

*'Evaluate Patriotism with  
Logic!': Interruptive  
Interiority, Nation and  
Indian Stand – Up Com-  
edies: A Transactional  
Analysis*

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*Patience and sorrow strove  
Who should express her goodliest. You have seen  
Sunshine and rain at once; her smiles and tears  
Were like a better way; those happy smilets,  
That play'd on her ripe lip, seem'd not to know  
What guests were in her eyes; which parted thence,  
As pearls from diamonds dropp'd*

King Lear IV, iii, 18 – 24<sup>1</sup>

*Why I don't do jokes on politics? It is because our government is super  
chill. Yay, yay, yay. Super chill our government is. Our government  
is so bipolar it is not even funny. If I dated someone like the govern-*

*ment I would break up on the first day. Our government is insane, okay? I don't do jokes on politics in India because I want to be safe.*

(Kenny Sebastian. Live in Chennai.  
Why I don't do jokes on politics in India)<sup>2</sup>

On January 25, 2018, The Times of India carried a news on its social section, which reported that comedian Kunal Kamra has been asked to vacate his house in Mumbai by his landlady, due to what she termed 'political issues' in a whatsapp conversation with the comedian. Kamra later observed in his facebook post that in India, 'as a comedian political opinion comes as a cost'.<sup>3</sup> Earlier, Kamra carried out an act named 'Patriotism in India', where he lashed out at the overt exhibition of patriotism and advocacy of militant nationalism that was being promoted by a section of the political leaders of the country, and making the citizens a party to that. Kamra invited death threats and abuses, and what was more his very living was jeopardized. A political leader whom he ridiculed was a close friend of the chief organizer or the CEO of a business firm where his show was slated, and it was scrapped. The trend was dangerous for him, since corporate professionals generally form the core of the audience for stand up comedy in India today. More recently, on April 3 the organizers of the Jaipur literary meet cancelled the show of popular comedian Rahul Subramaniam, since a group of professional performers – DJs of different clubs – took offence at one of his acts; and the organizers decided to stand by the offended rather

than the artist.<sup>4</sup> Such cases are often reported now. In the program by Kenny Sebastian referred to above, the popular stand up artist states: ‘Why I don’t do jokes on politics is because I’m scared. That’s why? It’s not that I can’t get punchlines in political jokes but I don’t want to get punched on my face’.<sup>5</sup> Clearly, the stand up comedy in India has become an important platform for raising and disseminating political views. Yet, the question remains is how and why have stand up comedy suddenly gathered such unexpected momentum in the last decade or so – not only are the comedians attracting full house of audience and fans all across the country, but their views and statements are becoming subjects of political activism and retaliatory action as well.

Typically, in a stand up comedy, an individual comedian delivers his item to an audience as a solo performer where the setting may vary from a small and niche pub to a wider audience in a big theatre. Essentially, it is a solo form of performance. Although there may be situations where the comedian works in a duo format, or more—and studies on stand up comedy have included such acts within their purview<sup>6</sup>—yet, this study will confine itself to a study of two primarily solo acts with the belief that its analysis and conclusions can be extended to these forms as well. This article is a theoretical intervention into understanding the psychology and economy that goes behind stand up comedy as a cultural marker, raising enquiries regarding some very basic questions

like what goes behind the performed joke within a social or sphere that make people laugh; joke as an independent category of social utterance and its relationship to the comic; what does it mean when a primarily social act like the joke is transposed to the scene of professional performance – including a certain media of dissemination; finally bringing in the question of value transaction, which in this essay will be confined to political value in the form of nationalism. The final analysis will be an attempt to understand jokes from the point of view of Berne's transactional analysis, which has been found to be absent from existing analyses of jokes.

### **Theorizing Jokes: Aesthetic, Psychological, Political**

Comedy, as a literary genre, has attracted critical and philosophical attention from early times. The comic is related to the generic term 'comedy' in an angular way. There are points of overlaps, where the comic and the comedy cut across each other's path – yet both agree to have a journey quite independent of each others' intrusions, along roads which are distinctly independent. If comedy refers largely to a genre, the comic refers mostly to a response. Of the many differences between the two, what comes foremost to mind is that the first can be read and enjoyed in isolation and be thoroughly enjoyed by usually a trained but often a casual reader. The second, by definition, needs a response to be meaningful.

The theorizing of the comic has two main strands – the aesthetic and the psychological.

