

# Comedy that lacks a punch

It is as much the job of a comedian to shock the audience with unpalatable truths as it is to make them laugh



SANJAY RAJOURA

The collective intellect of a society can be gauged by the art it appreciates and emboldens. What passes for comedy in India today caters mainly to the lowest common denominator of 'collective conscience' rather than collective intellect.

## Punch up

In recent years, we have seen a wave of stand-up comics in India, similar to the wave of software engineers we saw post-liberalisation. Stand-up comedy has become an aspirational career choice for many. We even have right-wing comics today and all they do is punch down (picking on the powerless).

I have come across many comics who believe that their job is to make people laugh – nothing more, nothing less. There are a few popular tropes to achieve this goal, such as the use of cuss words, misogyny, blatant casteism, Pakistan bashing, and body shaming. Since these constitute the favoured menu of our society today, a generous dose of these tropes is guaranteed to fulfil the objective of making the audience laugh.

I vehemently disagree with this understanding of comedy. Stand-up comedy is all about speaking truth to power. Today, with large sections of the media being pro-establishment, good comedy and satire have come to occupy the role of the fourth estate. Holding the mic in front of a captive audience is a powerful opportunity to drive home a point, and with humour. But for that to happen, comics must expose the patterns in the way power is constructed and operates. The comic needs to hold a mirror to society. It is as much the job of a comic to shock the audience with unpalatable truths as it is to make them laugh. Personally, I have no interest in going for a comedy act that does not ruffle feathers.

However, very few comics are aware of or are willing to talk about the frightening fault lines in our polity and social and cultural lives. In India today, freedom of expression has become an expensive commodity



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that few can afford. Stand-up comics who speak against injustice and obscurantism are at the front lines testing and expanding this freedom. They are vulnerable because they stand in front of a crowd showcasing their art. Many have been threatened online and offline with court cases and even physical violence. It is not exactly a conducive and enabling environment to be a comic today. But aren't the worst times for satire also the best times for it to flourish?

I have come across many 'safe comics' who say they are not political. This is a diabolical statement. It means either you are blissfully unaware of the world you live in or are deliberately choosing to ignore the ruthlessness of power structures. Either way, this 'apolitical' posture reeks of privilege.

## Jokes about privilege

What then does it mean to be a comic in today's India? The answer lies largely in the social capital most comics bring on stage with them. Most are largely upper caste, urban, privileged males. More than their sense of humour, it's their social capital that has helped them occupy the stage. It would be nice if every once in a while they acknowledged their privilege and made a joke about it.

The Indian comedy scene is caste agnostic. There is almost no conversation about caste on stage. While I was moderating a session at a media conclave recently, I asked a panel of female comics why there are no female Dalit comics in the circuit. One answered: "If they have talent, nobo-

dy can stop them." What is this if not the upper caste construct of merit? The panel of female comics was vocal about gender, but remained oblivious to caste barriers.

But it must be said that it is empowering to see a number of female comics out there. I find the sets and stories of female comics far more captivating. Let's accept it: every woman in our society has a bone to pick with male privilege. And all of them have comic sets that are personal. They punch up to patriarchy in every way. That men in the "circuit" rarely talk about that patriarchal privilege acerbically and in a self-reflexive way is not surprising but disappointing. After all, it requires courage to implicate one's own self in the structures we inherit and perpetuate. While many women have been relentlessly pushing the feminist arguments in their comic sets, most men are still stuck at stories of their rejections by girlfriends. In fact, they talk of how they took it like a "man". It goes without saying that these male comics enjoy a cult following.

India today is standing at a fork on the road. It can choose to either build on its foundational ideas or descend into further chaos. With performative journalism mostly holding forth, it is comics who can even be the new breed of journalists. Some of them have a huge following and an enormous reach. They must leverage this clout. Indian society is full of anecdotes. If you scratch the surface of these seemingly hilarious stories, you'll find horrors beneath. We must not stop at surface laughter.

That is low-hanging fruit. The real work of comics is to keep scraping and peeling the layers until uncomfortable realities are exposed.

The comedy scene in India is fairly well established now, albeit not as organised as one would wish. Coincidentally, the fault lines of our society have never been more visible and treacherous. The dispensation of the day – rulers and thought-shapers – is autocratic. This is the perfect time for comics to push the envelope even further. The more arrogant the powers, the more they expose themselves to ridicule. Unfortunately, barring a few, comics are limiting themselves, sometimes through self-censorship and sometimes because of total ignorance. Self-censorship is perhaps the most dangerous form of censorship as it does the authority's job without the authority getting its hands dirty. I am yet to find a reasonable explanation for ignorance. We are living at a time when ignorance is celebrated. If you are reading too many books or taking longer to finish your PhD, you can be accused of wasting the taxpayer's money or labelled an 'urban naxal'.

