

Humour and the Margins: Stand-Up Comedy and Caste in India

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Abstract

Stand-up comedy as an art form has been known as one of the most powerful forms of expression to speak truth to power. In India, political satire as stand-up is highly popular. However, there is a serious gap in recognising and critiquing social hierarchies, particularly the Indian caste system. Most comedians, including the women who are known as strong critics of patriarchal structures within Indian society and the comedy industry in India, do not see the lack of representation of a Dalit voice in the industry as a structural problem. When caste is specifically named in the routines performed by them, all of them incidentally are a reference to their upper-caste identities in a non-ironical manner. Through critical discourse analysis, the article analyses stand-up comedy videos by these comedians online videos, as well as other non-humorous critiques they have offered on other platforms such as social media in order to understand the implications of these references. The article argues that these narratives reflect the general dominant caste discourse that the upper-caste comedians are a part of and also reconstitute the same by reiterating their own locations within the caste system. Finally it reflects on the significance of humour and particularly stand-up comedy to effect change. Recognising that humour and laughter are social activities also means to acknowledge that they hold potential to break existing stereotypes. How and under what conditions would that become possible?

Keywords: caste hierarchy, caste system, Dalit humour, humour, India, stand-up comedy

Introduction

Stand-up comedy has been one of the most popular ways for artists to speak truth to power. Hannah Gadsby's Netflix special *Hannah Gadsby: Nanette* (Parry, 2018), particularly redefined the way satire and political critique could be expressed through the medium of stand-up comedy. In India, comedians themselves have hailed the stand-up comedy industry as “one of the most progressive” entertainment fields (Film Companion, 2017). As Subin Paul (2017) notes, Indian stand-up comedy and its potential to critique social structures and inequalities becomes particularly important because freedom of speech, particularly of journalists, is being heavily curtailed in India owing to the political climate. However, the comedy industry is not as “intersectional” as it is purported to be because of the existing structural barriers in the industry (Sahoo & Das, 2018).

Very few academic studies have been conducted on stand-up comedy in India, with Paul (2017) and Sahoo and Das (2018) some of the few to reflect on the topic. Even within the existing studies the articulation of caste¹ locations by Indian comedians or the lack of it has not been sufficiently explored thus far. This article aims to fill in that gap. It focuses on how caste locations of the comedians construct an exclusivity within the industry that mirrors the pervasive caste exclusion in the larger society. Through a close reading of a few comedians' performances, the article argues that the comedy scene in India is largely upper-caste. Due to this, the jokes that populate contemporary online and live spaces of comic performance only foreground upper-caste experiences, which in turn reinforces caste hierarchies, perpetuating discrimination.

Stand-Up Comedy, Caste and Humour in India

To trace the beginnings of stand-up comedy in India through official sources is difficult. Since there are only a few studies on Indian stand-up comedy, historicising its beginnings will always remain partial, and specific to traditional cultural spaces. The current form adapted in India, is a solo performance of jokes on stage by a comedian in front of an audience, usually in a public space like a cafe, a comedy club or a bar.² Different regional sources trace the beginnings of traditional stand-up differently. Some cite Kerala's *chakyar koothu* as the earliest form (Naidu 2016; Narayanan, 2018); while others cite televised comedic debate shows that still continue to air in regional entertainment channels (Raghu, 2016).

The current form of stand-up comedy is about a decade old having started with the establishment of The Comedy Store in 2009 in Mumbai. Beginning with hosting exclusively British comedians, the club began to encourage local talent a little while later. Apart from this, the Hindi stand-up comedy reality show, *The Great Indian Laughter Challenge* (TGILC) in 2005 and launch of YouTube in India in 2008 also contributed to increasing the popularity of the art form (Gupta, 2014; Being Indian, 2015). The launch of YouTube meant Indian audiences were introduced to Indo-Canadian stand-up comedian Russel Peters. These two events paved the way for comedian Vir Das to popularise live stand-up in India after having performed for a few years in the US himself. While TGILC familiarised Indian audiences with

¹ A form of social stratification exclusive to India mainly Hindus although the caste system has also been known to be practiced by people of other faiths as well. According to this, Hindu society is divided into four varnas, viz., Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaishyas (merchants) and Shudras (labourers). Outside of the four-fold varna system are the “antyajas” or Untouchables who are today variously identified as Dalit or Bahujan.

² The kind of venues chosen to perform stand-up has also changed over time, with several comedians experimenting performing at people's homes, at parties, and currently, with the Covid-19 pandemic, even on Zoom.

live stand-up in Hindi, Peters and Vir Das popularised the form in English. Currently, the popularity of live comedy has spread from English and Hindi to other languages (Bhatt, 2018; Ramakrishnan, 2019; Datta, 2019).

