Stand-Up: The "Comic" Public Sphere in India

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Comic performances might take a subversive form, especially in an autocratic regime where used as an instrument of expression by the oppressed, the silenced, the unseen, and the unheard, thereby offering a political critique of the state, economy, and systemic failures. This article discusses the ability of contemporary Indian stand-up comic performances to undermine hegemony. The article begins with a theoretical evaluation of the comic in the public sphere, moves to a brief survey of South Asian forms of comic performances, and links these concerns to performances by two contemporary comedy collectives, *Aisi Taisi* Democracy (ATD) and East India Comedy (EIC). The article then concludes with the possible complications of ATD and EIC's contribution to a robust public sphere.

Keywords: stand-up comedy, comic, India, satire, political critique, public sphere

Humor can be of different kinds, presented in varied formats, performed for multiple audiences, and can invoke diverse reactions in disparate spatial and temporal settings. One form of humor is political satire, which has been performed across cultures for a long time. Satire, as Peter Berger (2014) notes, is a "deliberate use of the comic for purposes of attack," often against (political and religious) institutions and their representatives; this can be educational and bound by a social context, unlike many other forms of the comic (p. 146). Humor can also be instrumental in offering an alternative viewpoint to its audience, challenging statist narratives, and countering a hegemonic perspective. This makes an analysis of contemporary humor imperative.

The article begins with a theoretical evaluation of the comic in the public sphere, moves to a brief survey of South Asian forms of comic performances, and links these concerns to performances by *Aisi Taisi*

Democracy (ATD) and East India Comedy (EIC), two contemporary groups of performers who have come together to perform comedy. The reasons for choosing selective performances by these two comedy collectives are threefold. Satire has a life that extends beyond its temporal context, more so in the digital world in which we live, allowing people to access its texts much later than its live performance. As Aswin Punathambekar (2015) also points out in his recent study of the afterlife of recorded musical satire, such interventions can carry over and acquire new meanings. Additionally, both collectives use Bollywood music as their reference, which is significant in the Indian popular cultural context because of its wider reach, catchy tunes, and propensity to affect other spheres, including religious practice. For instance, there are several *bhajans* (devotional songs) that are set to the tunes of Bollywood songs. In fact, the authors of this article were attracted to and intrigued by these musical pieces. We used published interviews, a close reading of lyrical content, a visual analysis of one of EIC's recorded performances, and a contextualization of the comic style in their performances to answer the questions raised in this article. We also look at the onstage and offstage texts of other stand-up comedians in India to clarify a sense of contemporary Indian stand-up ecology.

Comic performances take a subversive form, especially in an autocratic regime, where they are used as an instrument of expression by the marginalized, thereby offering a political critique of the state, the economy, and systemic failures. This article discusses the ability of contemporary Indian stand-up comic performances to undermine hegemony. The ambivalence of meaning that humor and satire possess is what gives them a distinct identity from any other form of resistance or dissent. However, this ambivalence is the reason why studies on humor are sidelined when serious issues like politics are discussed. How often can this humorous relay of information and opinions be considered serious enough to be seen as a critique of existing political discourses and actions? The global digital media landscape further complicates this matter. Scholars, such as Sangeet Kumar (2012, 2015), Subin Paul (2017), and Aswin Punathambekar (2015), have addressed these complications through their engagement with varied forms of political satire, stand-up comedy and parody, viral videos, and contagious memes to discuss popular engagement with politics and its (limited) democratization. Following this, we are concerned with the *possible* role of the stand-up comedy genre as a political critique and as enabling a "public sphere"[2] in a democratic state like India, which, like the rest of the world, has seen a significant rise in intolerance, violence, cultural nationalism, and authoritarian tendencies.

However, for this comic communication to be taken seriously, it has to be in discursive speech, *logos*, as Rancière (2010) calls it (p. 37). The challenge that stand-up comedy often faces is establishing itself as *logos* as opposed to *phôné* or *babble* (Rancière, 2010) and constituting a voice that can be spoken, heard, and noticed. Thus, one might question: Do the laughs that a parody of a Bollywood song elicit lead to anything beyond the temporality of that performance? Does the audience think about it "seriously" enough? Our analysis shows that the authorities and the audience seriously engage with the political nature of stand-up comedy by either appreciating or trolling performers through their social media pages or

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[2] Public sphere as defined by Jurgen Habermas (1962) is "made up of private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state" (p. 176). In the context of a representative democracy, Habermas saw the public sphere as a source of constructing public opinion to either reinforce or critique the authority of the state and its various policy decisions through speeches, debates, and discussions.

YouTube comments. Additionally, comics have been targeted for their jokes, leading to the cancellation of their shows. This transforms the stand-up into *logos*.

