most of the traditional news media companies and their journalists have failed to protect the integrity of country. Most of the traditional news media companies are either abiding by the dominant or adopting an unquestioning outlook to the powerful at their mal-practices. They have thus miserably failed to protect the democratic outlook of the country despite being regarded as the fourth pillar of the democracy itself. By discarding the journalism ethics, they decided to bootlick the dominant and disseminate its propaganda of ignoring the communal violence in the country and hence are aptly called as the Godi Media.16

As a citizen of India, I was personally influenced by the works of the Indian political stand-up comics. Their ability to educate the unaware masses and especially the youth, who otherwise turns a blind eye towards political issues, is commendable. I am myself one such example of a person who, at one point in time was majorly uninformed and uninterested in the political affairs of the country. Whose interest in the political matters of the country is revoked after coming across these satirical stand-up comics. Because taking in consideration the contemporary political situation in India, it is the need of the hour to educate oneself about the matters of country.

At such times when the institutions like Godi Media have failed its citizens and censorship and boycott cultures are trending in the country like never before. This in turn restrains one from voicing the injustices and wrong practices of the dominant. The Indian satirical and political stand-up comics have come as a representation of the rational citizens of the country, who are not blinded by the venomous propagandas of communal hate. They are the rational voices of dissent. Voices of the secular nation state of India who refuse to see their country and its citizens fall for the tactics of “divide and rule” by “their” own representatives. Furthermore, they are well aware of the fact that when other genres or institutions fail the people and society. Comedy then becomes the only genre that has the potential to reach out to the people and connect with them. Therefore, the political stand-up comics through their witty and powerful sets put forward the silenced narratives to the masses in a very cordial environment. And it is the pure simplicity of the genre that makes it comprehensible to all sections of the society and even forces them to ponder upon the situation of their contemporary society.
Hence, their work needs to be acknowledged and their voices need to be supported and shared far and wide, and that is the major purpose of writing this paper. So, anyone who is keen to explore the Indian socio-cultural setup, who seeks to know more about the Indian stand-up comics and how they are making an impact on the society, or who believe in the impact of humour in changing the dynamics of the contemporary cultures and societies, eventually makes for the target reader of this paper. Because the case of India, for instance, is one such prominent example where the Indian stand-up comics have taken up the job to reflect back to the society its ugly realities. And have stood up to the dominant when even most of the TV news agencies have failed to do so. And from time and again, either through their live shows or through the digital platforms they are revoking the lost rationality. It had been strangled by the communal hate owing to the dominant and its propaganda machines.

The impact of the stand-up comics is becoming even more difficult to curb down for the dominant. As instead of stepping back, more satirical stand-up comics are coming up, who have expanded the linguistic horizons of the genre away from just English and Hindi. As in the recent years, massive shift is being observed towards the regional languages. These regional stand-up comics are on their way to create their new budding space. And would have potential future prospective to use their voice and platform to reach to the spaces where both Hindi and English failed to find a place.

Since eliciting humour is the out-product of the shared linguistic, cultural, and social phenomenon. Subtitling of humour becomes particularly difficult when it is translated from the SL to the TL. Moreover, the comic’s style, tone, intonations, pauses, timing, and visual elements become even more difficult to be conveyed, when converted in a written text. Hence, the details of the show and details of the YouTube videos are provided for an inclusive understanding of the readers.

Furthermore, shared knowledge of the socio-politico-cultural background is of extreme importance for the readers to familiarize themselves with the culture of the undertaken study. Hence, by providing the relevant footnotes, care has been maintained to familiarize the unfamiliar readers to the contemporary Indian socio-politico-cultural background, as much as possible.

Additionally, to maintain the structure or the format of the comics’ acts, the translated texts are kept as close to the SL verbal syntax as possible, through the mode of literal translation.

Although during the process of analysis, limitation was particularly observed in the context of Hindi stand-up acts, since the Hindi texts needed to be translated into English for the purpose of analysis. Yet care was maintained to keep the essence of the meanings as close as possible, and for that even the original phrases were included. Yet it cannot be refuted that there exists no “perfect” translation. Even though efforts were made to retain the essence of the act by striving near perfection, still the translation cannot replicate the complete essence of the original act.

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**Notes**
1. “Bharat Muni was an ancient sage who the musical treatise Natya Shastra is traditionally attributed to. The work covers ancient Indian dramaturgy and histrionics, especially Sanskrit theatre. Bharat is considered the father of Indian theatrical art forms. He is dated to between 200 BCE and 200 CE, but estimates vary between 500 BCE and 500 CE” (Bharata Muni).
2. “The Natya Shastra is notable as an ancient encyclopedic treatise on the arts, which has influenced dance, music and literary traditions in India. It is also notable for its aesthetic “Rasa” theory, which asserts that entertainment is the desired effect of performance arts but not the primary goal and that the primary goal is to transport the individual in the audience into another parallel reality, full of wonder, where he experiences the essence of his own consciousness and reflects on spiritual and moral questions” (Natya Shastra).

3. “Johnny Lever is an Indian actor and comedian who is known for his works in Hindi cinema. He is one of the first stand-up comedians in India. He started to perform stand-up comedy in musical shows (orchestras). He recorded a comedy cassette called Hansee Ke Hungame which gave him recognition at homes via the audio mode. In 1986, he performed in a charity show Hope 86 in front of members of the Hindi film industry as a filler. His talent was recognized, which resulted in producer Gul Anand offering him a comic role in his film” (Johnny Lever).