A cursory glance at online event-booking websites³ reveals two things: there are at least 50-80 comedy shows listed in the metropolitan cities; the prices of all these shows, including open mics are not always affordable.⁴ For the first few years, comedians are not paid for any of their performances as most are open mics. Therefore, they have to ensure that they have alternative sources of income, through part-time or full-time jobs. Therefore, the socio-economic status of the comedians getting into the field becomes important. The primary factor determining the comics' socio-economic status turns out to be their caste locations. Almost all the comedians are upper-caste and middle/upper-class, affording them both the economic and cultural capital required to sustain themselves within the industry. The pervasiveness of casteist humour is thus inevitable.

Hindutva and Brahminism: The Contemporary Manifestations of Casteism

The caste system in India is a form of endogamous social stratification. Jatis or castes are “endogamous hereditary groups” classified into four categories based on occupation (*varnas*): Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaishyas (traders) and Shudras (labourers) (Gurusamy, 2013, p. 6). Others outside the four-fold caste system were treated as untouchables. They were also segregated geographically from the “upper- castes” and had to live outside the village (Gurusamy, 2013, p. 5). Generally, the caste system has been associated with Hinduism, but it is pervasive throughout all religions in the Indian social system (see Bama, 2000; Ahmad, 2010). The term Dalit was used by anti-caste leaders such as Jotirao Phule to refer to the untouchables. The terms “Depressed Classes” and “Untouchables” have been used by leaders like B.R. Ambedkar in several of his published speeches as these were the official terms that had been assigned to Dalits (see Valmiki, 2003, p. xviii; Ambedkar, 2014, for a more detailed explanation of the political terms used by anti-caste leaders and activists today). Casteism pervades Indian social life deeply and is present in educational institutions, medical establishments (Thomas, Srinivasan, & Jesani, 2016) or the news media (Oxfam and Newslaundry, 2019). Casteism is an inevitable reality that affects the marginalised castes in India.

Caste discrimination in India continues to be relevant and in practice even in the seemingly more “modern” and “progressive” times because it has reinvented itself with time and according to context. Casteism is not something one sees being practiced only among orthodox Brahmin families. Even individuals who have been actively involved in other “progressive” social movements have been noted to exhibit varying degrees of casteism. Gail Omvedt points out that while these movements emphasised “anti-communalism”, they did little to question the underlying caste hegemonies that led to the dominance of Hinduism in the first place (Omvedt, 2006, p. 3). The continuous “rebranding” of casteism in India has been attributed to various rigorous attempts at reinforcing Hindu nationalism or Hindutva (equating being Hindu to the idea of being “Indian”) through different strategies, the latest of them being performance of “apolitics” or the targeting of seemingly “neutral” or “indigenous” activities by the ruling parties to give the impression that their appeal is “universal” (Omvedt, 2006, p. 8; Reddy, 2018).

³ Insider.in and Bookmyshow.com are the two most used online booking websites in India.

⁴ Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, however, these shows have now moved exclusively online, offering viewers a chance to watch them live on video-calling platforms like Zoom. The prices of the shows also vary accordingly.

Studying Caste and Humour

Few academic studies have explored the link between caste and humour in India. However, many journalists and critics have noted the significant absence of caste critique in Indian popular culture. Casteist humour is not new; since the time that comedy in television and cinema has existed. Studies around the representation of caste or other forms of marginalisation in films and television point out how most Indian characters, as well as Hindi film actors on the screen are invariably upper class and upper-caste, to the extent that it has become the unchallenged norm (A. Deshpande, 2007). Tejaswini Ganti (2012), in her study on Hindi cinema traces the nationalistic origins of Indian cinema and how deeply entrenched within the Hindu ethos it was. In addition, she extensively talks about the insistence of popular actors from the industry in maintaining the facade of being from a “good family indexing an amalgam of caste and class status, educational level, occupational identity, and gendered norms of behavioral compartment and propriety” (p. 47).

Waghmore (2016) notes that humour has become one of the primary forms in which the “practice of untouchability is fast modernising and humour serves as a means to practice the (in)correctness of caste” (p. 158). He argues that “humour that is understood as anti-Hindu is a matter of ‘unlaughter’⁵ for the mainstream” (p. 156). According to Waghmore, the reaction of unlaughter “exposes the vernacular nature of Hindu modernity and the limits of Dalit accommodation” (p. 155). He adds that a study of humour helps understand the “normalisation of caste exclusion despite the institutionalisation of anti-caste sentiments as a modern Hindu sentiment” (p. 158). That is, humour at the margins “challenges Hindu prejudice and *unsettles the coherence of the modern Hindu universe*” (Waghmore, 2016, p. 174, Emphasis added). This results in disallowing any form of anti-caste humour from proliferating beyond vernacular confines. This disallowance is not simply a matter of taking away one’s freedom of expression but as an important defense mechanism against pain, to “acknowledge suffering as a given and still find moments to dive into the pleasures of joy through unbounded laughter” (Yengde, 2019, p. 56). For Waghmore, the disallowance of Dalit humour misses the point because “humour and laughter in Dalit movements thus are less intended to caste disparagement and are largely about setting new standards in which a critique of popular culture and ideas of purity and pollution is possible” (Waghmore, 2016, pp. 174–75). Yengde differs on the point of the intention of disparagement of Brahmins when he argues that:

Dalits who critique Brahmins and the Brahminical order not only express their emotions but also emphasize their individual superiority over the perpetrators of repression. Through this act, they create a shared space of solidarity amongst Dalits who have a similar view of Brahmins. A significant community spirit is created around the humour that contributes to the development of a narrative that views things from the bottom up. (2019, p. 57)

Casteist humour, however, is rampant and allowed to proliferate unchallenged. One of the most common tropes of eliciting laughter is that of the “lazy maid.”⁶ Comedian Sumukhi Suresh is even known for her character ‘Parvati Bai’, an online persona she created of a “sassy” Indian

⁵ A term coined by Michael Billig which indicates “a significant absence of laughter when laughter might otherwise be expected, hoped for or demanded” (2005, p. 192).

⁶ In 2019, web content creator The Viral Fever’s sister concern Girliyapa, which makes “women-centric” content, released a musical sketch intended to be a “spoof” of the trailer for the Hindi film *Gully Boy*. The video shows a so-called “empowered” bai (maid) who answers back to her employer, the upper-caste, working woman, insisting that she will continue to come “late” and be “lazy” (Girliyapa, 2019).

maid (D. Ghosh, 2017). Critics of such content point out the frequency with which casteist slurs as well as remarks on the sexuality of female domestic workers are paraded as humour (Alagarsamy, 2019; Rajrah, 2019). Indian domestic workers are a part of the unorganised sector that exposes them to various vulnerabilities: job precarity, exploitation of labour, low wages, the perpetual threat of sexual exploitation, etc. In addition, there is a complete lack of access to structures of redressal. However, makers of such content give little thought to how much they are responsible for further perpetuating the very institutions they seemingly intend to criticise. It is possible for such humour to become a trope on the internet because of the inherent imbalance of power on which it is based, as journalist Simple Rajrah notes:

accidental casteism is still casteism... The irritable kaamwali [domestic worker] aunty, the expressionless chaukidaar (security guard) who refuses to salute everyone, the patriarchal makeup didi, the crass, unskilled but arrogant autowala [auto rickshaw driver] are tropes that have been circulating in the comedy industry for way too long to be considered accidental slips by the privileged-but-well-meaning ‘content’ creators. (Rajrah, 2019)

But the validity of the criticism relies on whether the comedy content is “punching up” or “punching down” where the former indicates making fun of people who are more powerful than you and the latter targets the marginalised, as Alagarsamy points out:

nothing that elicits laughs at the expense of someone who neither consents to nor can afford to be the butt of it, should be considered a joke. As for caricatures, they can be for entertainment or be political. When a bunch of upper caste creators and actors get together to make a caricature out of a vulnerable, marginalised community – it is innately political. And the politics of [such content] harms the people who are already at the bottom (2019).

It is unsurprising therefore to see content like the *Kapil Sharma Show*⁷ – that bases itself on mocking marginalised communities – as one of the highest-rated, most popular comedy shows on Indian television. Kapil Sharma himself is one of the highest paid stand-up comics in the country today. Journalist Rajashree Gandhi points out that most of the privileged male comics in the country feel “unquestionably entitled to the audience’s laughter.” Noting that the sexist nature of Kapil Sharma’s show has been pointed out many times, Gandhi suggests “it is his caste privilege that shields him from any controversy or backlash. Any criticism of his show would be incomplete without the criticism of his brand, of which being a Brahmin is a big, understated part.” She further explores how his “humble background” as the son of a constable, “a small-town, North-Indian, fair Brahmin man who had neither dynasty nor reservations, but only used ‘pure’ talent to gain success through reality shows” was what made him the most-adored comedian (Gandhi, 2018).

Both Waghmore (2016) and Rajashree Gandhi (2018) see the nexus of caste and gender as crucial in building what Waghmore terms the “standard humour” in India which involves making fun of “women, homosexuals, fat and dark people” (the *Kapil Sharma Show* features a cis-man dressed as an overweight, old woman who is also an alcoholic and invariably harasses male guests in the guise of being their “fan”) (Waghmore 2016, p. 159). Waghmore elaborates that this kind of standard humour “reinforces and recycles” dominant Hindu views and values around caste through an important form of language use: regional language abuses.

⁷ An Indian Hindi sketch comedy and celebrity talk show hosted by former stand-up comedian Kapil Sharma.

He uses the examples of caste-based abuses and phrases in Marathi that are the basis of humour for the upper-castes derived from systematic, consistent insults to Dalits. Caste names of Dalits become swear words for upper-caste people to insult each other (2016, p. 159).

