

Is English Stand-Up Comedy in India Intersectional?

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Abstract

Stand-up has been found to share similar social responsibilities as that of *Parrhesia* which means “free speech” in a democratic space (Foucault, 1983). Politicization of the comedic space thus brings forth its potential as a critique on social injustice, incorporating a range of issues prevalent in any societal setting. On this premise, the space ideally should have inclusivity on the basis of caste, class, and gender across various communities in a country as diverse as India. However, on evaluation, we argue, that English stand-up comedy, through its demographics, nature of participation, discourses, and performative locations challenge their fundamental premise.

Using the theoretical (Crenshaw, 1991) and methodological framework (Intercategorical methodology) from intersectionality, the researchers present in this paper, a critique of the nature of English stand-up performances in India. In conclusion, two Hindi stand-up comedy performances have been used to counteract the gradual transition of stand-up comedy from a space that could ‘stand-up’ for social change to an elite-privileged space, where issues, political or social are raised strategically, mostly, if it matches the sensibilities of the urban populace.

Introduction

While stand-up comedy is being hailed as a contemporary cultural phenomenon that takes cognizance of social discriminations and responds to the same by inverting the disparity in power and raising voice against marginalisation, its roots could be traced back to the Greek figure of speech *Parrhesia* (emerging around 400 B.C) which stood for “free speech”. Foucault (1983) considers an individual a *parrhesiastes*, “the one who uses parrhesia, i.e., is the one who speaks the truth.” In contemporary times, an analogy could be drawn between the stand-up comics’ alias *parrhesiastes* and the society.

Foucault (1983) opined that a democratic spirit underlying governance and constitution (*politeia*) necessitated the presence of “*isegoria* (the equal right of speech), *isonomia* (the equal participation of all citizens in the exercise of power), and *parrhesia*.” This implies that for a government to function, it needed to acknowledge the rights of speech, equality in participation, and the freedom to articulate and critique the government when it was necessary to engage in the healthy process of articulating citizenship. In current times, we have been challenged (Sorabjee, 2018) and citizens have responded through consistent activism to thwart the curbing of these

freedoms. While this continues in a more formal governmental space and purview, stand-up comedy space that is supposed to provide a space for *parrhesia*, has shown dual dimensions.

It has indubitably revealed its power of constructing a sense of the public sphere (Paul, 2017), personal identities and cultural critiques (Mintz, 1985; Gilbert, 2009) and therefore has been christened as a comedy with a purpose (Gilbert, 2004; Rajagopal, 2009). Stand-up comedy hence has become a comedian's tool to take a stand and address an issue (Jenkins, 2015). Quite interestingly, stand-up comedy has also become a popular entertainment avenue for the youth (Saharoy, 2018). While for these above-mentioned reasons, this space has been celebrated as a place wherein people negotiate, recreate, and contest prejudiced, normative, and discriminatory practices in a humorous manner, few recent observations help us locate the politics of the stand-up comedy space. While entertainment masks the larger politics of stand-up comedy, when we probe deeper the larger discourse on stand-up comedy in India at the current moment with respect to the observation by Foucault, we realise that the discourse shows a few fault lines.

Is stand-up comedy space indeed a microcosm of the larger society? Can it provide a space for *parrhesia*, and is, therefore, following Foucault, supposed to challenge social hierarchies and provide avenues for 'reversals' (Keisalo, 2016)? Given these assumptions which incidentally have been argued as providing the foundation of stand-up comedy, in our first part of the paper, we ask whether stand-up comedy keeps its promises.

Our second attempt is the following. In tracing the evolution of *parrhesia*, Foucault notes that *parrhesia* "is a form of criticism, either towards another or towards oneself, but always in a situation where the speaker or confessor is in a position of inferiority with respect to the interlocutor. The *parrhesiastes* is always less powerful than the one with whom he or she speaks. The *parrhesia* comes from "below", as it were, and is directed towards "above." Given this underlying commitment, in our second part of the paper, we ask whether stand-up comedy keeps its promises.

Comedy Space

The comedy space aims to challenge the "dominant social norms", "push and invert boundaries of polite and formal public discourse" (Perez, 2013). Its main critique is to offer a space to the citizens and project the space as championing for celebrating the equal right of speech, the equal participation of all citizens in the exercise of power. Jenkins (2015) argued that comedians often bring, through their performances, critiques of normative structures and render it a dialogic status against the existing social order. Our study, in contrast, aims to uncover whether the premise on the basis of which the comedy space is being construed has indeed championed intersectionality, that is, providing people across caste, class, and gender to 'stand-up' and assert themselves. Continuing our observations from the prior agenda, we would explore whether stand-up comedy follows this second principle or not, specifically asking whose truth is being spoken and who is being laughed at.

