Comedy knows no caste: Nation and caste in English political stand-up comedy on the Internet in India

by

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B.A., St. Xavier's College, Kolkata, 2015
M.A., Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, 2017

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We acknowledge and respect the lək̓ʷəŋən peoples on whose traditional territory the university stands, and the Songhees, Esquimalt and W̱SÁNEĆ peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

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Abstract

Scholarship on humour in the Indian context has hardly looked at how performative humour or comedy intersects with the different axes of social stratification to impact caste groups perched at a disadvantageous position. And although English stand-up comedy in the country is gradually being recognized as an important facet of contemporary popular culture, efforts to see how this genre of performative humour aids and abets caste discrimination is still largely missing in the academic discourse. This study is an attempt to address this knowledge gap. By considering English political stand-up comedy as a subgenre of the wider performative art form, it aims to determine how comedians use political humour to critique the dominant understanding of the nation that the Indian State is trying to peddle to its citizens, and more importantly, if caste forms an analytical tool that informs their critique.

This study uses a qualitative discourse analysis methodology to study precisely how caste finds representation in the comedians' critique of the nation. It selects six political stand-up comedians and examines all of their stand-up comedy clips available for viewing on YouTube. By using a range of theoretical concepts, this research attempts to recognize the important connection between caste and political humour in India. It finds that English political stand-up comedy in India is anti-ritualistic as well as hegemonic. Comedians raise difficult, politically charged topics, normalize the critique of important political developments through humour and in doing this, negotiate the boundaries of free speech. They promote new understandings about the nation that is in stark contrast to the dominant ideology. But at the same time, the domain of English political stand-up comedy is not representative of caste questions. Comedians hardly ever talk about caste, and even when they do, it is mostly a passing remark or a hurried reference. Caste is also not represented in the comedians' identities since most of them hail from upper caste backgrounds. English political stand-up comedy, then, in spite of its democratizing potential, reflects and reproduces the caste bias inherent in the broader national public sphere. These research findings prompt a discussion on caste in popular culture and institute political humour as a legitimate entry point into the sociological analysis of Indian society.

Keywords: India, Internet, caste, nation, humour, English political stand-up comedy

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Preface

This study is a culmination of almost six years' worth of research. The idea of analysing comedy from a political-sociological angle first came to me when I was pursuing my first Master's degree in Sociology at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. What started out as an exploration of political correctness in comedy for a term paper has today taken the shape of a thesis. The study of caste, as an important attribute of Indian social life, has occupied centre stage in the coursework component of almost all my previous degree courses. I have been trained to analyse caste from myriad angles: through kinship ties, caste's endurance in Indian politics, its manifestation in rules of commensality and even through its overlap with other axes of social stratification such as class and gender. However, I soon noticed that there was hardly an effort in the academic discourse to situate caste in popular culture and understand how the question of caste plays out in everyday cultural references. As someone belonging to a generation that has been socialized heavily in the television culture, the film industry, and has evidenced the Internet boom first-hand, I found the absence of an analysis of caste in everyday popular culture to be quite perturbing.

Around 2016, when the idea of studying caste from the angle of popular culture first germinated in my mind, the English stand-up comedy industry in India was on an upswing with social media platforms inundated with short clips of comic performers talking about a variety of relatable topics. As a young student, forced to live away from family, and having to battle the big, bad world of Delhi on an everyday basis, these videos provided companionship during meals, comforted me when the academic pressure built up. About six-eight minutes long, they were not time consuming but took my mind off things momentarily. What piqued my interest was that stand-up comedy as a performative genre was being mobilized by a few comedians to talk about quite serious issues, discussions that I had rarely heard in the mainstream media. Kunal Kamra's comedic routines come to mind particularly. When the laughter wore off eventually, I realized that in this domain, there was a glaring absence of caste-related discussions. To me then, stand-up appeared to be a realizable, observable unit of Indian popular culture that could serve as an entry point into understanding the representation of caste in the popular cultural discourse.

Also around this time, the State machinery weighed down heavily on my educational institution. I realized exactly how powerful the authority can be. With my daily routine upended

by a series of administerial strictures, I began to reflect on the consequences of creative expression in the country. However, it was not until later in 2018, when the newspaper publication I used to work at was being hounded by BJP fanatics for its anti-government stance, that I seriously began to consider the limits of free speech in the country under the current political regime.