A recent backlash against the stand-up comic Munawar Faruqui in India is a case in point. Faruqui's arrest right before a scheduled stand-up act in January 2021 is confusing—was he arrested before a joke was actually made, and if so, did the joke offend religious or political sentiments? The fact of his arrest indicates the stakes—bodily and ideological—that gird the public performance of stand-up in contemporary India. At the time of writing this paper, Faruqui has been released on bail and is now a well-recognized reality TV star, having participated in ALT Balaji's *Lock Upp: Badass Jail, Atyaachari Khel!* (Lock Upp: Badass Jail, Oppressive Game!; Kapoor, 2022). The show brought together individuals who had previously been jailed for a reel-inmate experience. In a performative coincidence, Faruqui won the show. It is moot whether this counts as a victory over the groups that orchestrated his arrest. Faruqui's arrest and his subsequent popularity over national television set the tone for the twin tenets of radical critique and conservation tendency that run side by side in stand-up. However, the conversation that Faruqui's case activates can be seen as encapsulating a complex public sphere. This article proposes an understanding of contemporary Indian stand-up as subversive but tempered by systems of meaning making.

As Faruqui's example demonstrates, the avowal of the political aim of contemporary stand-ups makes their performances directly vulnerable to the powers that be. The article intends to calibrate this vulnerability in the social public sphere that such performances and their mediums of circulation activate. The editing of recorded stand-up performances and the violent censorship that performers and stand-up artists negotiate with nuance any celebration of the active public sphere. In fact, the crafting of these performances, despite physical threats and limited reach, fosters critical caution with which to treat stand-up in contemporary India. As mentioned earlier, stand-up generates twin tenets of radical critique and conservation tendencies.

Humor

Humor has been seen as serving multiple functions. The Aristotelian understanding of humor as originating in the phallic processions of Ancient Greece—ceremonial group parades characterized by obscenities and verbal abuse—brings together ideas of fertility, community, and laughter. The Shakespearean truth-speaking fool—a wise, witty, and insightful character in his plays who *can* speak the "bitter truth" in an otherwise restricted environment—is another example of a performance tradition that values satirical demonstrations. The Bakhtinian conceptualization of laughter as carnivalesque is a temporary subversion of the dominant structure legitimated by hegemonic forces. Finally, humor in anthropology[3] is considered either subversive or the glue that binds society together**.**

Early 20th-century theories of comedy argue that the satirical intent is that of the reformer, as if the artist gazes upon the ills that permeate the community around her/him, and attempts to rework the representation of the scenario with verbal or visual scalpels. Henri Bergson (1911/n.d.) and Sigmund Freud (1905) are two exemplars of such commentary. Bergson's (1911/n.d.) "Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of

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[3] By anthropologists like Mary Douglas (1978), Clifford Geertz (1973) and Victor Turner (1977).

the Comic" lucidly elaborates on the social signification of laughter. He remarks, "The comic will come into being, it appears, whenever a group of men concentrate their attention on one of their numbers, imposing silence on their emotions and calling into play nothing but their intelligence" (p. 5b). Bergson (1911/n.d.) identified the first symptom of laughter as being human. The quote above emphasizes the grouped condition of laughing individuals.[4] The social nature of laughter is the founding premise for Bergson's (1911/n.d.) comments. For Freud, it is an economy of the psychic mechanism of discharge. He informs us:

> Our insight into the mechanism of laughter leads us rather to say that, owing to the introduction of the proscribed idea by means of an auditory perception, the cathectic energy used for the inhibition has now suddenly become superfluous and has been lifted, and is therefore now ready to be discharged by laughter. (Freud, 1905, p. 108)

Freud's (1905) use of the word "inhibition" directly leads us to his earlier exposition of the id, ego, and superego, and we must remember that the psychic economy bases itself on social factors and relationships in Freud's work. Thus, Freud and Bergson are important precursors to the contemporary theories of the comic.

While Bergson (1911/n.d.) and Freud (1905) encourage an understanding of satire as a partnership between content and socialization, they ignore the South Asian public sphere as a sincere object of investigation owing to its location in time and space. A discussion of comedy in cultures that have negotiated the fraught process of colonization—and, more recently, globalization—leads to a productive analysis through the tools of humor and visuality. Recent works, namely Sangeet Kumar (2012) and Ashwin Punathambekar (2015), also point to the distinctive quality of the analysis needed for an accurate investigation of South Asian examples of satire. Kumar (2012) and Punathambekar (2015), for instance, traced a long history of satirical performances to South Asia. This article, therefore, advances this revaluation of the understanding of humor, a task that shall be accomplished through a discussion of East India Comedy's and Aisi Taisi Democracy's (EIC and ATD, respectively) staged/recorded musical comic pieces to arrive at an explanation for the successes and compromises of stand-up in 21st-century India.

The Comic in South Asia: A Survey

South Asian performance traditions have always incorporated elements of satire and political commentary. Bharata Muni's *Natyashastra* (1559/1951) codifies this in more than one *rasa*: the *haasya*[5] and the *vibhatsa*[6] being most notable. The phrase vibhatsa *rasa* carries connotations of pleasurable or

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[4] More recently Rebecca Krefting (2014) has referred to this grouped condition as cultural citizenship enacted through charged humor.