Framework: Theoretical and Methodological

Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) as a framework conceives of individuals as having multiple social category memberships. McCall (2005) defines intersectionality as "the

relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations”. She further argues that it has been a “major paradigm of research in women’s studies” and is one of the most important theoretical contributions of women’s studies in connection with related fields (p.1771). This approach situates the marginal participatory nature of female stand-up comedians, as well as, helps us understand the lack of discourses centering around marginalities of caste and class, across the gender spectrum.

For the analysis, therefore, we use intersectionality as a theoretical framework and intercategory complexity as a methodological framework (McCall, 2005, p. 1773), wherein “the scholars provisionally adopt existing analytical categories to document relationships of inequality among social groups and changing configurations of inequality along multiple and conflicting dimensions.” We use this framework to cut across the caste-class dimensions for providing an analytical critique of the larger philosophy guiding a space which is supposedly a space for championing equity.

Dilemmas of Intersectionality

Despite being popular on both television and internet, stand-up has its large audience on the internet due to its global appeal and easy accessibility (Venkataramesh, 2018). This is explained by how stand-up videos are the most shared and watched videos on the internet in India (Sengupta, 2018; Pradhananga, 2018; Venkataramesh, 2018). However, refuting the egalitarian premise of stand-up comedy space, we observe that a large body of academic and industry-related evidence suggests that the stand-up comedy space has always been, and continues to be, male-dominated (Gray, 1994; Nilsen & Nilsen, 2000; Ross, 1998).

Additionally, there is a conspicuous silence regarding caste-based atrocities, especially, the class-caste dimensions of individuals. Caste privileges are deep-seated and often overlooked. While we speak of race quite frequently (Trevor Noah is a case in point), caste is not spoken about. Therefore, while Stand-up comedy thrives on being the harbinger of social criticism wherein it is supposed to address social, political, and cultural concerns of a society, these two issues posit theoretical challenges to their very basic premise on the grounds of inclusivity on the basis of gender, class, and caste. We consider the current trends and changes in the space to articulate whether intersectionality has or can be achieved in such a promising space for evolving the equitable consciousness in our civil societies.

Gender, class, and Caste: Three-pronged Approach to Understanding Intersectionality

Before we further our critique, we wish to assert and guard against a propensity for a binary, two dimensional analyses—one of the basic premises of a clear, linear binary opposition or categorisation is to assert that a specific space, individual or event possesses or does not possess any attribute or dimension. Here, in this case, whether stand-up comedy affords intersectionality or not. In the current formulation, it does make us conclude that it does not. However, one needs to study the current changes that have been implemented to thwart the lack of intersectionality in the discourse of current trends in stand-up comedy space.

Stand-up has transpired as a tool for the privileged males to bring out the prevailing social ailments in the society. This proposition stands challenged in terms of gender when a female body enters this space (Lockyer, 2010). Even though the gender ratio in comedy has

been skewed towards men, across the world, India is witnessing a rise in the number of female comics today (Women-only stand-up comedy: Humour has It, 2015). Therefore, while according to our observation, there are only 6 Indian female YouTubers in comparison to 44 males, TLC Queens of comedy, an all-female stand-up reality show that broadcasted between September 24 and October 20, 2017, are examples of the transitions (TLC Launches ‘Queens of Comedy,’ India’s First Female Comedy Show, 2017). This is indicative of the process of feminization of stand-up as a space in India.

Whether it has achieved gender equity deserves further analysis. But for the purposes of the paper, we understand feminization as an increase in the participation and not as a reflection of feminist consciousness amongst the participants.

A recent case where a female Stand-up comedian has challenged the current practices of the trade is in point. Until quite recently, women have been marginalized in many fields of humour – especially in the public realm (Shifman & Lemish, 2010). Ayushi Jagad (2017) commented on the popular comedy channel AIB, on its apparent sexism in their video creation process and thus a differential representation of women in their videos which the male scriptwriters claimed to be feminist in nature. It was found that the videos produced by AIB could not pass the Bechdel test. To which, Ayushi suggested that the *videos needed to be scripted by the women writers* and the *content be devoid of any reference to a “man”*, to pass the test at the very basic level. As Stand-up routines are ideally self-written but not always beyond the focus on issues pertaining to men, it can be assumed that it does not pass the first base of the test. Therefore, while comedians have taken note of the lack of intersectionality, the feminist consciousness is yet to emerge from the performers. We could say that the move is in place. AIB has acknowledged their discrepancy and is now seen as participating in the discourse of raising awareness about these issues in their Instagram post (allindiabakchod, 2018).