To broadly take stock of the aesthetic schools of understanding the comic, it is necessary to note that the differences between the two were not so distinct in the classical period of the modern West. The Comic was understood as a performing - primarily dramatic - form which had the elicitation of the mirthful feeling as its primary objective. In its earlier stage in the West, comedies were meant to elicit spontaneous laughter through ridicule, representation of the grotesque, and presentation of satiric modes. It had its root in Dionysian rituals of Megaris and Sycion and was characterized by strong sexual and scatological overtones. These early plays were yet a long way off the sophisticated satires of Aristophanes, and we come to know of their content mostly through Roman reconstructions like Plautus' *Aulularia* based by common consent on a Menander's lost comedy, a condition not unlike sculpture. Although extremely popular, comedy was never thought to be of the same stature as tragedy – only one day was devoted to its performance as compared to three for the later in the annual City Dionysian festival. Moreover, it resisted strict theorization. Comedy always had something that resisted theorizing, definition and categorization. This discomfort is evident in subsequent interpretation which almost went out to accommodate anything that was not clearly within the tragic vein as comic.

Although it will be hyperbolic to state that tragedy had a clear and definable, and perhaps somewhat static, structure – it in all appearance was more recognizable in its characteristics than comedy; particularly through the clearly discernable towering presence of the tragic hero or heroine, one on whom misfortune amassed itself either through his or her own doing or by chance and forces beyond human control. For comedy, there was no such clear generic marker. This discomfort is most understandably manifest in the various categories that critics have created within comedy itself in subsequent times. In his afterword to *The Labyrinth of the Comedy*, Richard Keller mentions as many as thirty diametrically opposite views that have been presented on comedy, twenty-four of which were based on the idea of social opposition.<sup>7</sup>

The discomfort is not unique to the West. In Indian aesthetic theory, no clear distinction is made between comedy as a genre, the comic as a performance that elicits a certain kind of response, which is laughter, and the joke. In fact, the *rasa* is named after the response – *hasya*. *Hasya* is one of the *rasas* laid out in the *natyasastra*. Regarding the *alambana* (or cause of perpetuation) of *hasya*, Vishwanatha has defined in Chapter IV of *Sahityadarpana*, that –

*Vikritakarvakchestam yamalokya haregjanam/tamatrambanam pratu*

Thus it refers to the ‘*vikriti*’ or deformity of form or speech, an aberration. But for *hasya* it needs to be qualified, as they themselves may or may not lead to laughter. Shastri states, ‘the term *alambana* has a slightly different shade of meaning when applied to *hasya* on the one hand and *sringara*, *karuna* and *vira* on the other’.<sup>8</sup> The *sthayibhava* or constant emotion of *hasya* is haas, or laughter. But is that an emotion at all, or is it a *sthayin* only in the sense that it is present in all agencies at some point of time, but is made meaningful, drawing its semantic import only in relation to other *bhavas*. In Sanskrit *Rasa* theory – the gamut of *rasas* – *hasya* is not only about aberration, but an aberration itself. Shastri states ‘the theory of *rasa* as expounded and elaborated by our ancient scholars may not be applicable to *hasya* in toto’.<sup>9</sup> But this paper would argue that is not the complete picture. There is an irony, not out place, in this argument itself. *Hasya* is not only not an aberration of a *rasa*, it may argued that it is actually the truest of all *rasas*, turning others into if not aberrations, at least incomplete as *rasas*. How so? That is a question we will return to once we understand laughter and not only as an affect but also as an entity within itself, but for that we need to survey the field and find out other theories related to the comic affect and joke.

Western aesthetic theory has been overtly engaged in understanding comedy as dissimulation, as a representative of a dichotomy between ‘appearance’ and ‘reality’.

Unmasking has been a latent trope throughout its entire gamut of theoretical enquiry. This may be finally traced to the Bacchic rituals, where actual masks of goats, and fake hooves and phalluses were worn by the participants to create an illusion of excess sexuality. Once the participant was unmasked, the reality was revealed and that caused the laughter. Thus, unmasking has always been a major form of comic exploration. In Western theories of the comic, this has indeed been a bedrock. However, over the years as the ritualistic and nuclear performances increased in depth and volume to become a loosely defined artifact called comedy, this spontaneous sensation turned into joke. A joke is a part of the comic, but a comic cannot be altogether a joke. The sexual root also underlines the fact that there is something deeply psychological that goes on behind a joke work.