[5] According to Bharata Muni (1559/1951), "Now the comic sentiment (haasya) has as its basis the dominant emotion of laughter. This is created by Determinants such as showing unseemly dress or ornament, impudence, greediness, quarrel, defective limb, use of irrelevant words, mentioning of different faults, and similar other things" (p. 110).

[6] According to Bharat Muni (1559/1951), Vibhatsa "is created by determinants like hearing of unpleasant, offensive, impure, and harmful things or seeing them or discussing them" (p. 115).

flavorful disgust. Rasa is the attainment of pleasure or enjoyment, as in the enjoyment of the culinary rasa, so vibhatsa is a contradiction in terms—pleasurable disgust. As the *Natyashastra* informs us, the comic is created and contemplated in multiple gestures. Because the *Natyashastra* is a central text in many South Asian performative traditions, it is important to begin with a sense of the text here. Another route that the comic has taken is that of "folk"—forms such as *Nautanki*, *Tamasha*, and *Bhand Pather* come to mind. Similarly, what is considered "folk" traditions continue to appropriate new themes and styles. In fact, explicit censorship under the British led to the reappropriation of many such traditions. Richmond Farley (1973), who has worked extensively on Indian theater, in his landmark essay "The Political Role of Theatre in India," surveys 20th-century theater as a medium of political propaganda:

> One of the IPTA's most effective means for making political propaganda palatable to the common people was to garb it in the familiar forms of traditional theater of a region. In Andhra Pradesh for instance, enthusiastic workers exploited *Burrakatha*, one of the state's most popular forms of storytelling. (p. 324)

While the satirical and the political have appeared in South Asian comic performances, it is important to note that both the *Natyashastra* and Bergson and Freud are helpful but limited here. Bharata, the composer of *Natyashastra*, was interested in enumerating the presentation of comic gestures and scenarios. The complexity that a vigorous public sphere demands is absent, or at best presumed, in the *Natyashastra*. Bergson and Freud underlined the social and psychic processes of the comic and laughter, but they too did not extend the comic to public communication. These texts constitute an ideological lineage to buttress the contemporary nature of Indian stand-up but themselves need to be supplemented by other concerns. A more historical view helps any theorization of the comic in contemporary South Asia. For example, with India's New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1991 and the consequent changes in the media landscape (Neyazi, 2018), comic performance took a different turn. Post 1991, private investment in media led to newer technology and an explosion of forms available to Indian consumers. Television became more accessible, and so did cable choices available on television. TV channels played host to comic poets—or *haasya kavis*—whose expositions delighted and bristled. Privately owned channels hosted artists, writers, and orators to perform before a studio audience. *The Great Indian Laughter Challenge,* which ran from 2005 to 2008 on the Star One channel, was a popular show that featured poetry, satire, music, and often a live orchestra (Star Bharat, 2023). It provides a platform for stand-up comedians. Notable names, such as Kapil Sharma, Bharti Singh, and Sudesh Lahiri, attained fame through this show. The performances mainly included themes such as cricket, national and regional politics, and gendered quirks.

The speedy popularity of MTV and Channel V provided more platforms for bilingual comic spaces. Kunal Vijaykar, Kaneez Surka, and Cyrus Broacha created *The Week that Wasn't*, a sketch show that uses satire and parody to comment on contemporary news that has aired on CNN-News18 since 2006 (CNN-News18, 2014). At the same time, performance spaces, such as studios, pubs, and theaters in Bengaluru, Mumbai, and New Delhi, began to host performers for audiences who might enjoy light entertainment as they consumed food and drinks. Vir Das, a comedian noted for his political stance, had a prolific output of performances that took the government to task. He created three Netflix "specials," *Abroad Understanding* (Das & Raboy, 2017), *Losing It* (Das & Raboy, 2018), and *Vir Das for India* (Das & Bhuyan, 2020). He also created the YouTube series *#TenOnTen* (Vir Das Comedy, 2021a) and recently performed a monologue, "Two Indias," at the Kennedy Center in Washington in

November 2021 (Vir Das Comedy, 2021b). In fact, as we write this piece in 2022, we are confronted with an excess of multimedia content related to stand-up comedy across platforms like YouTube, TikTok, Instagram Reels, Amazon Prime, and Netflix. Netflix and Amazon Prime have particularly expanded the Indian audience's access to stand-up from across the world. This summary is only a scratch in the rich history of South Asian comic forms. For instance, post-1947, India saw a steady sustenance of political cartooning, which was only just beginning to be studied as an admixture of visual art and newsprint (Devadawson, 2014; Khanduri, 2014). This confirms that a measure of comic and satiric forms and traditions existed in South Asian media usage before stand-up comedy took the shape that it has now. Our brief survey only touched upon certain storytelling opportunities in theater, television, print, and streaming.