While gender-based marginalities are being taken cognizance of, they are largely restricted to the sex-based disparity that is female participation and does not often acknowledge the participation of people across the gender spectrum. This is in spite of the fact that many performers, especially female performers are LGBTQA+ activists. But, for this case, at least there is acknowledgement and activism centering on the discourse.

The second case is that of class. Stand-up comedy space needs to be intersectional when it articulates discriminations not only on the basis of gender but also sees identities as intersectional, including but not restricted to concerns of class as well. Otherwise, the narrative or discourse fails to uphold an approach of equity in the truest manner. This motivates us to evaluate whether there is a similar attempt at feminization of the space on the internet that delimits the boundary of gender, exclusively devoid of a class consciousness. We need to ask whether accessibility to all the sections of the society has been provided in such a space or not.

Understanding stand-up as a feminist public sphere becomes imperative for our project (Haghani, 2008) but this same approach could be contested by the very socio-demographic profile of the participants and the nature of spaces in which they are performed. Stand-up in India, exclusive of the urban experiences and settings stands questionable on the grounds of inclusivity (Patel, 2018; Sengupta, 2018). These six female YouTuber stand-ups belong to the

educated, urban Indian section of our society. Stand-up performances thus, become a part of upscale, elite spaces such as pubs, cafes, and corporate meets. This raises questions regarding intersectionality even for female stand-up comedy performers, that is whether women of varied age, colour, caste, and class are included in it or not (Reardon, 2016). A recent articulation of this gap is being addressed by individuals such as Aditi Mittal, an established female stand-up performer.

Deepika Mhatre, a 42 years old Maharashtrian female stand-up comedian, a professional cook, jewellery seller by the day and stand-up comedian by the night navigates this space of stand-up on YouTube and is challenging the scenario altogether (Salvi, 2018; Lopez, 2018). She supports a family of three daughters and her husband. On the professional frontier, she cooks in four houses and sells jewellery on the train and sometimes performs stand-ups when she gets a chance. Mhatre explored stand-up comedy by chance as she had participated in one of the in-house talent competitions organised for the domestic helps by one of her employers. Then, she was introduced to Aditi Mittal by one of the journalists who had discovered her during this performance. Aditi Mittal trained Mhatre for her first performance in a comedy club, where she helped her write and perform. Mhatre talks about comedic routines involving a maid's experience from an artist's point of view, but now as a stand-up herself utilizing the opportunity to speak, she thanks her employer along with her mentor ace-comedian Aditi Mittal for it (Salvi, 2018; Sharma, 2018). Despite her venture into the comedy space, Mhatre continues working as a cook and sells jewellery for comedy doesn't pay her enough. Comedic routines in stand-ups are often associated with the urban setting, its problems and experiences, yet Mhatre seems to have found her voice in stand-up when she says, "I have seen stand up comedians often sharing stories about their maids, but now, I will speak" (Patel, 2018). Her comedy is positional, observational, and is critical of the middle-upper class and its aspirations. It bridges both the personal and political at the same go, reinstating the purpose of stand-up comedy. Foucault (1983) had asserted that the *parrhesiastes* is always less powerful than the one with whom he or she speaks. Mhatre, performing in an upscale pub or comedy club responds to that concern. But studies argue that comedy taste could be seen as being class-specific (Friedman, 2011; Kuipers, 2006). Therefore, while the working-class representation is a single individual story and alludes us to the changing dynamics of stand-up as a potential space for social change, we need to wait and understand whether her participation remains a single story or evolves the direction of stand-up comedy in the future. That, incidentally, is the litmus test for intersectionality of stand-up comedy spaces in India at present.

The third concern is that of caste. A world of silence pervades here. This is evident in the lack of any study or survey on the absence of performers from a marginalised caste background. The *parrhesiastes* alias stand-up comedy performers were supposed to be in a position of inferiority with respect to the interlocutor. Foucault (1983) argues that the *parrhesia* comes from "below", as it were, and is directed towards "above". "The ideal function of stand-up is punching up," says Ayushi Jagad (2018). Jagad (2018) explains the technical and socio-political aspect of a joke: punching up and punching down are processes in which a person identifies his/her position in a society. Ideally, in comedy, a person is supposed to punch up, which is to say a joke about someone privileged than you are...It is of utmost importance to ask who you are laughing at, who comes out looking bad at the end of your joke. If the answer is someone who is