Some of the earliest observations on the subject of joke among modern philosophers were by Fischer and Jean Paul. To state Fischer, 'Our whole spiritual world, the intellectual kingdom of our thoughts and ideas, does not unfold itself before the gaze of external observation...and yet it too contains its inhibitions, its weaknesses and its deformities – a wealth of ridiculous and comic contrasts. In order to emphasize these and make them accessible to aesthetic consideration, a force is necessary...the only such force is judgment. A joke is a judgment which produces a comic contrast'.<sup>10</sup> Thus, primarily two aspects are foregrounded by Fischer, first

that the joke revels in comic contrast, and secondly it is a judgment. The third aspect that he states is the purely subjective nature of joke. 'A joke is something comic which we produce, which is entirely subjective', which is attached to action of ours as such, to which we invariably stand in the relation of subject and never of object, not even of voluntary object. Jean Paul considers joke to be able to find similarity between dissimilar things, the more dissimilar the better the joke, a concept that Kraepelin takes further by saying that jokes find association between contrasting ideas. Lipps accepts this idea but states that this contrast is between meaning and non-meaning itself, between sense and senselessness that is the guiding spirit behind every joke. He further states that joke follows a process of bewilderment followed by illumination. Building on this legacy of enquiry, Freud developed his theory of joke in his article 'The Joke and its Relationship to the unconscious'. It became the fountainhead of a number of psychoanalytic interventions which followed in understanding joke, and laughter.

Freud's analysis of joke is a conglomerate of a number of suppositions, the first most predictably being joke as a sublimation of man's unconscious desires to violence, aggression and sex. However, Freud already realizes by the time he makes this hypothesis that the issue of joke is somewhat unique in the sense that it resists reduction to any definition or categories. It is a performance which structurally needs an other to even begin to form.

The listener, audience, reader or in other words, the receptor of the joke is unlike the performer of any other semiotic performance – it is structurally woven within the joke, which he calls a joke-work.<sup>11</sup> Freud states that three agencies are necessary for a joke to be one – the speaker, the listener, and a third on whom the joke is, the ‘butt’, so to of the joke. There may be situations where two of these three identities may coalesce and/or collide—e.g. when the joke is on the self, or on the audience—but there too, formally, the three categories are retained. They appear to collide where they do not actually do so. Together, these agencies with the ‘joke’ form a unit, which Freud calls the ‘joke-work’. The joke work, thus, is a space where deep seated desires to violence, aggression, opposition and sex are sublimated in a socially sanctioned way. That, at the outset, may have the appearance of fairly neatly thought out proposition, unless we remain sensitive to the new set of problematic it engenders.

Questions related to power censor, and semiosis. Power is at the root of a joke work. This power may work out at any of the different micro-levels of operation in society – questions of class, gender, nation etc. Freud himself gets sensitive to these undercurrents and divides jokes into two categories, which he himself then goes on to dismantle – i. the tendentious and ii. The non-tendentious is the innocent joke that elicits a smile. But a tendentious joke is judgmental, it critic, judges and in-

sults, often through an attack on religion, sex, marriage, politics and institutions and grand narratives of similar ilk. despite its somewhat robust character, it gives rise to boisterous laughter which is its special attraction. Stand up comedy, when it challenges institutions, generally falls within the non-tendentious category.

As we can surmise from the above survey, psychoanalysis has turned into an accepted and widely recognized method to study joke and laughter. The best example that suits our purpose the most is John Limon's book on Stand up comedy<sup>12</sup>, where he bases his analysis on the basis of Kristeva's theory of the Abject. Limon uses Freudian analysis of 'tendentiousness' to elaborate it further and bring in an element of Lacan's psychoanalysis to set the structure subverted through the arousal of humour by the comedian within a father-child relationship, governed by the child's need to impress and repudiate the father at one and the same time – to 'stand up' to the father and earn his trust by proving his individuality as an equal. There is conflict and hope for acceptance. This creates an anxiety on the part of the child to stand at a distance from his father in an act of defiance for or otherwise there would be a complete immersion of the self with the structure, the 'systemic status-quo'. It is in this sense that the comedian stands in a certain strategic distance with the events he/she comments on. Standing too close would choke him, smother him, and finally rob him of all identity.

Although the jester/comedian stands at some distance from the rubric he is operating in, he is not standing outside it altogether. He has to be within it, earn the trust of the system, only to trample it later. Limon uses, and we will re-iterate it here since it seems to work exceedingly well, the theory of abject to analyse, not only the role of the jester, but of the joke and what results in laughter as well. Abject has two meanings, and both are brought to play here. The first more general meaning is to be humbled by, to bow down. The second, more technically specific sense, is the one in which Kristeva develops it in her theory of the abject, where it is something we would like to get rid of only with the conscious and deep understanding that we cannot get rid of it permanently. All we can achieve is a temporary cleansing for it to return again – like bodily excreta, boils, wounds etc. Since we cannot get rid of them, the unconscious weaves its own mechanism of defense, thus carrying out a cleansing at a discursive level. The jester, comedian, along with the audience enters into an unwritten and understood contract to exercise the abject together – perhaps the reason why scatological jokes elicit such ready laughter. But abject often is more subtly woven within the joke work. This is when we look at joke as a form of political action.