## Challenge the status quo

And too many comics are more invested in the technique of a joke. They believe that as long as they get the technique right and get the laughs, their job is done. Comedy and satire then become those routines for which Kota is famous – teach children how to crack the JEE without really giving them a scientific temperament. No wonder then that we find a lot of IITians wearing astrological stones. Similarly, the upper caste comic may have cracked the technique of telling a joke, but has not understood how the hegemony of caste and gender works, and will never speak against it.

That remains my fundamental problem with the majority of Indian comics. By not reading enough and challenging the status quo, they risk becoming a mirror of society rather than showing the mirror to society. The best thing about stand-up comedy and satire is that it can be local, non-elitist, intelligent and biting, without being complicated in its language and expression – all that the liberal elite intellectual is accused of. It is time for comics to seize the day.

Sanjay Rajoura is a stand-up artist and actor

# The attack on agroecology

Powerful lobbies with vested interests see agroecology as a threat to their influence on farming systems



SUJATHA BYRAVAN

Agroecology is recognised worldwide as a system that enhances fertile landscapes, increases yields, restores soil health and biodiversity, promotes climate resilience and improves farmers' well-being. Its practices are supported by many agricultural scientists, the Food and Agriculture Organization, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, farmers' groups and several NGOs. It is therefore surprising that the National Academy of Agricultural Sciences, based on a brainstorming session that included industry representatives, sent a letter to Prime Minister Narendra Modi opposing Zero Budget Natural Farming (ZBNF). ZBNF, developed and publicised by agro-scientist Subhash Palekar, has been adopted by Andhra Pradesh.

## Threat to powerful elites

Farming in India, as in most other countries, is largely under the control of powerful lobbies with vested interests and connections to deep pockets. These include fossil fuel, fertilizer and seed companies as well as scientists with funding connections to agribusiness. These lobbies perceive large-scale transitions to agroecology as a substantial threat to their influence on farming systems. If India, a large developing country, shifts to sustainable farming methods, they would all have to look elsewhere for support. The battlelines are drawn and when natural farming, still a small player in the margins, starts to move towards the centre, shrill voices in opposition are likely to get louder.

In Britain, when public hearings were held in the early 2000s to discuss genetically modified (GM) crops, corporations threatened to pull grants from scientists on the committees if they voted against GM. When individual scientists in Europe and the University of California published articles describing how GM foods and crops affected the health of human beings and insects adversely, they were personally attacked and vilified. When glyphosate trials against Monsanto were recently decided in favour of litigants who accused the company of causing cancer, some voices called to have only scientists on such juries, thus opposing the central tenet of "a jury of one's peers".

What hangs in the balance while these battles are being fought is the threat to food systems and biodiversity. As a result of industrial farming, friendly insects are no lon-

ger part of the agricultural landscape, water pollution is rampant, depleted soils are commonplace and plunging groundwater tables have become the norm. The opportunity cost incurred from investing only in industrial methods of agriculture is one that has been borne largely by the farming community and the natural systems.

## Different paradigms

That scientific enquiry and scientists are part of a paradigm of belief systems has been established, at least since Thomas Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Support from corporations for research has become part of "normal" science. The problems with this normalisation in medicine, pharmaceuticals and university research have been described in numerous studies. Assessment of an issue by scientists does not by itself guarantee its legitimacy or truth.

The current battle on ZBNF is between those powerfully entrenched and new voices of state and civil society. Mr. Palekar's words too have been jarring on some topics. Quarrels among the powerful in one camp or another have become a clash of egos, where substantive matters are lost in semantics and jargon, often taken out of context. There are many successful agroecology-based methods in India, so mudslinging among groups can also be a distraction.

The most prominent voice for ZBNF is Mr. Palekar and the developing experiment is showing success largely because farmers are supporting it. The practice may not be all zero budget, may not be fully successful everywhere and will need to be adapted to India's various agroecological zones. The funds for the Andhra model (₹16,500 crore) are reportedly going mostly to train farmers. This is small in comparison with huge subsidies for the Green Revolution and the numerous lobbies it has spawned. So, while the enemy is being made out to be Mr. Palekar and his methods, this is a red herring. The real attack is on agroecology, for the threat it poses to entrenched institutions.