Methodology

Humour theories have developed quite a significant body of work in the last four or five decades. As Jason Rutter (1997) notes, most humour theories we read about today, derive their ideas from three primary “classical theories”: superiority, incongruity, and relief (p. 8). Superiority theory suggests that any form of laughter requires someone to be the joker and the other to be the target of the joke. That is, someone is always being laughed *at* (Rutter, 1997, p. 9). Incongruity theory suggests that humour arises out of the recognition of the element of surprise in the joke. The surprise originates from connecting two seemingly unrelated subjects together (Carrell, 2008, p. 303). The relief theory posits that humour, and laughter in particular, facilitates release or relief in the person laughing at the joke, something that would perhaps otherwise have caused stress or may not have been socially sanctioned (2008, p. 309).

Scholars agree that humour is a social act (Farb, 1981; Kuipers, 2008). Highlighting the social function of humour, Peter Farb notes that humour relieves tension in a socially sanctioned way, reinforcing societal structures as one group laughs at another. This, in turn, leads to the creation of an in-group while simultaneously excluding other people who are not part of the group; it also facilitates communication as it allows people to “say by laughter what cannot be said in words” (1981, pp. 763–767). When upper-caste comedians reference their caste on stage, they assume at least some complicity by the audiences which is why they are able to make the audiences laugh. Thus, the comedians assume a “superior” position and create a virtual, ephemeral in-group with these audience members for the duration of the performance. The jokes performed may not necessarily be aimed at disparagement of marginalised castes and classes, but simply reiterate some of the characteristics of being upper-caste. However, the joke and the resultant laughter as such builds “solidarity among the members of the group that laughs” while promoting “antagonism” toward the “outsiders” (Farb, 1981, p. 766). Here, the outsiders (marginalised castes) are literally *outside* the room, both by design and circumstance. Incongruity, Rutter explains, refers to the experience when:

two or more objects are presented through a single concept, the concept then becomes applied to both objects and the objects become similar. However, as the joke progresses, it becomes apparent that the concept only applies to one of the objects and the difference between them becomes apparent (1997, pp. 18–19).

This article argues that to be able to “get” the joke and laugh at it involves being privy to all the social and cultural symbols that the joke presents. This indicates a prior access to certain kinds of cultural capital accessible to only a few privileged in the society: in this case, upper-caste comedians.

To demonstrate these ideas, the article analyses the contexts in which comedians talk about (their) caste by analysing their stand-up comedy videos available online. While stand-up is primarily a live form of comedy, it is not possible to analyse the content of the jokes that are performed during these shows without jeopardising copyright issues. Scholars in the past have analysed the different aspects of a live comedy performance. Many factors including the venue

(Lockyer, 2015), the act of performance of the jokes⁸, and the propensity of the audiences to find the jokes humorous contribute to the success of the comedy set (Rutter, 1997; Schwarz, 2009). However, as Billig notes, reactions to humour can be diverse (2005, p. 178) and hard to map. Videos uploaded online provide a more concrete textual reference from which to draw inferences. Most of the videos are edited versions of longer performances that have been tried out several times before the comedian decided to release them to the public. Therefore, this article works with the assumption that the uploaded video is the “best” version of the joke at the time according to the comedian. This article focuses on the comedian per se because it is their social location within the context of the Indian stand-up industry that is being studied. The audience is seen in relation to the comedian’s own perception or reading of the crowd in the room. That is, the comedian makes the particular joke in that manner because they *assume* complicity or backlash from audiences.

The main reason that this article focuses on upper-caste comedians’ caste humour narratives is because of the relative dearth of comedians from marginalised castes performing on stage at the same scale. One comedian in particular, Deepika Mhatre, who performs in Hindi, has become quite popular since 2018 (Aditi Mittal, 2018). Much of her content is aimed at ridiculing the “madams” in whose homes she works as a domestic help. However, she neither names her own caste, nor does she identify her own analysis as a caste critique. The layers of discrimination she deals with in her narrative are still constructed as that those arising from class disparity rather than caste. Delving into the implications of such an action by her would make an interesting study, which is beyond the scope of this article.

Not being aware of Mhatre’s caste location, any form of analysis of her own understanding of caste through her stand up performances would be unhelpful. Additionally, as Dalit feminist scholar Sunaina Arya has noted, there has been a trend within Indian academia studying caste discrimination, to make Dalits and Bahujans as “objects” of study for their insights into caste discrimination (2019. p. 225). This study therefore is an attempt to turn the gaze inward-to understand the various ways in which humour perpetuates existing social inequalities by studying upper-caste comedy narratives.

Some of the comedians analysed here switch between Hindi and English in their comedy routines. In this case, the text has been translated into English by the researcher, along with indications of the original language. Only sections with explicit reference to caste have been reproduced in the article. Caste references in some of the videos are disjointed and nonlinear. In such a case, only the section where the reference to caste has been made, is reproduced. Pauses and laughter are indicated within square brackets while parts of the monologue that have been skipped are indicated with ellipses.