Igor Krichtafovitch has foregrounded this disrupting effect of laughter, of verbal spite, in *Humour Theory: The Formula of Laughter*.<sup>13</sup> On the other end of the spectrum, resides Michael Billig's understanding of humour. Bil-

lig argues that all cultures use ridicule as a disciplinary means to uphold norms and conduct and conventions of meaning. In his *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour*, Billig challenges the basic idea that humour is good and therapeutic.<sup>14</sup> The abject theory of Limon can actually bring both these together from a psycho-analytic perspective, that it is both a challenge to the consolidated power and an intention to stay within it. Freud realizes this, and terms it as ‘tendentious jokes’ in his analysis. He states that a tacit political understanding of joke as a tool of political progress explains why even apparently dense jokes are readily, almost instinctively, understood and realized by an audience. By making political action as a subject of the joke, it turns political action into a joke in itself – whereby resides the politics of the joke. We can here refer to the excerpt from the Chennai act of Kenny Sebastian with which the article began. It is thus obvious, that the latent violence in a joke can become manifest and overturn the structure any given minute. This is the particular danger of joke, where it operates as an agency of subversion par excellence. One example could be the character of Sansthanak in *Mrcchkatika*. He who begins as an instantaneously funny character—an aberration or *vikriti*—becomes dangerous, and an agency of murder and death. The formal rigidity of Western forms of drama make such transitions difficult (one would perhaps have said impossible if not Shakespeare exploited this danger in many of his comedies), but the possibilities were always

lurking just beneath the surface. Shakespeare's' precarious movement in the deep and murky luminal space of these two extremes have been often noted.<sup>15</sup> It is precisely this changeability that makes 'hasya' unique among the rasas. It cannot sustain itself for any length without dismantling itself. It radiates, to use an analogy from the pure sciences, breaks itself down by touching everything around it. That is its nature. The reason why a complete play on 'hasya' has never been written is this – give it time enough, and it will change, which is another meaning of 'vikar' or 'vikriti', noted by aestheticians to be the most identified aspect of 'hasya' rasa. Even the same joke work, on repeating, loses itself. As an abject, it makes its appearance once, in one form, and disappears.

### **Transaction, Media and Value in Stand Up Comedy**

Stand up comedy brings the social performance of telling jokes on the professional stage. His or her role is equivalent to the role of the jester, but it is also different because the material medium through which the performance is disseminated is mass media. The rise of the stand up is connected to the rise of reproducible recording mechanism—through audio records, television and finally through internet channels and DVDs. It is a product meant for mass consumption, and that reorients the theoretical dynamics that we have already discussed by bringing in that one crucial factor that was amiss in the above analyses – the question of transaction, of trade.

Since its growth and dissemination is directly connected to the growth of mass media itself it is therefore imperative that it brings certain values for consumption. A value that is directly connected to the labour time that goes in its creation, performance and consumption (which can be understood by the changes in the consumption slot for stand up comedies in mass media like television) on the one hand; as well as the symbolic value it trades at the same time. Typically, a stand up comedy is structured within a set-up of consumption, where the audience invest to be entertained, and entertained in a form which was in itself is not thought as a part of entertainment i.e. elicitation of laughter. There is a two-way process woven in it – it is the timing, the punctuation of the joke by the laughter of the audience that completes the joke act. By its very nature, the joke work operates within a closed binary structure, which simulates the structure of the market – by the relationship of the product and its ready consumption. The readiness of consumption validates the quality of the product. There remains no other way. This explains the reason why even televised stand-up comedies create a performance like set-up like a live show, which may not be felt to be necessary in other forms of entertainment like a drama or a musical performance. (Even dramatic situations which aim at elicitation of laughter as its primary objective often simulate this structure by the timely punctuation of catch-lines or situations through pre-recorded canned laughter.) Audio records, for example, which were popular in America as

the early disseminators of the art of stand-up comedy also simulated a live set-up, complete with the response of the audiences in the form of uproarious laughter. Thus, joke in stand-up comedy, is a commodity which sets a certain value to itself, both in a material and a symbolic sense.