We presently have a subsidy-based agricultural system where farm inputs are firmly in the hands of corporations and their elite networks. Agroecology-based farming is not regressive, but rather a technology of the future with a traditional idiom. Farmers appear to be listening to and following Mr. Palekar. If policymakers ignore the posturing and stay focused on improving soil health and quality of life for farmers, while observing and supporting successes, farmers may even double their incomes and India's food security could sow new beginnings.

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# Learning lessons from history

Instead of moving with the dominant discourse of today, the Congress should look to its earlier days

## BURTON CLEETUS

The voice of the vanquished is often silenced. What endures as 'truth' is often the logic of the victorious. The Indian political scenario is currently passing through such a transition. The Congress, which dominated the country's political life for most part of the 20th century, is in a precarious situation. It is still trying to come to terms with its resounding defeat in two general elections. Its drubbing has been accompanied by large-scale defection of its leaders and workers to the BJP. If 2014 was a shocker, 2019 has created a new normal.

However, unusual circumstances demand unconventional solutions. One such suggestion came from Congress leader Jairam Ramesh, who argued that instead of demonising the Prime Minister all the time, which does not augur well for the party, the Congress should also recognise the good acts of the Narendra Modi government. This was primarily meant as a strategy to create space for the Congress within the hostile domain of India's politics. Mr. Ramesh's words were later echoed by his party colleagues Abhishek Manu Singhvi and Shashi Tharoor. These comments should have ideally stirred a controversy within the party; however, that did not happen. Critical voices against the trio were feeble, except in Kerala where Mr. Tharoor, MP from Thiruvananthapuram, was asked to explain his position in writing by the State leadership.

## Structural troubles

The moot question here is: Will the Congress be able to revive its prospects by relying on a strategy of selective praise and criticism? In politics, there are neither quick fixes nor ready-made answers. The problems that the Congress encounters are deeply intertwined with the sociocultural and religious milieu of Indian polity.

Yet, the strategy of offering praise as a prelude to constructive criticism may not actually work in India's present political domain. This is because yardsticks are constantly redrawn by the party and government in power. And such altered norms receive endorsement through official informa-

tion networks of the government, through state-run and private media houses that support the ruling party, and through social media accounts. In such a situation, a selective voicing of support by Congress leaders for the government's policies does not matter much.

However, a closer reading of the systems of power and a critical engagement with the political praxis will help the Congress contextualise and reposition itself as the main Opposition party and formulate strategies for the future. Such critical engagement is different from what has been suggested by the three Congress leaders.

The party, which has for long confined itself to legislative politics and survived within the protective spaces of state power, needs to revisit its history to envision the future and not try to move with the dominant discourse of the present. The very fact that top leaders make such suggestions is reflective of the bureaucratism that has engulfed the party.

## An alternative vision

After its formation in 1885 and until the arrival of M.K. Gandhi into Indian political life in 1915, the Congress debated on the kind of strategy that should be devised against the British colonial state. Those who believed in the constitutional methods of agitation, known as the 'moderates', argued that confrontation with the colonial state would not be an ideal form of resistance, while the 'extremists' believed in more militant forms of agitation. It was here that Gandhiji's contributions later became significant. He offered a new political strategy that undermined the very agenda of the colonial state itself and a vision that found legitimacy among Indian masses.

Similarly, endorsing the agenda of the present Indian state would make the Congress irrelevant in the long run. To sustain itself as a political party, it has to reinvigorate its political networks and create an alternative political vision that citizens can trust.

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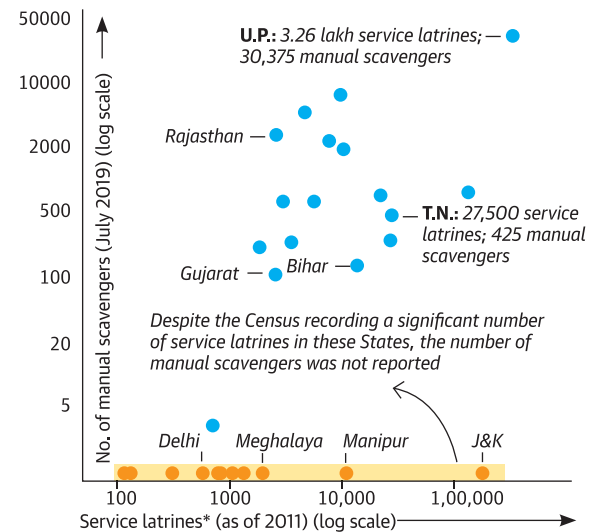
## DATA POINT