In addition to analysing text from the stand-up routines, other manifestations of caste references by comedians, such as interviews and social media posts have also been analysed in order to provide a more nuanced analysis of the caste structures at play. The comedians analysed in this paper have grown quite popular and are now household names. Their public personas and actions very clearly stem from, and have a bearing on, the kind of comic they are perceived to be. Hence, a critical discourse analysis of caste narratives by comedians has been attempted (Van Dijk, 2001; Fairclough, 2013).

⁸ Many other factors including race (Daube 2010; Antoine 2016), gender (Sheppard, 1985; Boyle, 2015) and sexuality (Reed, 2011; Mizejewski, 2014) of the performer factor into the success of the performance. Consequently, the manner in which the performers present themselves through their attire influences how the audiences perceive them and their jokes (Greenbaum, 1999; Bolsover, 2015; Filani, 2015).

How Stand-Up Comedians Talk about Caste

This section explores how caste manifests in upper-caste comedians' narratives. All the stand-up comedians referenced in this article are, by their own admission, upper-caste. There is a pervasive reference to one's identity as a Brahmin in most of these comedians' sets to signify different aspects of occupying the caste position. Some comedians attempt a caste critique, but fail to do so due to their own caste locations and lived experiences. Those that do attempt a thorough self-examination of their caste privilege are few.

In Their Stand-Up Routines: The Pervasive “Brahmin” Reference

As a self-explanatory identity marker. Comedian Rahul Subramanian jokes about his failure to explain to a Pakistani Muslim why he was vegetarian, simply mentioning that he is “Brahmin.” When the other person still did not understand, he fumbles: [In Hindi] “I said to him we have this (struggling to find the right words)... caste [trails off] to which the other person replied, “oh, your Shia-Sunni? He understood me!” [Laughter] (Subramanian, 2016, 0:44). In making this joke, Subramanian means to indicate the “similarities” between him and the Pakistani Muslim because he was able to relate to Subramanian in his own way. However, Subramanian draws a false parallel between the sectarian conflicts between Shias and Sunnis in Pakistan and the caste system. The Shia-Sunni sectarianism is one of the most well-known intra-Muslim conflicts globally, not particularly restricted to Pakistan (Finnbogason et al., 2019). Both theological dogmas and capitalisation on the same by political leaders have led to furthering the Shia-Sunni divide (Finnbogason et al., 2019, p. 30). This is unlike the Indian caste system where the reasons for Brahmin domination are not and never have been theological per se, since there has never been a “religious” text like the Quran or Bible to ever exist for what we know as Hinduism today (see Gail Omvedt 2006; Ambedkar, 2014 for a detailed analysis of Hinduism as a colonial, and later Brahmin construct in India). The justification for Brahmin dominance over Dalits, on the other hand, is based on the concept of purity vs. pollution that has justified blatant human rights violations with regard to the Dalits in India for centuries see Guru & Sarukkai, 2012 for an extended sociological and philosophical discussion on the idea of purity and pollution). Coming to the specifics of the conflict in Pakistan, the Shia-Sunni divide is more recent, aggravated primarily by geopolitical transactions (Zaman, 1998; Abbas, 2010; Rizvi, 2016).

This joke by Subramanian succeeds because of a) his assumption that the audience understands the relationship between vegetarianism and Brahminism; and b) they have a vague idea of the Shia-Sunni conflict as being rooted in domination and suppression too. Laughter by the audience also indicates agreement with the vibe he sends out through his joke.

Another comic, Prasad Bhat, casually mentions his caste while explaining his career choice as an artist: “it’s really hard being an artist, especially when you come from a Brahmin family like mine” (Prasad Bhat, 2019, 04:31). In making the joke, Prasad Bhat relies on the audience’s familiarity with the orthodox caste expectations among Brahmin families to land his joke. He indicates further that his deviation from his family’s, and hence caste, expectations of his career was forgiven mainly because his elder brother had already done so by being a “genius ... research scientist in New Zealand” (2019, 4:42).

Bhat’s “deviation” therefore was not necessarily a subversion or conscious challenge to caste hierarchies but seems to be a mere accident owing to being the second-born. Moreover, it is also because he comes from a place of privilege (in the form of having cultural capital as a Brahmin, and cis-male), that he is able to pursue off-beat careers with only a little resistance.

Consistent assertion of the “minority” status of the Brahmins. Comedian Sundeep Rao speaks of his caste as being a “disability” in one of his videos (Rao has a disability himself; he is partially visually impaired⁹). His joke includes asking the caste composition of the audience and inviting all the “brahmins in the house” to a “caste party” where they neither drink, nor smoke, but only “read religious books like the *Ramayana*” which he refers to as “fifty shades of pray” (Rao, 2014).