In the material sense, the rise of the stand up is related to the rise of mass media. McLuhan, in the *Medium is the Message*, asserts that “The way in which we send information is more important than the information itself”.<sup>16</sup> This leads us to an argumentative position whereby we can say that the change of the platform for the jester to deliver his or her jests or jokes, have changed the role of the joke, and its content as well. The platform of the drama, which was written text, performed to a few already presupposed a context where those who entered in the transaction—the aesthetic transaction of the stage—entered with a certain understanding of what was to be expected. There was a greater control of the rubric within which the performance played itself out. In mass media, both the reach multiplied manifold and the control diminished. The critical movement of reception was from the audience to the mass. Initially TV shows were the platform within which stand up comedy flourished in the West, but in India, the real boom took place after the growth of the internet, where personalized YouTube channels became the preferred medium for dissemination of this art. As a medium, internet provided both a

high degree of publicity and a possibility to reach a higher number of people, a market which was both huge and specialized; it also was a platform where the institutional modes of censorship were more limited, thus providing a certain degree of freedom. This reduced censorship within the structure often opened up avenues of coercion in more violent ways, like actual physical and psychological harm extended to comedians who chose a critique of power as their subject.

But what was the symbolic value that was transacted in these arts? To go back to our theory of jokes, it is understandable that the joke is arising from a conflict—a conflict between an idea and its acceptance, between social groups, between the personal and the political, between the sexes—the paradigms of conflict may be manifold. However, there has to be a conflict, and there has to be a judgment. And the judgment is uttered in a way, where the comedian—and his or her audience who become of the jokework by responding and thus completing it—manifests a desire to both challenge the authority and be simultaneously accepted by it.

Eric Berne's introduced the concept of transaction analysis within the field of psychology in his influential book *Games People Play*.<sup>17</sup> We will use that premise to understand stand up in this essay, since it brings to the fore the role of transaction within psycho-analysis to analyse social relationships. According to Berne's theory, all

our social actions are based on transactions. As soon as there are two people, sooner or later one will try and communicate with the other. Communications brings and bonds us together as a human race. He states that what transacts between the two units, the sender and the receiver of the message is a relation that is guided by three principles. He calls them the Parent, Adult or Child states (often abbreviated as PCA). Any individual contains these three states simultaneously in his or her psyche. The restrictive and disciplining but ultimately well wishing parent, the adult who makes for rational allowances, and the impulsive child. One person, moves from one state to another, but more commonly simultaneously exists in all these planes. A man's desire for something, his restriction for its acquisition, and the rational explanation of that denial or restriction happen simultaneously. It also comes into fore when an individual is communicating with another individual or a group. The transaction can be pictorially presented as below (Fig. 1):

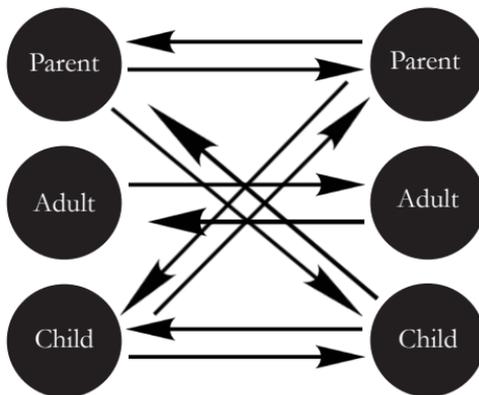


Fig. 1. PAC model of transactional analysis

It is clear from the diagramme on the previous page that there are two possibilities, where the transactions are smooth, and where they cut across each other. If between the two ends, one takes the role of a parent and the other of a child, then the transaction is normative between communicator I (CI) and communicator II (CII), as shown in the figure below:

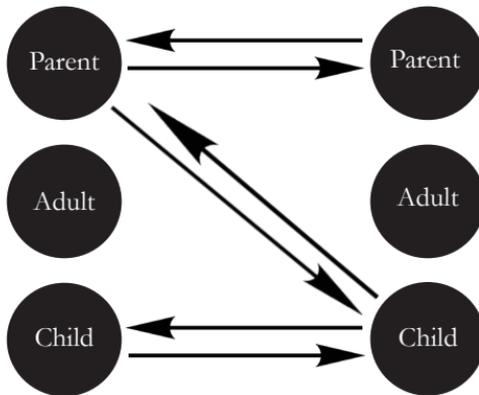


Fig. 2.i Normative response with no cross currents or splits

Another possibility, is when CI and CII takes the following position as represented in Fig 2.1, where both communicate to each other as adults.