Stand-up Comedy as a Form of Political Expression

Lawrence E. Mintz (1985) defined stand-up comedy as "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 vehicles" (p. 71). Mintz (1985) explored the social and cultural functions of stand-up comedy in American popular culture,[7] which he tied closely to the recognition of the comedian's "traditional license to deviate behavior and expression" (p. 74). Scholars such as Shawn Chandler Bingham and Alexander A. Hernandez (2009) and Stephanie Koziski (1984) have equated a stand-up comedian with an anthropologist and a sociologist. They look at humor as a sociocultural mediation and political expression, and the comic as a social, cultural, and political observer and commentator. The comic through her/his acts not only unveils tacit knowledge of her/his own society but might also challenge existing narratives by decoding and debunking acceptable notions of sociality and civility, making their audience reflect upon issues of race, ethnicity, class, and gender by highlighting what is rather than what ought to be.

Such a task, as pointed out by scholars studying the genre of stand-up comedy, can be read as a form of political expression. It is important to note that all stand-up comedy acts can be read as political. Thus, debunking the status quo by questioning social and cultural conventions, reversing people's expectations, and taking institutionalized politics head-on are many ways in which stand-up comedians shock their audience. This is not to say that all stand-up comedy acts are analytical in their intent, but this highlights that most of these acts are responses and reactions to manifest topical social themes. Sometimes, while addressing politics, they tend to highlight the contradictions and inadequacies of certain ideological frameworks in organizing society and societal relationships. Such acts are often put into the category of recognition politics (King, 2012) and subversion and/or charged humor (Krefting, 2014), wherein the comedian attempts to interpret and articulate information and strives to arrive at new political configurations that may not necessarily produce immediate change. This is done by transforming their observations into artistic constructions and presenting them as entertainment, thus fusing artistic endeavors with overt party politics that espouse action. It is this subgenre of stand-up comedy that EIC and ATD's musical pieces engage in.

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[7] Mintz has looked at the genre of standup comedy from the 1950s by focusing on comedians like Jerry Lewis, Jackie Gleason, Irwin Corey, Dean Martin, Bob Hope, Jack Benny, Lenny Bruce, Alan King, Bill Cosby, etc.

The ever-increasing number of stand-up comedians in India, their tours across the country, personal shows and specials, channels, and comments/reactions to their acts by the audience make it difficult to ignore the growing humor industry and the use of comedy as a medium of communication. In contemporary time and space, the corporatization of media houses, digital technology, and global flows of information have affected every aspect of social relationships, including the one between the media houses and the receivers of information. There is an engagement in propaganda and "manipulative publicity" (Habermas, 1962, p. 178), where certain questions are asked and others are ignored, and the attention of citizens is misdirected to less significant issues. Consequently, alternative media platforms and digital portals have emerged that work toward re-igniting the culture of debates and discussions. They are increasingly becoming a significant mode of communication. A prominent example is Alt News, a fact-checking online outlet, managed by Pratik Sinha and Mohammed Zubair, which regularly fact-checks fallacious claims made in mainstream media. Alt News has gained national attention as we write this article, and Zubair has been arrested for a 2018 post he made. Stand-up, too, is presented as a site that speaks truth to power.

Furthermore, the changing composition and role of the audience in stand-up acts need to be explored. The stand-up comedian not only reacts to the events and processes in her/his society but also tries to create a community through the acts. Their routines might also lead to some kind of affective bonding between people that transcends different identities and creates a community to engage in what Victor Turner would call "plural reflexivity" (Turner, 1977, as cited in Mintz, 1985, p. 73). It is here that the role of the comedian as a spokesperson-critic becomes fused with that of the intellectual activist. The commitment to politics (in all senses of the word) transforms performers into critical performers and activist artists. In interviews with media outlets, these performers have clarified many times that their work is intentional and that they are interested in politically purported aesthetics. This is not to say that current South Asian stand-up art succeeds in its attempts. As we shall see, access, circulation, and reception (including excessive trolling) are important influences in critical meaning making. After all, stand-up is a form of entertainment[8] that is bound by the rules of the industry in which it thrives.

Reading the Comedy

We shall now discuss some performances by comedy collectives in India, in particular the musical pieces by East India Comedy and Aisi Taisi Democracy. This section engages with two ATD pieces to establish a constellation of overt political references accessible via Bollywood tunes and then reads "The Donald Trump Song" by EIC (East India Comedy [EIC], 2017a) as an example of motivated political urgency circumscribed by gender. East India Comedy, or EIC, was started by Sorabh Pant, Kunal Rao, Sapan Verma, and Sahil Shah in 2012; it was later joined by Azeem Banatwalla, Angad Singh Ranyal, and Atul Khatri. Currently, EIC is constituted by Sapan Verma, Sahil Shah, Angad Singh Ranyal, and Azeem Banatwalla. The collective garnered a sizable online presence and has now branched into other media. All have performed at stand-up "specials" for Amazon Prime or Netflix.