A lot of reading ensued, followed by theoretical formulations and re-formulations. I gave up my job to pursue academics. A lot of happy accidents occurred on the way, the joy of finding an article that supported my theoretical claim remains unmatched. This academic journey explored quite a bit of uncharted territory because in many ways, what I was proposing to do has seldom been attempted before. The absolute frustration about not being able to find relevant literature has been quite unnerving. All of these experiences have resulted in a dissertation that is quite removed from my rather simplistic understanding of caste in comedy in 2016. It is now informed by a range of theories, conceptual categories, and political developments that I have experienced on the way, have been introduced to me or which I have taught myself.

Introduction

"Every joke is a tiny revolution" — George Orwell (1945)

In 2020, a 19-year-old woman in Hathras, a city in Uttar Pradesh in India, was sexually brutalized by four men. The woman was a Dalit, a lower-caste, and the four accused were upper-caste (Ara, 2020). In the nation-wide furore that ensued after the incident, there were repeated attempts to subdue the caste identity of the victim and construct the narrative in a manner that focused on the despicable state of women's safety in the country, without reflecting on the intersections of gender and caste. However, despite the public pressure to see it as gross violation of women's safety, the incident remained just that: an episode of caste violence. The woman was brutalized essentially because of her caste identity. At a time when women's safety in India languishes at a dangerous low, it is not hard to imagine the everyday experiences of those triply marginalized by gender, caste, and class.

In the mainstream public discourse in the country, there are frequent attempts to masquerade caste-related violence as something else entirely. Caste is widely perceived as a harmless attribute of Indian social life, a private family matter, that only becomes significant during elections and matrimonial alliance. Caste-related violence, then, is an anomaly and is treated as such (Natrajan, 2012). Caste, by and large, is denied legitimacy in the public sphere where it is thought of either as a historical construct, a thing of the past; a human fabrication bearing no truth or is denied social legitimacy altogether (Mosse, 2020). This is amply demonstrated by the fact that caste-related news hardly features in the traditional news media (Rani, 2016). Even when such issues are featured, the coverage is replete with misinformation that propagates false ideas about the lower-caste identity. A study involving a discourse analysis of the way caste finds mention in news pieces found out that prominent Indian newspapers frequently associate the lower castes with victimization, social unrest and do not stress other aspects of their identity. Further, there is rarely an attempt to keep the conversation alive and the incidents are promptly erased from public memory (Fonseca et al., 2019).

This treatment of caste as impertinent to the national discourse has undergone considerable changes with the advent of the Internet and its plethora of social media platforms. Now, more than ever, there is increased mobilization to acknowledge alternate caste experiences and give

them their due recognition. There is also an attempt to keep the conversation on caste going. Mainly spearheaded by Dalit groups and liberal, socially aware groups, the discourse on the Internet sees caste for its continued relevance as a determinant of Indian social life. This online advocacy has been successfully translated into offline activism for lower-caste rights in several instances. This firmly consolidates the role the Internet, but more importantly, the several social media platforms play in resisting dominant ideas, challenging the social structures in the country.

The Internet, in fact, has not only brought about changes to how caste is envisaged in the popular discourse but has also fundamentally transformed the cultural landscape in India and facilitated easier and smoother dissemination of information and cultural symbols. Today, with social interactions moving online mostly, it is imperative that we respond to them critically. Social media platforms have altered communication channels. Most of what is understood to be popular culture icons in the country is either circulated through these technocratic establishments or have originated from it. It is precisely at this politico-historical juncture that I situate this research. By examining how the question of caste features in the popular cultural discourse on the Internet in India today, I aim to arrive at an understanding of the broader practices of social inequality existent in the country. Popular culture, however, is a significantly vast and complex notion that takes under its ambit a wide variety of things. This adds to its vagueness as a possible unit of analysis. Thus, for this study, I consider the now flourishing genre of English stand-up comedy in India as an identifiable, observable unit through which I examine popular culture's treatment of caste.

Performative humour has had a long history in the Indian subcontinent and has existed in many forms in different parts of the country at different points in time. English stand-up comedy, as distinct from the indigenous versions of the performative genre, is a comparatively recent phenomenon that has only made inroads in the Indian cultural consciousness in the last decade or so. This has been prompted largely by globalization that has acquainted a large section of the populace with global cultural references, and also by the advent and the widespread diffusion of Internet throughout the country. This genre of comedy has made possible a different kind of laughter, one that is not censored, does not rely on histrionics and mimicry, and emerges from everyday experiences. The performances are usually conducted in front of a live audience, and shorter, edited clips of the same are then uploaded on the streaming platform, YouTube, and social media networks such as Facebook and Twitter for wider public dissemination. The edited clips, of course, do not represent the authenticity of the live shows

but it is these clips with which the wider population engage. English stand-up comedy has gradually become a viable economic enterprise in India and has brought recognition to the comedians from all over the world, placing them on a near equal footing with comedians from the US and UK, countries with already established spaces of performative comedy. This is, however, not to say that English stand-up comedy is the only mode of comic entertainment available in India. It co-exists with other, equally important, spheres of performative humour such as sketch comedy that is popular on talk shows on television. But because of the fact that the Internet has taken it far and wide, it is now the most widely recognized. Its short format, its ability to evoke topics from everyday life contribute to its appeal.