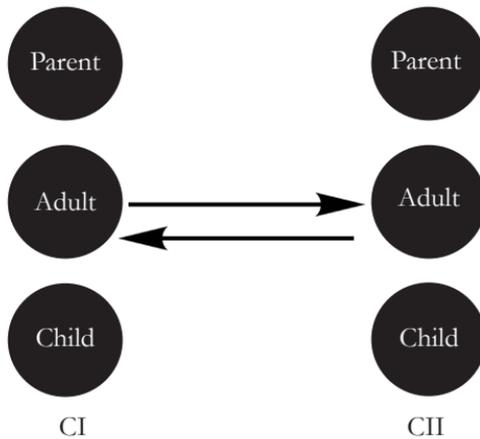


Fig. 2.ii

However, if the other does follow that track and assumes the role of a parent then there is a disconnect and communication breaks down. Or, if one is talking as a parent to a parent, but the other is responding as an adult to another then there is a split. It can be pictorially represented as below:

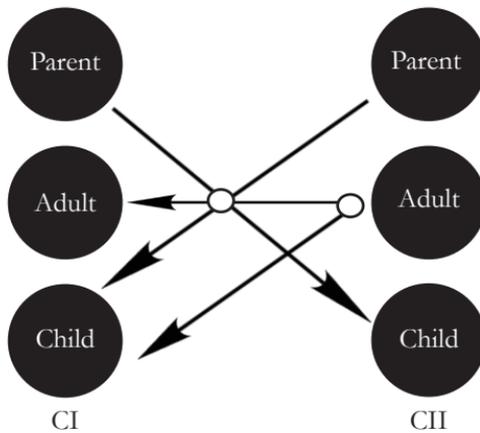


Fig. 3. Splits in transaction showing the location of joke

In the figure on the previous page, the first person is communicating to the other as a child, while the second is responding as an adult to an adult, or an adult to a child. It is at the precise points of intersection that the discomfort lies, and that I argue is the point where jokes, like other acts of judgments are located which disturb the status quo of transaction.

To bring all the above issues together, my analysis of jokes about institutions as they occur in stand up comedies is that we have already seen that there are three parties involved – the jester or comedian, his or her audience, which together form the joke-work, and the ‘butt’ of the joke, which is being judged and commented on, or ridiculed. Fig. 2 (both i and ii) represent the rapport that the comedian builds with his audience, the rapport that the audience in investing it to dismantle its collective relationship with the third aspect – the institution, or ideology, or person that is ridiculed, with which they collectively get into a split transaction. Fig 3 represents the comedian and the audience, now a group, on one side as the first player in the game – and the object of ridicule the second player of the game, with whom its relationship is necessarily split. And it is at the intersections of those split that joke resides.

However, if we look more closely at the model, then a few other aspects become clear to us. For example, the communicator I, here the institution being ridiculed

has to be necessarily subversive, taking a parent role – a psychologically restrictive and prescriptive position to which the communicator ii is always the child. The joke lies in communicator ii's denial to fulfill the role of the obedient child and retort as an adult to an adult or assume the role of the parent and be judgmental on communicator I by treating it as a child. This is an expose – exposing the apparent parent as the child, which is the basis of dissimulation, the unmasking that is so common in all theories of the comic. But, the communicator ii is also dependant on communicator I for its succor. It cannot, so to say, survive without it. It formed it, and thereby demands obedience from it. This becomes very close to the oedipal anxiety of being accepted and challenging the father figure at the same time. And that happens here too. As an abject, communicator ii may not like communicator I, but it cannot undo it altogether, because it is central to its existence. We will now look at a few select portions of stand up performances and see how this transactions plays out there, where the communicator I is the nation.

### **Nation: Respect and Ridicule**

*I've never understood ethnic or national pride 'coz to me, pride should be reserved for something you achieve or attain on your own. Not something that happened by accident or birth' (applause) Being Irish isn't a skill. It's a fucking genetic accident'.*

(George Carlin on national pride)

Nation is a broad category. Yet, Ernst Renan states there is one unifying factor that binds together its various conceptual and effective forms. He states, 'a nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth are but one, constitute this soul or spiritual principle. One lies in the past, one in the present. One is the possession in a common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form'.<sup>19</sup> This consensual undividedness, however becomes problematic when nationalism as an idea and a discourse emerges out of it, and turns it into essential. Bhaba observes how nationalist discourses to 'persistently produce the idea of the nation as a continuous narrative of national progress, the narcissism of self-generation, the primeval present in the Volk'.<sup>20</sup> Yet, within this totalitarian discourse that tries to inscribe nation within its purview lies many an ambiguity. within the tendency to read the Nation rather restrictively; either, as the ideological apparatus of state power ... or, as the incipient or emergent expression of the 'national-popular' sentiment preserved in a radical memory, there resides 'highly significant, recesses of the national culture from which alternative constituencies of peoples and oppositional analytic capacities may emerge'.<sup>21</sup>