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[8] For an analysis of the same, refer to Ian Brodie's (2014) A Vulgar Art: A New Approach to Stand-up Comedy.

Aisi Taisi Democracy, or ATD in short, consists of stand-up comedians Varun Grover and Sanjay Rajoura and musician Rahul Ram, founded in 2014. The trio's latest act is called "*Aisi Taisi* Democracy: The *Azaadi* Tour" (Aisi Taisi Democracy [ATD], 2019a, 2019b). Their musical pieces are parodies of Bollywood songs, in that they play with the "original" Bollywood songs by changing choice lyrics. The Rafale Song plays with "*Kisi pe Dil Agar aa Jaaye toh Kya Hota Hai*" (What happens if the heart falls for someone; Goldmines Gaane Sune Unsune, 2019) from the 1975 Bollywood film *Rafoo Chakkar* (Escaped; Goldmines Bollywood, 2018b), while *Chunaav ka Mahina* plays with "*Saawan ka Mahina*" (Monsoon month; Goldmines Gaane Sune Unsune, 2018) from the 1967 Bollywood film *Milan* (Union; Goldmines Bollywood, 2018a)*.* Both EIC and ATD have similar performative styles, techniques, and concerns—they both use English and Hindi, use existing digital, technological, and cultural structures, and have critiqued policy decisions taken by various political parties while in power. Recent scholarship (Dogra & Khilnani, 2020; James, 2020; Miller, 2020; Paul, 2017, to name a few) on stand-up in India has discussed these themes to give us a sense of the audience demographics targeted and reached out to by stand-up performers. The section of the population that accesses these performances and texts are young, urban middle and upper class, English language educated, social media savvy, multinational corporate employees residing in metropolitan cities. Unlike live performances, recorded performances may expand the geographical reach of the audience but not necessarily in terms of class, education, and language categories.

ATD has been making musical pieces since 2014 and has engaged with many contentious issues, such as cow vigilantism and lynchings in the name of protecting cows ("Gaiyya Song"; ATD, 2017), elections ("Chunaav ka Mahina"; ATD, 2019a), and constant reinterpretation of history to suit the ruling party's agenda, scams, and corruptions—negotiations between the government and the French company named Rafale ("Rafale Song"; ATD, 2018), and Unemployment ("*Naukri*"; ATD, 2019b) to name a few. ATD satirizes incongruity across the political spectrum, evident in their Rafale song that likened it to the Bofors scam[9] that transpired under the Congress Party's rule in the 1980s and is still pending in the Supreme Court. The performers, Sanjay Rajoura and Rahul Ram, in their introduction to Rafale song (ATD, 2018) alluded to the short life of breaking news with the following lines: "…*The problem with the news cycle is that people forget and we won't let it be forgotten! Why forget![10]*" (ATD, 2018, 00:35).

> *When the heart falls for someone, What happens*
> *An Ambani's marriage to Rafale happens*
> *…..if Ambani calls then of course!*
> *Of course what happens?*
> *New governance old Bofors happens.[11]* (ATD, 2018, 01:04)

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[9] According to a news article "From Bofors to Rafale" (2019), the Bofors scam was to do with a $1.4-billion howitzer deal between Swedish arms manufacturer Bofors and the Indian government signed in 1986. It was alleged that the Swedish company paid nearly $9 million to politicians, Congress leaders and bureaucrats, including the then Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi. The case is still alive in the Supreme Court

[10] The original Hindi text has been translated to English by the authors.

[11] The original Hindi text has been translated to English by the authors.

We read the *Azaadi* tour of 2019 as part of the group's agenda purported to defamiliarize issues of public relevance just before the elections. *Azaadi* literally translates as "freedom." By naming it as freedom, the group attempts to demand a contemplation of postcolonial anxiety and asks a question that successive intellectuals have asked post-1947 and still ask every Independence Day and Republic Day: How free are we? Has "*azaadi*" liberated us from social strictures? The term *azaadi* is currently appropriated by different groups in India and has come to largely mean an attempt to reclaim citizen's rights to protest, dissent, question the government, and reimagine the idea of India. In this scenario, it is difficult, and indeed a misunderstanding, to read the *Azaadi* tour and its consequent activities by the members as anything but a political intervention. Eventually, the group means to interrogate the "subjection" to political regimes.

In "*Chunaav ka Mahina*" or "Election Season" (ATD, 2019a), the group highlights the attraction of power and how each candidate, irrespective of their party affiliation, is only interested in winning the elections at any cost, including making inflammatory speeches, personally attacking their opponents and establishing political alliances with parties and individuals despite their different ideologies (ATD, 2019a).