4. “Hindi is an Indic-Aryan language spoken chiefly in the ‘Hindi Belt’ region encompassing parts of northern, central, and western India. Hindi, written in the Devanagari script, is one of the two official languages of the Government of India, along with English. It is an official language in 9 states and 3 union territories out of 28 states and 8 union territories of the country. Hindi is also one of the 22 scheduled languages of the Republic of India” (Hindi).

5. “Papa CJ is a stand-up comedian from India. For higher studies he went to the UK whereby after visiting the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2004, started performing stand-up comedy. After being a regular on the UK comedy circuit he moved back to New Delhi in early 2008, where he started off the English language stand-up comedy circuit in India and began grooming new talent. In 2009 Papa CJ became the first Indian comedian to be invited to perform at the Just for Laughs festival in Canada. In 2015, he became the first Indian comedian invited to do a solo show at the Melbourne International Comedy Festival” (Papa CJ).

6. Varun is an Indian-American comedian, actor and musician. Das had studied in the US and had a small career as a stand-up comedian at open mic nights in Chicago. When he came to India in 2003 to perform a stand-up show in Delhi, he introduced the Indian audience to the Anglophone and rougher American stand-up humor. In 2017, he became the first Indian comic to make a comedy special for Netflix called “Abroad Understanding”.

7. Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) is one of the two major political parties in India alongside the Indian National Congress. “Since 194, it has been the ruling political party in India under Narendra Modi, the incumbent Indian prime minister. The BJP is aligned with right-wing politics, and its policies have historically reflected a traditional Hindu nationalist ideology; it has close ideological and organizational links to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)” (Bhartiya Janata Party).

8. Recently in one of his address the Chairman of the Parliamentary Official Language Committee, Mr. Amit Shah, who is also the Union Minister of the country, claimed to make Hindi as the “link” language of the country by replacing English as the common language.

9. Sanjay Nishad is Uttar Pradesh’s fisheries minister and is politically affiliated to the BJP. He sparked a controversy in April 2022, after he claimed that people who do not love Hindi will be assumed as foreigners or as linked to foreign powers, adding further that people who do not speak Hindi “should leave this country and go elsewhere”.

10. Kunal Kamra is an Indian stand-up comic known for his political and observational comedy. In March 2017, he released a stand-up comedy video titled “Patriotism and the Government” on his YouTube channel mocking the Indian government. He received several death threats for uploading this video. Due to his constant criticism of the government, he is often labeled as “anti-Hindu” and “Congress dog” (i.e., a derogatory term used for someone who favor INC over other parties). In December 2021, his multiple shows to be held in Bengaluru were cancelled due to “threats to close down the venue if the shows were held” by the extremist Hindutva organizations. Even in September 2022, his stand-up shows that were to be held in Gurgaon were cancelled by the right-wing Hindu organization called Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP).

11. Munawar Isqat Faruqui is an Indian stand-up comic and a rapper. Faruqui’s stand-up genre ranges from dark comedy, satire, and character comedy. In January 2021 while performing a stand-up show at Munro Cafe in Indore, Madhya Pradesh, he was interrupted by Eklaya Singh Gaur, son of BJP MLA [from Indore] accusing him of making malicious jokes about Hindu deities and the Minister of Home Affairs of India, Amit Shah. Hence, Faruqui found himself locked up for 35 days. Even in 2022 there seems no sign of relief for the comics as his latest show that was to be held in the national capital Delhi on 28 August 2022 was cancelled by the Delhi Police over the “fear” of disruption in harmony due to his performance.

12. Rahul Dua is an investment banker turned stand-up comic. His genre of stand-up comedy is observational comedy. He caught his first big break after he appeared on Amazon Prime Video comedy reality show called Comicstaan. The comic also posts his stand-up clips on his YouTube channel run by the same name, i.e., Rahul Dua

13. Saurav Mehta is an Indian stand-up comic. He caught his first big break as a stand-up comic after he appeared on Amazon Prime Video comedy reality show called Comicstaan. He is also a writer and an actor.

14. Gujarat riots of 2002 were a three-day period of inter-communal violence that took place in the reign of the then Chief Minister of Gujarat, Mr. Narendra Modi (who is the current Prime Minister of India and is politically affiliated to the BJP).

15. The Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019 was passed by the Parliament of India on 11 December 2019. It amended the Citizenship Act, 1955 by providing a pathway to Indian citizenship for persecuted religious minorities from, Bangladesh and Pakistan who are Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis or Christians, and arrived in
India before the end of December 2014. The law does not grant such eligibility to Muslims from these Muslim-majority countries. The act was the first time that religion had been overtly used as a criterion for citizenship under Indian law and attracted global criticism” (Citizenship (Amendment) Act).

“The National Register of Citizens (NRC) is a register of all Indian citizens whose creation is mandated by the 2003 amendment of the Citizenship Act, 1955. Its purpose is to document all the legal citizens of India so that the illegal immigrants can be identified and deported. It has been implemented for the state of Assam starting in 2013–2014. The Government of India announced plans to implement it for the rest of the country in 2021, but it has not yet been implemented (National Register).

16. Godi media also called Media is a pejorative term coined and popularized by Ravish Kumar who is a journalist in the Indian news media company called NDTV. Idiomatic equivalent of the term Godi media could be “lapdog media” in English. The term is used to refer to the television news media or any other forms of media that are perceived as mouthpieces of the ruling political party of India called BJP.

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