

Multilingualism and Subversion: Articulating Plural Identities in Stand-up Comedy in India

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Abstract

Laughter has become a serious business in India now. Over the last decade, the growth of stand-up comedy has been phenomenal in India. From having late-night comedy shows on televisions that employed the same stream of jokes repetitively, the comedy scene in India has evolved into an entire industry of stand-up comedians performing in pubs, clubs, auditoriums, and digital platforms like YouTube channels and other streaming platforms. The huge popularity of stand-up comedy hints at the license given to the stand-up comedians by the audience to discuss the current socio-political issues of the country. The audience's laughter in response to the comedian's joke might suggest a collective agreement to the stand-up comedian's opinionated jokes. Therefore, an understanding of the relevance of stand-up comedy in contemporary culture becomes pertinent. Since stand-up comedians use the medium of language to connect with the audience to convey their jokes, it becomes important to take into cognizance the role language plays in the performance especially in a multilingual country, like India. This research paper is thus an aim to analyze the role of multilingualism in stand-up comedy in articulating issues pertinent to India to locate the contemporary pluralistic culture of India.

Keywords- Culture, Tradition, History, Comedy, Multilingual, Multiculturalism

Stand-Up Comedy, as Laurence E. Mintz defines is, "...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 vehicle" (Mintz 71). Although stand-up comedians are sometimes, seen wearing costumes and using props for their acts, verbal tools are the primary means of performing the act. Mintz formulates for us the verbal tools employed by the stand-up comedians to construct their discourse. These tools are one-liners, puns, malapropisms, double-entendres, insult comedy, parodies, and mimicry. These tools borne by language convey the stand-up comedian's thoughts and perspectives to the audience. Amiya Dev, in his essay "Comparative Indian Literature" writes, "As multilingual people we have a complex consciousness, even when we are speaking only one language, for the multilingual situation is more a matter of consciousness, than of a polyglot orientation" (Dev 13). The Indian stand-up comedians are seen using only one language or a mix of Indian languages in their comic acts. The complex consciousness that Amiya Dev talks about becomes prominent in the joke of Biswa Kalyan Rath, a stand-up comedian from Orissa,

But I grew up trilingual. Most people grow up trilingual. And you grow up trilingual, you speak three languages. *Ek maa sikhata hai, ek school mei sikhata hai, ek kujhbi society mei sikhata hai. Lekin jaise tu trilingual bara ho jayega toh log aa jayenge.* [Changes tone to sophisticated English] Bro, what language do you think in, bro? *Janna chahata hoon thorasaa, human behaviour mei curiosity rakhta hoon. Liberal Arts parke aaya hoon, thora*

baata mujhe, mera curiosity saant karde beta, utsuk hoon, plz baata de (Rath 5:18).¹

Rath's joke both in colloquial English and Hindi; and the juxtaposition of the words "curiosity" and "saant" serve as a catalyst in explaining the multilingual lingo of urban India. Multilingualism, points out Amritjit Singh "operates at a colloquial level" (Singh 143) which assists the stand-up comedians to deftly bond with the audience. Once this bond is established and the joke is successful, the laughter generated amongst the audience also denotes their confirmation of the comedian's view. Rath after the joke explains to his audience that his mode of thinking in a language changes with the situation. Pretending to cry he continues in the Oriya language, "*Jibonota dukhho, songaro ta mohomaya*"² making the audience laugh hard. The audience laughs hard because they can relate to the multilingual consciousness which like the comedian, they are too part of. In a multilingual scenario, members of one language group hold on to their native tongue as they converse with speakers of another linguistic group to master the dominant idiom of the other language. Manan Desai tells his audience, "*Gujarati bhasa mei joh majachi woh aur koyi bhasa mei nahi, angrezi bhasa khali communication maate...*"³ (Desai 29:58). For him, there are layers of affirmation in the Gujarati language that cannot be expressed in the English language which serves only as a means of communication with members of other linguistic groups (though not always). Moreover, in the Indian school system, two languages are taught - first and second language (the language of the state and generally English). This leads to people learning more than one language. Consequently, an Indian audience would often have the ability to think in more than one language creating a multilingual consciousness.

The style of contemporary stand-up comedy as discussed in this article began in India with Ash Chandler's stand-up performance in 1999. Chandler following the American and British style of stand-up spoke in "English" in his act. Then in 2008 Papa CJ, who was a regular performer on the United Kingdom Comedy Circuit returned to India from London and started performing stand-up in India following the British style of comedy. Vir Das also came back to India from America in 2003 and began performing stand-up comedy following the American style in major Indian cities (Wikipedia). Both Vir Das and Papa CJ have been instrumental in popularising the western style stand-up comedy in India. They both like Chandler performed in English inspiring many comedians in India to take up stand-up comedy as their profession. In 2010, The "Comedy Store" from London opened an outlet in Mumbai's Palladium Mall, which became the first comedy club in India. The format of stand-up comedy in the "Comedy Store" followed the British style and initially, the performers from the United Kingdom's comedy circuit were invited to entertain the audience. This new style of comedy inspired many youngsters in India to visit the "Comedy Store" to take up the art form as their profession. The outlet eventually became the "Canvas Laugh Club" in 2013. Comedian Zakir Khan observes, "*kyu ki comedy ayi thi west se. Thik hae. Format west ka hae. Toh suru me jinhone kiya wo English me hi kiya aur us time pe corporate ka zor tha ki hamare companies mei English comedians aate hae*"⁴ (Chopra 22:30). Tanmay Bhat, responding to Zakir Khan's comment mentioned above remarks, "Now it's reversed." (23:00) Comedians inspired by Vir Das and Papa CJ, performing the western style of stand-up in India continued to speak in English as seen in the American and British stand-up. With few places to try stand-up like the comedy club or a