Indian stand up comedy pitches itself within these spaces, and brings out the fissures that are glossed over in nationalist discourse. It takes many forms – ethnic, gen-

der, racial, linguistic – as is expected in the multicultural ethos of India – but we will here look at only one of those approaches viz. the question of patriotism and nationalism. The premise within which we will build our analysis is to consider the imagined ‘nation’ as a conceptual ‘parent’ component with which the citizen transacts, somewhat adopting the model of social contract theory which forms one of the foundational pillars of the modern nation. Kunal Kamra in his extremely popular and also controversial act on Indian patriotism, beautifully illustrates the relationships referred to above. Let me first lay out excerpts from the act to aid the analysis. Kamra talks about demonetization and the long ATM lines where he apparently stood not for the money but for content observes:

When you are in that ATM line no, it's like after a while you start like bitching the country. And the moment you evaluate the country like properly you know like with logic, whenever you evaluate patriotism with logic, there is this old Indian uncle who just appears (roars of laughter)... Siachen pe hamare jawan hamare liye seema pe khadi hain, aur aap ATM ke line pe nehi khade ho sakte. (with voice modulation)<sup>22</sup>

Let us analyse the above transaction. What the comedian is doing here is picking up a particular political move, i.e. demonetization as the subject of his joke. He is particularly critical of the rhetoric of national progress and patriotism that was invoked to justify this act. The

nation, like a parent component, wanted its citizens, as child component, to accept this move as it was meant to be beneficial for the nation at the long run – through a rhetoric that mimics parental censure that is validated by a thought of ultimate good that the child may not at that very moment surmise. Ideally, the citizens unproblematic obedience would have meant the transaction to be smooth and undisturbed. What Kamra does here is disrupt that communication by assuming first the role of an adult, who wants to disengage patriotism from its position of dominant parenthood to that of a reasoning adult – ‘you evaluate patriotism with logic’ are the very words he uses. And then, he invokes the figure of the ‘old Indian uncle’, a paternal figure par excellence who censures the child with an image of patriotism of which the military becomes the cul-de-sac. The joke works well precisely because the audience psychologically finds no problem in associating the parental role of the nation to the figure of patriotic old Indian uncle.

The nation is defined as much as what is beyond it as to what lies within. Bhaba talks about the essential Janus faced nature in nation formation. He states, ‘the ‘locality’ of national culture is neither unified nor unitary in relation to itself, nor must it be seen simply as ‘other’ in relation to what is outside or beyond it’, and yet there is an ‘insistence of political power and cultural authority in what Derrida describes as the irreducible excess of the syntactic over the semantic’. What emerges as an effect

of such “incomplete signification’ is a turning of boundaries and limits into the in-between spaces through which the meanings of cultural and political authority are negotiated’.<sup>23</sup> An act by Rahul Subramaniam, another noted stand up comedian, provides us with an excellent opportunity to see this negotiation in practice. In this act, named ‘Indians and Pakistanis’, he talks about a trip to Barcelona that he undertook with his father’s profident fund money after his retirement, and met a Pakistani restaurant owner. Although he was sceptic in the beginning, they soon became friends and like all friends they bantered a lot over a number of things like cricket, culture and even politics. In political discussions, he tried to prove India’s superiority by referring to the wars of 1965 and 1971, and his Pakistani friends retorted by saying that he remembers it, but his Indian friend does not. This puzzled Rahul Subramaniam, as he thought they were they were the inarguable testimonies to India’s superiority. And then he delivers the punchline, which says –

‘then I realized, *unke textbook mein woh jite bain, aur apne textbook e apun jite bain.* (Pause) *Pata nahin sach kya bain?*

(They won in their textbooks, and we in ours. Who knows what the truth is!)<sup>24</sup>

And then, as a Parthian shot he compares this entire war narrative in history to a cricket match between children which ends invariably in commotion, till it gets dark and

one shouts we have won and all join him not knowing exactly who had won and they all return home happily. We can see that apart from questioning the infallibility of nationalist narrative, he foregrounds the role of the 'narrative' in constructing a nation. At the same time, he also shows, how being a narrative it can be dismantled. Finally, by reducing the parent to the child, he cuts across the transactional prerogative, thus creating the laughter.

## **Conclusion**

The above examples show how jokes, and the laughter that they elicit can be a major force to bring out the ambiguities and fissures within an institutional discourse. From the question of materiality, this is significant that the rise of internet and YouTube as modes of dissemination of cultural representation, these voices have found a platform that actually transcends national boundaries. The choice of the subjects, and the language with which these are delivered, shows it to be addressing a global south and a large number of expatriate constituencies as well. The internet, as a medium, have been liberating and made these voice of resistances possible. These comedians often publicize their live shows through their channels, and this shows that people are willing to pay for the subversion – a subversion that more traditional modes of popular expression, like cinema, have at least partially failed to address. It is a force to comply, and the force is being felt – with a little delay, but high impact.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> William Shakespeare. *King Lear*. Ed W.J. Craig. *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*. (London: Magpie Books, 1992), 932.