> *It's election season, it's noisier than before*
> *It's another time to choose who will screw us more*
> *How the discourse is downgraded, Gotra, Janaiyu versus hate is rated*
> *Someone says Pappu, Some say the guardian gores,*
> *It's election season, it's noisier than before!*[12] (ATD, 2019a, 00:20)

Similarly, EIC's musical pieces, some of which are "Donald Trump Song" (EIC, 2017a), "Modi Song" (EIC, 2017b), and "Aadhar Song" (EIC, 2017c), look at the various political decisions and their implications for the population at large. They address topical issues that have been bones of contention in contemporary India, such as demonetization, mandatory Aadhaar Card, *Swachh Bharat Abhiyan* (Clean India Campaign), and American and international concerns, such as Trump's comments on Mexicans, Muslims, homophobia, nuclear warfare, and issues of privacy, surveillance, big data, and data leak. The "Donald Trump song" (EIC, 2017a) is particularly helpful in understanding the EIC agenda.

Here are a few lines from the "Donald Trump song" (EIC, 2017a):

> *White men, here is how it's going down*
> *All the Black men, we will shoot them into ground*
> *Mexicans, this is not your hometown,*
> *We are gonna build a wall around the country…*
> *… Trump's USA,*
> *I have successfully fucked USA.* (00:37)

A close reading of this song, part of a series of musical sketches performed by the group in a video released on February 16, 2017, shows how the sketch uses contemporary political references and is set to the tune of the popular 1978 American song "Y.M.C.A." (Village People, 2008). The audiovisual text follows

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[12] The original Hindi text has been translated to English by the authors.

a pattern similar to staged and recorded events that feature an audience within the studio. Shots of the stage that display the bodies of the seven men are perpetually cut by shots of audience members enthusiastically responding to the performers on stage. In terms of visual dynamics, the text consists of two actors—the performers and the audience. The audience shots are carefully edited to give the impression that they actively contribute to the video. It is as if both the performers and the audience are performing their respective identities. This emphasizes the importance of a mutual contract between the performers and the audience.

The enthusiasm visible and audible in the audience during the performance of the Donald Trump song is partly arrived at by a dedicated editing of the final product. For instance, at the moment the performers sing "And Hillary/ You can/ Suck my Cock," (EIC, 2017a, 01:26), they thrust their pelvises toward the audiences; the camera cuts their pelvises and closes up on a female audience member who is pleasantly shocked at the bawdy slapstick element in a performance that carries markers of dignity like the English language, the Western formal costumes of the performers, and the incessant political and public nature of their content. As an editing device, this particular cut is a strategic maneuver. It literalizes the shock of the comic, as elaborated by Freud. The viewer who watches the video on her phone/device is cued in to vitally recognize that a risque joke has been committed and not only committed but also enjoyed. This apprehension of enjoyment is meant to sieve off potentially dangerous content.

The cut to the female audience member "genders" the audience. It visualizes the shock, pleasure, and encouragement that female audience members might display when engaging in the antics onstage. The potential danger is now intensified through editing, as if the possible corruption of a risque performance has already happened and has been enjoyed. One presumed danger of explicit language is that it may corrupt the audience. Here, the audience seems to take pleasure in the brazen content. This dramatic pleasure makes the performance more explicit, the delicious outrage more intense, and the performance more objectionable, as it is now vulnerable to be thought of seducing unsuspecting audience members. In other words, if fond laughter allays fears of subversive dissent, the gendering of the audience makes it vulnerable to a conservative understanding that attempts to control female responses to sexual displays. Similarly, it must be noted that including a female audience member's response is an editorial decision. This impacts the group's performance. The audience member is seen as performing her gender. Thus, the visual text takes some of its valency from a representation of female sexuality that is perhaps meant to titillate the phone/laptop viewers.

It seems, then, that the video has been conscientiously crafted, as there emerges a clear distance between the actual performance and the performance available on a digital public platform. The camera has added a directed intention that is meant to manufacture a way of seeing and a way of understanding in the viewer's mind. What, then, can we say about this ambivalence? In fact, a cursory glance at the actor-audience contract reveals another aspect of the directed intention: a desire to homogenize the actor and audience. Both are young, both articulate and competently understand the English language, both can find sarcastic humor in parody, and both seem interested in world affairs. This implies that the actors have found an ideal audience that possesses the ability to negotiate their comic performances. However, it is obvious that this ability depends on multiple factors, and the viewer who lacks any of these variables cannot appreciate the artists. For instance, a certain background is a prerequisite to understanding that the popular

American tune "Y.M.C.A" (Village People, 2008) is being used to fulminate against the ridiculous public persona of the American president. The final video smoothens the edges and provides the fantasy of a utopic audience reception. In this case, it is clear that the rapier wit performed on stage, which apparently posits democratic, public, and social problems, undermines itself in its performative appeal to a restricted audience composition. The audience for the recorded and replayed performance is constructed as enjoying a visibilized feminine shock. However, only a restricted audience may appreciate the political and musical references in the performance.