Sneha Suhas, a Maharashtrian Brahmin¹⁰ comic who primarily performs in English, recounts a conversation she had with her mother in this short clip:

[Her mother says] ‘Sneha, I think we should get you an MBA’. I was like, Ma, thanks for the offer but I don’t think I want to do an MBA. She was like “Why?” I was like, “Ma, we come from this *minority* community which doesn’t have a reservation. [she’s asked to explain the comment by her mum] Brahmins are 5% of the population. 50% of the seats are reserved against us, Ma!....” We are genetically lazy people. My ancestors, they didn’t want to be merchants, businessmen, warriors, skilled labourers—they decided to pray for a living! (Evam Standup Tamasha, 2017, 1:47; Emphasis added)

This victimhood narrative that is constructed around the upper-caste identities today is not new. Much of the discourse supporting the caste system today revolves around how the Brahmins are the “new minority” and therefore should be given their due. Not just in comedic routines, but the upper-caste narrative around maintenance of caste hierarchy has been to assert that they are the “real” minorities. Several comic strips and memes have been created to construct this brand of victimhood where the “meritorious” upper-caste person – who gets where they are due to hard work and personal merit – is unable to reap benefits of getting a subsidised or free education because the people eligible for reservations are “stealing their seats/jobs/opportunities” (Sampath, 2014; Mannathukkaren, 2016; Akbar, 2017). This upper-caste narrative, we find, also holds State sanction as the Modi government introduced a new policy of having 10% quota in January 2019, introducing the category “economically weaker sections” particularly aimed at upper-caste communities.

This move has been criticised as “completely overturning” the original intent of the reservation policy in the Constitution. The quota system was meant to address social inequalities that would still be faced by ex-untouchables because of historic discrimination. However, by emphasising on the economic aspect of discrimination, the State “avoided” addressing caste and acknowledging that the reservation policy was meant to end caste monopoly (Omvedt, 1990). It also successfully secured the votes of upper-caste voters in the 2020 elections (Kumar & Gupta, 2019).

The point being made here is that invariably each of these comedians have grown up with these ideals and have internalised some parts of the same. All these comedians draw upon and also in some sense reinforce some of the stereotypes about Brahmins that exist: traditionally, Brahmins were the only ones allowed to have any kind of education, primarily of religious texts such as the two Indian epics of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* apart from other scriptures. Sneha Suhas and Sundeep Rao reiterate the stereotype of being ritually devoted to god while Prasad Bhat draws from the stereotype about Brahmins and their privilege of being able to

⁹ A term he uses himself to refer to his eye condition on stage caused by juvenile macular degeneration.

¹⁰ Brahmins originally from the state of Maharashtra.

access education not available for most people. Therefore, implying that being an artist is not compatible with the intellectualism generally associated with the Brahmins. Causes of this internalisation may be many. A few that are evident here however, as noted earlier, the pervasive Hindutva narrative that punctuates all aspects of Indian life, including popular culture, mainly films (Murty, 2009; S. Kumar, 2013), television and news channels (Sen, 2011; S. Kumar, 2005). The overwhelming presence of upper-caste characters on television or films, whether it be in TV series or a multitude of TV adaptations of mythological stories, has gone unquestioned. Brahminness of protagonists in any form of entertainment has been taken for granted. Thus, while comedians name their caste, they do not feel the need to explain such identification.

The effects of this internalisation can also be seen clearly in the legislative decisions taken by the Indian state. Although there may be an irreverent tone in some of their narratives while poking fun at the Brahmin stereotypes, this disparagement or self-deprecation succeeds in being humorous because of the shared sense of superiority with the audience. Both Sundeeep Rao and Sneha Suhas refer to their caste identities as “disability” or “minorities” indicating that there is a sense of neglected victimhood in their identities. It seems from their narrative that the tenets they have to follow (prayers, not eating non-veg food, not drinking) are oppressive to them and therefore is nothing to be celebrated. Rao and Suhas were clearly talking to an Indian audience directly and therefore did not have to explain to them what it meant. However, as Subramanian tries to tell the Pakistani man what caste system is, he fails. In this case, the lack of language to define caste comes from a lack of necessity to understand it. When one reaps benefits from a system, while they recognise that it has no logical meaning whatsoever, they do not need to find the right vocabulary whether in the vernacular language or in English. The invocation of caste here happens in a situation of discomfort. However, this is not caused by something oppressive. It is just an inconvenience. The point is that caste is named or made fun of not to point out the flaws within it leading to caste discrimination, but to talk about those flaws as simple inconveniences rather than systemic phenomena which might have dire consequences for the person experiencing discrimination as a result of it.

Tokenistic Caste Critiques

As opportunistic reactions. In January 2020, comedian Kunal Kamra shared a video on Twitter of him confronting the news anchor Arnab Goswami¹¹ for unethical reporting about the suicide of Rohith Vemula, a PhD student at the University of Hyderabad. Goswami, who had earlier reported that the university should be held responsible for his death in 2016, completely changed track and reports instead that “there is no proof” that Vemula was indeed mistreated because of his caste location (Verma, 2020). In addition, he also insisted that he is not Dalit as he claims because his father was an upper-caste person.