few pubs for open-mics, comedians started performing in the private shows of the corporate companies. The corporate stand-up shows also became a source of income for the comics to sustain their passion in the open mics where there were less or no payments for their performances. The audience in the corporate shows being proficient in English expected the comedian to speak in the same language. However, with the growth of stand-up comedy in India, comics started experimenting in the regional languages, primarily Hindi. With Hindi stand-up performances becoming popular, more comedians began incorporating the regional languages in their stand-up acts. Performers like Zakir Khan and Abhishek Upmanyu, who grew up in predominantly Hindi-speaking cities such as Indore and Delhi use Hindi on stage to stay true to their own experiences (Shah). However, Vasu Primlani, a stand-up comedienne informs us, “Then, slowly this got caught on with the Hindi populist and Hindi comedians came up. So, since the temporal progression of this occupation was from the West down, the penetration into the regional languages hasn’t been very strong” (Rakheja). But the popularity of stand-up in the Hindi language has given comedians the courage to speak in their regional languages. Instances of stand-up comedy in Malayalam, Punjabi, and Gujarati are becoming popular in India. However, stand-up artist Praveen Kumar opposes, “Your audience becomes niche in regional stand-up but the reaction to a joke is often better. When I’m doing an English show, I don’t mix it Tamil because then I would still be catering to Tamil audience” (Bhatt). Kumar’s comment underlines the nature of the linguistic diversity in India which becomes a barrier to the stand-up comedian’s intention to build a pan-Indian audience. However, this has not prevented stand-up comedians like Karthi Durai to perform in Tamil, Manan Desai in Gujarati, and Dipangshu Acharya in Bengali.

The Alt Balaji App has also launched regional stand-up comedy videos in Marathi, Punjabi, Gujarati languages on its digital platform in 2018 (Editor). This proves to us that there is a demand for regional language stand-up comedy in India.

In spite of being a multilingual country, there has been a dominance of the English language in India because of its colonial past. The initial stand-up performances only in the English language also highlight the politics of this dominance. I will not go into that politics of dominance but the crisis of being able to speak/understand English as part of the status-quo is addressed by stand-up comedians. Rajneesh Kapoor announces in his act, “*Acha I will be using some Hindi and some English because you know basically India mei matlab hamari English aisi hai baas*”.⁵ Kapoor goes on to humorously describe the English used by Indians, “That’s why I am so glad we have Indian English, *matlab humne apne English banali hai*. You know the best part about Indian English? Anytime you forget the real English word, in Indian English, you are allowed to *banaofy* your own words up” (Rajneesh 7:21). Stand-up comedians admit the fact that not only all of them have gone to English medium schools and learnt ‘proper English’ or know the language at all like Vijay Yadav recalls, “*English-vinglish ka bi scene tha thora sa, thora sa..kyunki hum zyada English likhke aate the toh teacher number kaat deti thi humara*”(Yadav 5:22).⁶ This is the reality of India where most Indians are unable to speak/understand English and yet English dominates the Indian language scenario. However, despite this dominance, the demand for regional language-based stand-up comedy proves Ganesh Devy’s point, who says, “Wherever the colonial power was played the local languages were destroyed completely: in Australia, in United States, in Canada. In this country so many languages remained alive

despite a long spell of colonial rule. So the people of this country deserve the credit for all this work” (Pesch). Not only are the stand-up comedians courageous to perform in regional or mixed languages, but the audience is also appreciating this linguistic diversity to explore the contours of Indian humour in a multicultural ethos.

Language sometimes becomes an agency for establishing the stand-up comedian’s identity. Biswa Kalyan Rath, as the above mentioned joke highlights, delivers his punch line in Oriya to establish his identity on stage. Likewise, Sandeep Sharma says, “*Toh mei UP se hoon. Mera nam hae...*” (Sharma 5:03).⁷ Other stand-up comedians too introduce themselves like Zakir Khan from Indore, Abhimanyu Upadhyay from Delhi, Vijay Yadav from Harayana, and Abijit Ganguly from Bengal. The space where stand-up is performed is generally an urban cosmopolitan space like pubs and auditoriums, and yet the establishment of regional identities through language creates a cultural plurality, that is, unique to India. Further, cultural stereotypes are broken through the use of language by the stand-up comedians. Rahul Subramanian, for instance, draws a comparison between North and South Indians through cultural stereotypes in his act. Subramanian mocks the North Indian people for not knowing the names of the four states in South India in his joke, “Leave it...all of them are *aandu gondu*. All *aandu gondu*. You think that’s how we speak. North Indians?”⁸ (Subramanian 1:03) The joke draws upon the linguistic barriers between North and South Indians that have resulted in forming cultural stereotypes. These instances also reveal an implicit tendency of the performers to promptly engage with the audience by validating their regionality. Zakir Khan begins his act by saying, “So ya guys, my name is Zakir Khan and I’m not a terrorist. And I may look like a labourer but I’m not from Bihar”

(Khan 14:39). Endless examples, like this, can be cited here but all would point to how stand-up performances mock cultural stereotypes through their jokes on one hand and brings about cultural plurality through multilingualism on the other hand.