Theories of cultural participation, including Bourdieu's (1984) elaboration of "habitus" and "cultural capital," are helpful here.

> Those who suppose they are producing a materialist theory of knowledge when they make knowledge a passive recording and abandon the "active aspect" of knowledge to idealism, as Marx complains in the theses on Feuerbach, forget that all knowledge, and in particular all knowledge of the social world, is an act of construction implementing schemes of thought and expression, and that between conditions of existence and practices or representations there intervenes the structuring activity of the agents, who, far from reacting mechanically to mechanical stimulations, respond to the invitations or threats of a world whose meaning they have helped to produce. (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 469)

The video editing and performance appeal to preexisting and perhaps prejudiced notions. The craft of circulation genders the performance—this may not have been the case when the performance was actually recorded. This distance between live performance and recorded replayed performance is significant, as it seems the very form of stand-up is changing. Stand-up when performed live fosters a shared sense of immediacy. However, the recording and circulation of stand-ups, especially over OTT platforms, have shifted some of this immediacy. The aim of this article has been to complicate the sense of a political public sphere that is immanent in the contemporary stand-up. The changing nature of musical satirical stand-ups is an area that deserves further research. We see that editing the video to include feminine shock adds a layer of gendered enjoyment to the performance. It may be argued that such gendering prevents scholars from claiming that contemporary stand-up is wholly committed to a radical subversion of the status quo—after all, the infrastructure of circulation demands that the video be gendered. Does the complex usage of multiple axes of identity in South Asian comedy enable a robust public sphere? An answer to this question must address the consequences of media usage.

Comic Consequences

Unlike in many countries, web portals, such as YouTube, in India are not under a regime of complete censorship. Azeem Banatwalla of EIC pointed out in one of his 2017 interviews that because there is less censorship for web portals, they can write and talk about anything ("Tell Me Nothing," 2017). It seems that Banatwalla is speaking of policy-based censorship because, in the last decade, online communities have created their own informal rules of what can be said and how. However, for acts like EIC, since humor is inherently ambivalent, most people do not "get" the subtle meanings in these acts, thereby being unsure about how to react or whether to react at all. One can also attribute

some influence to the use of the English language in these performances, which might not be comprehensible to a larger audience, a point that has been discussed at length by Subin Paul (2017), giving us a glimpse into the complexities generated by language within a study of stand-up in a linguistically diverse country like India. We see that the Donald Trump (EIC, 2017a) song may have a higher number of views (4.1M) than the Aadhaar song (3.4M), but the number of comments on each varies significantly (2680 and 3380, respectively, in June 2022).

However, censorship has begun to manifest itself in the structure of these media. Trolling and its intensity in numbers about what can be said on social media platforms have become central to how political satirists conduct themselves online. For instance, performers who identify themselves as political satirists have faced their share of wrath. Since most of these acts are strongly worded, they have received extremely polarized responses, as seen in the YouTube comments section of each of these performances. For instance, on the Aadhaar song of EIC, some typical responses are "I always thought that this day will come when comedians will bring out national issues and media will do comedy" (Devam, 2021) and "There should be strict laws to deal with such comedians or the right to expression for making the fun of own laws and mark of identification" (Chunu, 2022). A typically abusive response will be something like, "Motherf**ker sometimes they feel like antimodi☺"[13] (Dk, 2018).

Sometimes, these reactions may snowball into material consequences for the performers—their shows canceled, venues vandalized, police complaints lodged against them, constant surveillance, death threats, and threats of sexual violence against them and their family members. Signaling the general intolerance toward questions, criticisms, and dissent, which is also symptomatic of the insecurities of the global power elite, a noted stand-up comedian in India, Kunal Kamra started his 2017 act with the statement "India is a democracy until you criticize it" (Kamra, 2017, 00:01). Kamra is not the only one to have done so. Both EIC and ATD have categorically taken up this issue in their acts. For instance, EIC in their Aadhaar song sings "If anyone raises questions, slap them down with an anti-national tag"[14] (EIC, 2017c, 01:00), taking a cue from the 2016 incident in Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in New Delhi.[15]

Sometimes, it may lead to self-censorship as well. For example, Kenneth Sebastian, who performed a political commentary titled *Why I Don't Do Jokes on Politics in India*, published on April 22, 2018, tells his audience why he jokes about restaurants and tea and biscuits. "It's not by accident… biscuits are non-violent… that is why I do jokes on simple stuff that don't get me into trouble…. why don't I do jokes on politics? Because our government is super chill!" (Sebastian, 2018, 03:05). Such a self-aware attitude

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[13] The original Hindi text has been translated to English by the authors.

[14] The original Hindi text has been translated to English by the authors.