less privileged than you are - be it caste, class, race, gender or sexuality - then your humour is derisive and needs to be called out (Rajendran, 2018). Discourses on race and stand-up comedy could be brought in here. Perez (2013) argues that

many Americans believe racism to be a thing of the past (Bonilla-Silva and Forman, 2000; Coates, 2008; Hyman and Sheatsley, 1956; Lipset, 1996; Sniderman and Piazza, 1993). Studies show a shift in American racial views and an overwhelming condemnation of racism (Jackman and Crane, 1986; Sigelman and Welch, 1993; Slavin and Madden, 1979). Yet numerous studies continue to illustrate that racial discrimination and stereotyping persist (Bobo et al., 1997; Bonilla-Silva, 2001, 2010; Feagin, 1991, 2000). The current period of race relations, scholars argue, consists of subtle and elusive forms of racism and has produced many contradictory behaviors, attitudes, and realities in contemporary American society. A 'racism without racists,' contends Bonilla-Silva (2010), is the racial ideology of the post-Jim Crow USA, where there tends to be an unwillingness to believe that racism continues to exist and negatively impact the 'life chances' of racial and ethnic minorities.

Why Then, Is There a Silence on Caste?

Rajoura, a 44 years old Jat Hindi stand-up comic says "I really think caste is the most important thing in our society, 'It determines everything – what we eat, whom we deal with, whom we marry, everything. " Rajoura criticizes his own community (Tellis, 2017). Rajoura who left his lucrative job in the Silicon Valley, does stand-ups and also writes on various issues while identifying himself as a satirist. His entrance in the comic scene is a testimony of his dislike for the IT exploitative and regressive culture of especially the Indian corporate houses that he often claims to be the reason for his career-shift. Rajoura's routines are socio-political and cultural satires addressing issues of caste, class, culture and everything political, to an extent feminist concern about gender equity. He satirizes the Indian political scenario that uses the discourse on caste as opportunistic click bait in garnering votes. Thus, Rajoura brings everything political onto the stand-up stage that is often left untouched. To an extent his routines are gender inclusive when he talks about sexualities beyond the hetero-normative discourses. He doesn't budge from critiquing his own community of Jats either wherein he critiques the oft projected sense of self-glorification attached with the community membership in the face of the community often being charged with following regressive practices (Tellis, 2017). Rajoura refrains from calling himself a stand-up as he says that he only presents his experiences on stage. He doesn't feel obligated to entertain when asked upon why he doesn't get into the visual mediums on YouTube. Rajoura, criticizing the Indian Stand-up scene says, it doesn't touch upon the soul of the country that is caste politics, which is often due to the elite backgrounds that the comedians belong to. Often Rajoura collaborates with his fellow comedians like Varun Grover and musician Rahul Sampath and writes satire-songs that are part of "Aisi Taisi Democracy," available on YouTube (Abhishek, 2015), a collection of insightful parodies and satires that strike the chords of social criticism, quite unabashedly.

Conclusion

Perez (2013) articulates that

Stand-up comedians frequently breach norms of etiquette and polite public discourse. With respect to race, stand-up comics often rely on blatant racial and ethnic stereotypes of the perceived deficiencies and proclivities of ‘others.’ Joke-tellers justify the use of such stereotypes by pointing out that the role of comedy is to confront touchy subjects, breach norms of etiquette, name taboos, etc. (Dundes, 1971; Gilbert, 2004; Oring, 2003). What matters is ‘being funny.’ The use of comedy to rupture the taboo is not unique to racial discourse, as one can imagine sexual or political humour surfacing in sexually or politically repressive societies (Davies, 1998, 2011; Morreall, 1983).

We could have used the comedy scale to articulate, resist, organize, and bring in the required consciousness about the caste-based atrocities to the forefront. Instead, stand-up comedy routines, continue to spread the clean, elite comedy to cater to the middle-class sensibilities. We however, acknowledge that few comedians have been steadily challenging this trend (Varun Grover et al.).

Mapping the trajectory of stand-up comedy spaces in India, specifically, English stand-up comedy in India, as archived, individually or via channels, on Youtube, reflects two issues- the concerns regarding intersectionality. In the paper, we delved deeper into the analysis of the current shifts in stand-up comedy discourses in India and articulated how, while it was largely being shaped as a non-intersectional space of social participation in India, is being consciously challenged and evolved as a space of possibilities, based on consideration of gender, class, and caste. Albeit, with a pinch of elitism. However, if the apparent disconnect between social criticism, intersectionality, and emerging spaces such as stand-up comedy spaces are taken cognizance of, then they can emerge as potential tools for a cultural turn based on humour (Bhola, 2018)

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