Finally, I would like to discuss the relevance of stand-up comedy in India today. In “Talking Tongues: Speaking Gestures. Oral Narrative as Performance Text”, Epsita Halder notes, “Ways of speaking, clothing...joking, etc. form the basis of communicative practices which constitute social resources. The study of oral culture analyses the social organization of communicative forms and practices” (Halder 109). Stand-up comedians are playing with different languages to comment on the socio-political scenario of India which can be said to be validated by the laughter of the audience. It is an interactive performance where reactions are instantaneous as in the live shows, and a new space is created in contemporary society to voice dissent. Amit Varma, in his podcast show rightly puts it, “earlier comedians were entertainers...but now they are the voice of society in a sense”. (Varma Episode 75). Humour has always been a critical agency to comment on the socio-political issues of India. The *vidūṣakas* in the Sanskrit dramas too only had the right to criticize the king. We live in a society today, where jokes, memes, and trolls have acquired the role of social criticism. Zakir Khan brilliantly comments on India’s secularism through a mother-son’s relationship, “*yasomati maiya se bole nand lala, radha kyu gori, mei kyu kala? Aise awkward maat ho ki Musalman ke ghar mei Krishan ke gaane. Bhai, maa bete ka rishta hai, ishe secular rahne do*” (Khan 14:50).⁸ The essence of the joke is brought out in the lines of the song in the Hindi language that sets its tone joke to underline secularism in India. Sorabh Pant also critiques fairness creams, “This is a product I saw an advertisement for. Which was basically:

Fairness Baby Oil. Again. Which parents are so racist?" Pant tells the premise of the joke in English but switches to Hindi to tell the punch line. "Their child is born and they're like: *Kala kaluta byengan lute...*" (Pant 7:27).⁹ Tanmay Bhatt in an interview notes that the purpose of a comedian is to speak the truth in society. According to Bhatt, stand-up comedian Kunal Kamra has a huge fan following because he has a strong voice (Chopra 29:47). Kunal Kamra mocks the government for branding JNU students as anti-nationals mixing Hindi and English language in his joke, "ye [JNU students] *desh ko girayaga- I am like inka canteen mei udhaari hai!*" (Kamra 8:04)¹⁰ The outcome of the stand-up comedians voicing their opinions is not a part of the discussion here, but language undoubtedly plays a big role in making the jokes triumph. So far, I have been talking about how multilingualism plays a role in stand-up comedy. In India, there are at least 780 languages according to Devy, yet only a handful of them are heard in the stand-up performances. Stand-up being an urban popular culture performance might be one of the reasons that all Indian languages do not find its place in it. But there is a deeper answer to it that needs to be investigated and this paper is just the beginning of that journey. Stand-up comedian Abhishek Upamanyu recalls his performance in Bengaluru, when he asked the audience if they understood Hindi, they said yes. But when he spoke in Hindi, he found they were not familiar with his dialect (Shah). This brings us to another important factor- the dialects. There are different dialects even in one Indian language based on its location. This problematizes the stand-up comedian's use of regional languages to communicate with the audience. However, the complexity of the dialects is part of the multilingual maze of India. It paints out a picture with the brush of multilingualism, colouring the canvas with diverse languages, and having their own shades

of dialects pertaining to a particular region and culture across India, to create pluralistic identities that are unique to India.

End Notes

1. But I grew up trilingual. Most people grow up trilingual. And you grow up trilingual, you speak three languages. One your mother teaches you, another, your school teaches you, and whatever the other is you learn from society. But when you grow up trilingual people ask you, 'what language do you think in bro? I want to know as I am curious about human behaviour and have studied Liberal Arts. So please tell me. (All translations are mine, henceforth.)
2. In this life filled with sorrow, the world is nothing but *maya*.
3. The essence of expressing in Gujarati cannot be felt in any other language, English is just for communication.
4. The format of stand- up comedy came from the West. So, initially the comedians performed speaking in the English language. Further, the corporate companied wanted the performers to speak in English.
5. Okay, I will be using some Hindi and some English because in India, because our English is like this.
6. There was little scene in English, very little scene, because if we wrote much in English, the teacher would deduct our marks.
7. So I am from Uttar Pradesh. My name is...
8. Child Krishna asks his mother Yasomati as to why Radha is fair and he is black? Don't feel awkward to hear that songs of Krishna are sung in a Muslim household. This is a mother-son relationship. Let it be secular.
9. Black as the aubergine.

10. They will be the cause for the fall of the country. But I am like they still have debt in the canteen.

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