<sup>2</sup> Kenny Sebastian ‘Why I don’t do jokes on politics in India – Stand Up Comedy’ published April 22, 2018, accessed on 27.04.2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=azFe8b6yfb0>. accessed 27.04.2018

<sup>3</sup> <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/viral-news/comedian-kunal-kamra-asked-to-move-out-of-his-house-due-to-political-issues/articleshow/62647201.cms> accessed 20.04.2018.

<sup>4</sup> Siddhant Pandey, ‘Are we taking comedy too seriously: Rahul Subramaniam’s show cancelled amidst threats’, [www.inuth.com](http://www.inuth.com), published April 03, 2018, accessed on 20.04.2018. <https://www.inuth.com/india/are-we-taking-comedy-too-seriously-rahul-subramanians-show-cancelled-amid-threats/>.

<sup>5</sup> Kenny Sebastian ‘Why I don’t do jokes on politics in India – Stand Up Comedy’ published April 22, 2018, accessed on 27.04.2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=azFe8b6yfb0>.

<sup>6</sup> John Limon studies Carl Reiner and Mel Brooks in *Stand Up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000).

<sup>7</sup> Jan Welsh Hokenson, *The Idea of Comedy: History, Theory and Critique*. Madison (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> A.D. Shastri, “Hasyarasa”, in Proceedings of the Fifth World Sanskrit Conference, Varanasi, India, ed Dandekar and Navatha. October 21-26, 1981.(New Delhi: India: Rashtriya Sanskrit Sans-than, 1985), 340.

<sup>9</sup> (Ibid), 341

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Freud. Sigmund Freud. *Joke and its Relationship to the Unconscious*. (1905) Free E-book from [www.SigmundFreud.net](http://www.SigmundFreud.net), accessed 29.04.2018. <https://www.sigmundfreud.net/jokes-and-their-relation-to-the-unconscious-pdf-ebook.jsp>.

<sup>11</sup> Sigmund Freud. *Joke and its Relationship to the Unconscious*. (1905) Free E-book from [www.SigmundFreud.net](http://www.SigmundFreud.net), accessed 29.04.2018. <https://www.sigmundfreud.net/jokes-and-their-relation-to-the-unconscious-pdf-ebook.jsp>.

<sup>12</sup> John Limon. *Stand Up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000)

<sup>13</sup> Igor Krichtafovitch, *Humour Theory: Formula of Laughter* (London: Outskirts Press, 2006).

<sup>14</sup> Michael Billig. *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humor* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2005).

<sup>15</sup> Madeleine Doran notes the simultaneous phenomena among a section of the Elizabethan dramatists to separate the nomenclature between tragedy and comedy on one hand, and a continued resistance to complete separation on the other in *Endeavors to Art: A Study of Form in Elizabethan Drama*. (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1954).

<sup>16</sup> Marshall McLuhan, “The Medium is the Message. Understanding Media’ in *The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964).

<sup>17</sup> Eric Berne. *Games People Play: The Psychology of Human Relationships*. accessed 15.04.2018. [http://rrt2.neostrada.pl/miodusze-wska/course\\_2643\\_reading\\_3.pdf](http://rrt2.neostrada.pl/miodusze-wska/course_2643_reading_3.pdf).

<sup>18</sup> George Carlin on national pride. Published by Gabor Henyel on May 14, 2014. accessed on 28.04.2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iOmQP9guII0>.

<sup>19</sup> Ernest Renan. ‘What is a nation?’ translated and annotated by Martin Thom in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhaba 2000 edition (London and New York, Routledge: first published 1990), 16.

<sup>20</sup> Homi K. Bhaba, “Introduction: narrating the nation” in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhaba 2000 edition (London and New York, Routledge: first published 1990), 1.

<sup>21</sup> (Ibid) 3.

<sup>22</sup> Kunal Kamra, Stand up comedy on Patriotism and the Government. Publishe by Kunal Kamra on May 1, 2017. accessed on 28.04.2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qBbpFGGA-kmo&t=80s>.

<sup>23</sup> Bhaba, 4.

<sup>24</sup> Rahul Subramaniam, Stand up on India and Pakistan, published by Random Chikibum on November 3, 2016. Accessed on 27th April, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M4x6q-SuFovI>.

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