Kamra tweets through his public handle that he “did this for [his] hero. [he] did this for Rohith” (Kamra, 2019). He even shares a video to prove the same. The result of this “heckling” as most media called it, was that he was banned from not just the flight he was on, but four other airlines including the one owned by the government: Air India (The Wire Staff, 2020). For the purpose of the article, I will not delve into the manner in which the issue of his flight ban was debated in the news as well as social media (Scroll Staff, 2020). However, I focus on the statement he makes about how he “did this for Rohith.” As Shubhangani Jain (2019) points out, Kamra’s engagement with caste either in his stand-up comedy or on his podcast where he features

¹¹ Formerly, he was the editor-in chief of Times Now. Currently he runs the news channel Republic TV.

politicians from different parties as well as student leaders, is that he does not engage with caste to critique it.

In an episode of his podcast *Shut Up Ya Kunal* (Kamra, 2017), Kamra argues how reservations should be on economic basis forgetting the vast discourse around caste and the very roots of affirmative action. He might not ideologically subscribe to casteism, sexism, etc., but he chooses not to complicate the discourse around reservations or development; his very lack of effort revealing his privileges (Jain, 2019, pp. 47–48).

Media sociologist Ravikant Kisana calls this declaration of motivation behind Kamra's action as "strange." Kisana elaborates that in the entire body of Kamra's work,

there is no public record of engagement with the Ambedkarite Students' Association...with no public engagement with the ideas of Mahatma Phule, Ambedkar and Periyar...and with barely any attempt at amplifying the voices of Bahujan scholars and activists, Kamra's new declaration needs to be scrutinized (2020).

Kisana sees this as a larger "mainstream Savarna" project of appropriation of "Rohith as a student martyr and icon to be pitched against the Hindutva forces" (Kisana, 2020).

Kisana rightly points out that icons such as Ambedkar and Rohith are selectively celebrated, and their ideologies repurposed to suit the Left liberal goal of mobilising forces to defeat fascism; and any "mobilisation that does not align with the Left is acting against its own interest and splitting the unity of the resistance" (2020). For instance, they will use the "constitutionalism of Dr Ambedkar. But strangely forget ... the radicalism of his proposals for the annihilation of caste" (Kisana, 2020). Similarly, Rohith is acceptable within the Leftist fold only as a student martyr while scores of other students in similar marginalised positions are ignored by them (Kisana, 2020).

Lack of intersectionality. Comedian Sumukhi Suresh was invited to a panel discussion moderated by comedian Sanjay Rajoura where he asks her to comment on the lack of Dalit presence in the stand-up industry. He further comments that even while female comedians speak of feminism, "their intersectionality is problematic" (Bridge Talks, 2018, 12:47) as they use Dalit and other lower-caste identities names as slurs to insult each other, as Waghmore pointed out above. Suresh's response to the same was: "Using my gender, or my caste, if I am stopping someone, a Dalit man or a woman, that is where the problem starts" (Bridge Talks, 2018, 13:41). This demonstrates a lack of understanding of systemic barriers that prevent a person from accessing opportunities that are otherwise available to everyone. Suresh has created a brand for herself by basing some of her most popular characters on people from marginalised social groups such as the maid. But the fact that Suresh is unaware of the stereotypes she is perpetuating as a result begs some room for self-reflexivity, particularly because it is in the context of humour and laughter. Suresh here is also alluding to the "merit" argument that is often used to argue against caste-based reservations (Shah, 1993; Ilaiah, 2006). Her implication seems to be that while she has achieved all that she has out of her own hard work, she could not possibly be hindering another person's growth.

In her special, *Don't Tell Amma* (Don't Tell Mother), Sumukhi Suresh talks about her caste identity (as a Hindu Brahmin). In the context of explaining how her family was poor, she talks about how her family would insist on participating at the Rotary Club blood donation camps:

If we are donating blood, we might as well take it and sell it. You know how much I'll get for O+ve Brahmin blood? [cheering and hoots in the crowd] That's right. In fact, my plan was, go to Rotary Club, take any blood and sell it as Brahmin blood. It's the same, anyway. Just more delusion in Brahmin blood. We're like, here take, some more delusion, some more [gesturing as if she's giving away something]. Casteism? We started it, come on! [less enthusiastic cheering] (A. Ghosh, 2019, 00:19:13).

Suresh seems to have gained some perspective on casteism in India. However, simply introducing the idea of (hypothetically) selling "Brahmin blood" in the joke seems to imply her also ascribing to the casteist basis of why it is more "valuable" than other kinds of blood and her benefitting from it. Even her next line about Brahmins being the most "delusional" is also ambiguous in its potential for critique. Delusional about what? The premise is not explored enough except when she says, casteism was invented by Brahmins.