[15] In February 2016, following a student-led protest in JNU against the 2013 hanging of Kashmiri man Mohammed Afzal Guru owing to his alleged role in 2001 parliament attack in India, five students were arrested and were slapped with sedition charges. In popular discourse, these students and subsequently "all" students from JNU were categorized as anti-national who wanted to break the unity and malign the integrity of the Indian nation. Similar sedition cases against students across the country around that time were read by political leaders, activists, intellectuals as an attack on people's right to dissent.

toward political comedy only emphasizes the general political disposition in India and the hurdles to realizing a more robust public sphere.

The last section discussed the gendering of the recorded stand-up. However, it is not simply audience responses that may be gendered. The overwhelming majority of stand-up artists in India are men. This is another aspect of a complex public sphere with which contemporary stand-up is in a tussle. Answering a question on why there are lesser women performing political comedy, in his recent April 2019 interview with Anupama Chopra, Varun Grover, a member of ATD, stated that "we (men) can afford to do political comedy because it involves a lot of risks, lots of abuse, lots of hate online which I think only men can afford and that too only Hindu men can afford" (Film Companion, 2019, 2:53). Grover acknowledges his privileged position but uses it to speak up and confront such issues. This also explains the gendered visual performance during "The Donald Trump Song" (EIC, 2017a) earlier in this paper. Social classification determines the satirist and the shape of the satire.

Yet, it would not be inaccurate to say that these performers are fulfilling part of the function attached to Gramsci's "organic intellectual" (Gramsci, 2010, p. 6). These artists are creating a space to theorize the contemporary political economy, as opposed to traditional intelligentsia. Moreover, these intellectual performers are self-aware of their role as activist artists. For Noam Chomsky (1967), here "[i]t is the responsibility of intellectuals to speak the truth and to expose lies" (para. 4). There is no doubt that these performers may be seen as attempting to reform their society and fulfilling their felt social and moral responsibility to communicate their discomfort with the status quo. Kunal Kamra feels that he owes it both to the future generation of comedians and to the industry that he is part of to create an art that stands the test of time and is logical. And it seems he will always prioritize his art over information, which is what distinguishes him from others who just put out a piece of information or an opinion but do not have any art in it. Grover reinforced Kamra's point, stating that his truth is more important to him and that he will continue to say it irrespective of any threats. He believes that "every art form comes with an inherent moral compass" (Film Companion, 2019, 16:38). He performs his truth because it makes him alive. As we have seen, charged stand-up comedy in contemporary India may strive toward speaking the truth to power, but it faces many structural hurdles in its endeavor.

Conclusion

We return to our questions, then: Do these acts have any implications for creating, recreating, or changing public opinion, public culture, and public rhetoric? Can they compete with the mainstream media, altering people's opinions and making them think critically? Can these performers be called agents of change, influencing discourse making and affecting public action? Especially when there is a sea of misinformation every day that each of them wakes up to and has to react to?

We see these musical pieces as acts of political critique, carrying the possibility of initiating public discussions and influencing public opinion, more like an intangible space of possible resistance. However, as we have argued above, the first compromise demonstrated in "The Donald Trump Song" (EIC, 2017a) is that of gender. Further, the only audience members who possess and participate are those with the wherewithal to function in an economy of sufficient cultural capital and access to global digital media

infrastructure, networks, and information. John Berger (1972), in a splendid study of European visual cultures in the medium of oil on canvas, photography, and advertising in *Ways of Seeing*, argues that seeing is locating (p. 7). For Berger (1972), the significant question that needs investigation is: Who is looking at whom? And following Berger, we ask: Which "way of seeing" does the media-savvy stand-up artist engender in his putative project of dissent? As the artist makes use of YouTube, the medium itself creates viewers with specific kinds of capital—as seen in the comments and trolling the artist encounters.

We have demonstrated that the comic is a site for material and psychological battles to be fought, thus realizing the potential of transformation enabled by the genre of stand-up comedy. We feel that stand-up, which is obviously political performatively, revitalizes the public sphere of discussion and dissent and, at the same time, manufactures a restricted audience that may view and share the videos of EIC and ATD. The visual form through the internet carries its own ruptures over the dissenting content, and thus the potency of stand-up is sometimes compromised. While the humor in such performances is potentially located in anxiety—an anxiety of degraded discourse—the fact that these performances are shared, and to an extent, can sustain themselves means that these well-intentioned attempts may accord to themselves a measure of success. Even as we confront the material problem of the circulation of cultural capital, we cannot dismiss the shifts that are momentarily enabled by the circulation of these performances. Moreover, as we have seen, a close reading of performances reveals deeper problems of gender, genre, and censorship. We conclude this paper with the words of John Lennon (1969, as cited in Cannon, 2020), hoping that our paper has allowed our own audience to rethink their concrete optimism:

> When it gets down to having to use violence, then you are playing the system's game. The establishment will irritate you—pull your beard, flick your face—to make you fight. Because once they've got you violent, then they know how to handle you. The only thing they don't know how to handle is non-violence and humor. (para. 5)

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