### A job that kills

Despite a 2013 law prohibiting employment of manual scavengers, a government survey identified 54,130 people engaged in this job as of July 2019. This figure is understated as the survey was carried out only in areas where "there are reasons to believe existence of manual scavengers". The survey was only conducted in 170 districts in 18 States. By **Suman Sen**

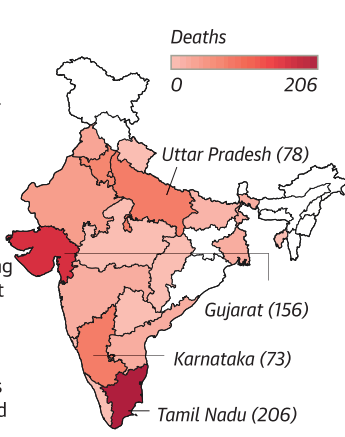
### Official count

When the number of service latrines\* in which night soil was removed by the people in a State in 2011 is plotted against the number of manual scavengers identified (as of July 2019), U.P. is among the most imbalanced States. It has a very high number of service latrines and a relatively low number of manual scavengers



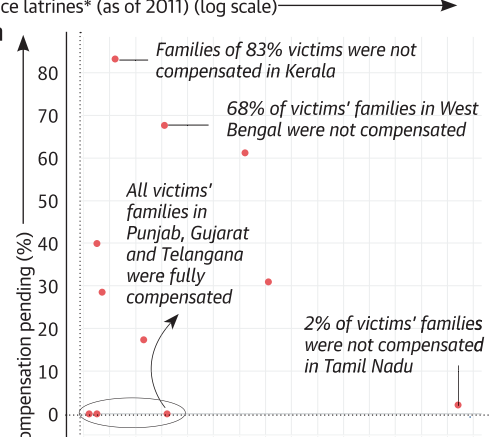
### Sewer deaths

Tamil Nadu had registered 206 deaths of manual scavengers who were cleaning sewers or septic tanks between 1993 and July 2019. This was the highest among all States. Gujarat recorded 156 such deaths, the second-highest. 15 States and UTs have not reported data on deaths



### Compensation rate

The chart plots the share of families of victims (who died cleaning sewers between 2014 and 2018) who received compensation against those whose claims are pending. Kerala performed the worst in terms of % of compensation



Source: National Commission for Safai Karmacharis, Govt. of India, Parliament Q&A, Census 2011

## The Hindu

### FROM THE ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO SEPTEMBER 25, 1969

## Comprehensive plan for handicrafts

A multi-pronged drive is on to give a face-lift to the world famous handicrafts of Kashmir. The drive envisages a comprehensive programme for training of artisans, evolving modern designs for the handicrafts, finding new talent in the countryside, revival of some vanishing crafts and finding markets in foreign countries. The Jammu and Kashmir Department of Industries has framed various short-term and long-term schemes for the purpose. The activities of the Kashmir Design Centre are also being expanded. In all, it is estimated the project will cost Rs. 12.57 lakhs during the current financial year to train 355 artisans and on other operations. Eight schemes included in the training project are with regard to the renowned Kani shawl, toys and doll making, carpet weaving, the Apprenticeship Training Scheme, the Spinning Centre, expansion of the Tweed Centre, Sopor, training of designers for the carpet industry and the Common Facility Programme. Under the Kani shawl training scheme, the State Government proposes to spend Rs. 70,000 during this financial year. The number of trainees will be increased to 50 from the existing 20.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO SEPT. 25, 1919.

## Medical Administration in Jails.

Now that it is definitely known that the Jail Committee will be visiting Madras about the middle of next November, it is but proper that some of the defects of the administration should be brought to the notice of the Committee and the public. I shall in this article touch only on one side of this vast question, viz., the Medical Administration.

It is undeniable that in jails the medical administration is indissolubly connected with the rest of the jail administration. The health of the prisoners is considered to be a matter of supreme importance and therefore the classification of their health and labour, the distribution of labour, hours of work, proper preparation and distribution of diet, keeping all new prisoners in quarantine, provision of proper clothing and bedding to them, proper accommodation in the association wards, close observation of convicts who are alleged to be weak-minded, and proper treatment of sick prisoners, besides the supervision of the hygienic condition of the prisoners and the sanitary arrangements of the jail are some of the important works assigned to the medical staff.