It is interesting also to note the audience's reaction to when she speaks of the value of Brahmin blood. In contrast, there are fewer laughs and hoots, when she talks about the "Brahmin delusion." The audience that identified with the previous joke suddenly becomes self-conscious of the fact that she was also calling out the casteism involved in it. Even though her perspective may not be critical enough, just a little bit of mirroring of one's attitudes being reflected through the comedians' jokes is enough to make them uncomfortable.

Caste Critiques of the Stand-Up Industry Attempted Through Comedy

Few stand-up comedians in India today really manage to critique caste actively in any form. Primary among them is Sanjay Rajoura. Much of his stand-up involves being self-deprecatory in that he makes fun of his privileged background: being a cis-male, Jaat (another upper caste identity common in the northern parts of India) comedian. He has also written much around the lack of self-conscious critique in the audience, as well as among the comics themselves. Sanjay Rajoura is also part of the satire troupe Aisi Taisi Democracy, along with singer Rahul Ram and fellow comedian Varun Grover, that is known for scathing critiques of the present Modi government through stand-up comedy and music.

One of the jokes that he has made public where he critiques caste privilege is when he says; "Only two Brahmins have been hung since Independence. The first one for killing Mahatma Gandhi. If you are Brahmin, you would have to kill a Mahatma to get a death sentence" (Rajoura, 2019).

A YouTube channel calling itself *Temple Monkeys* makes satirical videos critiquing discriminatory structures while foregrounding caste in them (2019). One of their episodes called "Sit-Down Comedy" tackles the upper-caste dominance within the comedy circuit, focusing particularly on the Tamil scene:

The video speaks of the caste network within the field which enables people from certain communities to get more opportunities than others, as is the case in other professions, too. Added to this is the constant reiterations of caste identity that punctuate several of these stand-up shows in the city, in the name of comedy and "cultural" references (TNM Staff, 2019).

It becomes evident through the two instances above, that the comedy industry has started to become self-reflexive of its upper-caste exclusivity. These instances, though only two of a strong critique particularly by upper-caste comedians themselves need to be acknowledged.

Though they may not do much in terms of exponentially transforming the industry and making it more self-aware, these critiques are indicative of the fact that self-reflection is possible, and much needed for the industry at the present moment. Through the three primary themes of analysis, it becomes evident that the stand-up comedy industry is a microcosm of the larger society. Stand-up comedians featured here are well-known, having been on the scene almost as soon as the craft started to gain popularity in India. As such, these comedians also hold much appeal with audiences across the country.

Conclusion

This article explored the differences in the humorous caste narratives performed by Indian stand-up comedians based on their individual caste locations. It demonstrated, through textual analysis of their standup comedy clips, that one of the most prominent castes that finds visibility in the narratives is that of the Brahmin, the uppermost among the caste hierarchy. With slight differences, most of the comedians draw from common stereotypes about being Brahmin. This is done not in an ironic sense, to indicate the history of caste discrimination that Brahmins and other upper castes have perpetuated, but to create a sense of community amongst the members of the caste by highlighting traits commonly associated with them.

Those comedians who do intend to point out the discriminatory nature of the caste system, fail inexorably by offering tokenistic and reactive responses that seem to last only until the current news item is making the rounds, as was indicated through the example of Kunal Kamra. Non-humorous caste critiques by Indian comedians such as Kunal Kamra also indicate the privilege the upper-caste Hindus have of not needing to historicise their own engagement with the anti-caste movement before appropriating Dalit, anti-caste voices as their icons and claiming to fight for them in a one-time gimmicky fashion. This becomes problematic primarily because of the image they then build of themselves in the media as the “liberal saviours” that do not need to justify their own locations in order to stand representative of a “good cause.” Despite being issued an unjustifiable ban by four airline companies, the fact still remains that Kamra’s overall image remains unaffected as does his privilege as an upper-caste Hindu who can and has survived backlash both in a personal as well as professional capacity. Other comedians like Sumukhi Suresh fail to recognise the intersectionality between gender and caste, even as they champion feminist ideals in their stand-up content.

Comedians like Sanjay Rajoura are making honest and consistent efforts to call out all forms of social inequality through their comedy. This demonstrates the possibility of being able to perform successful comedy even without resorting to making old, tired stereotypes as jokes. However, most comedians refrain from exploring that space or lack the perspective to do so. This lack is particularly worrying because these comedians are now public figures, their celebrity nature almost similar to that of a film actor. While this assumption of the comedy industry as being one of the most progressive was broken after the #MeToo Movement broke out in India, breaking many a male comedian’s career (Pathak, 2019), the upper-caste domination in the industry still remains unquestioned. With audiences seeking validation for their beliefs through laughter, they have also begun looking up to particular comedians for their brand of humour, and consequently world-views. The danger lies in the possibility that discriminatory attitudes get sanctioned and reinforced, particularly through the guise of humour, where “nothing is serious anyway.”

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