Historically, stand-up comedy has been an important means of resistance, a tool for affecting change. The space it creates aims to challenge the dominant norms and upset the formal public discourse. Stand-up comedy often breaches the norms of etiquette and repeatedly points out the importance of confronting touchy subjects, issues that do not always find expression in politically repressed societies. Stand-up comedy can be used to articulate alternate opinions and bring in the required consciousness to contest the dominant ideology (Sahoo & Das, 2018). Within the vast expanse of English stand-up comedy in India, there exists a niche genre of comedians who dabble only in political topics. These comedians then perform what can be understood as English 'political' stand-up comedy. The topics in such performances range from patriarchy, through recent political developments in India, to even the prime minister himself. Contrary to the wider genre that deals only with comfortable, 'safe', topics, the political stand-up comedians are direct in their criticism, blending humour with political critique. The monologues are at times uncomfortable, morbid, and crude but nonetheless, they compel one to think, even after the clip has ended. The comedians construct an alternate understanding of a situation and encourage the audience to critique things with them. English political stand-up comedy's potential to raise uncomfortable topics and normalize them in the public discourse has prompted me to consider this performative subgenre as a prism through which to understand the crosstalk between caste and comedy. I realized that analysing the comic discourse of a select few political stand-up comedians — six of them have been finalized for this study — would aid me to succinctly draw out Indian popular culture's treatment of questions pertaining to caste.

The literature on humour in India, however, is quite sparse. Still less has been written about how humour aids and abets different forms of social discrimination, but more specifically caste discrimination (Gorringe et al., 2015; Sahoo & Das, 2018). The studies on humour in India fail

to consider how humour aligns with the different axes of social stratification to discriminate against caste groups perched at disadvantageous positions. This indifference could stem from an unwillingness to consider humour and satire as definitive political acts that could influence Indian public life. This lacuna in literature could also be attributed to the apathy towards caste-related discussions that is so pervasive in the public sphere. It is precisely this knowledge gap which I try to address in this study. By analysing how caste and political humour impinge upon each other in the public domain, I aim to recognize political humour and satire as definite political acts that could have significant outcomes in negotiating the limits of the contemporary public sphere in India. Additionally, I also attempt to introduce political humour as a viable sociological unit of analysis through which to study the Indian public experience. And finally, through this research, I intend to contribute to the extensive literature on caste in India by opening up new directions through which this historic conceptual category can be studied. In doing this, I try to institutionalize caste as an important rhetoric in the Indian popular cultural landscape.

It is very difficult to argue for 'a' caste system, as is academically popular, since at different points in history, caste has assumed different characteristics. Even at a singular point of time, caste has several manifestations, multiple ways in which it can be interpreted. Thus, at the very outset, I would like to assert that the term caste, in this study, has been used in myriad ways depending on the context in which it is being spoken about. The term has been used simultaneously to refer to an ascriptive, hereditary status, when explaining its etymology and various attributes, it has been also used to refer to the hierarchy that forms the basis of the social stratification system in India. Caste has been again used to refer to the violence that is an intrinsic aspect of everyday caste experiences.

It is also important to recognize why this study is important today. The Internet has radically shifted information production and consumption in India, enabling a greater number of people to engage with the ideas so often circulated on the domain. The comic clips uploaded on YouTube and shared via the other social media platforms thus have considerably heightened stakes of accountability that can impact individuals and their identities both positively as well as negatively. It then becomes important to consider the consequences that the representation of caste in comedy could have for the many lower-caste groups. This study is therefore an attempt to underscore the ways in which the question of caste identity plays into a politics of representation in stand-up comedy and, by extension, popular culture. It opens up avenues for determining how this could impact the lower-castes' fight for self-determination.

At the same time, I acknowledge that the country is currently undergoing a regime of repression with the prime minister, Narendra Modi, at the helm. There is a flagrant crackdown on free speech and democratic dissent. Channels for alternative communication have been clamped down, social media platforms are increasingly being patrolled. People who dare convey their disapproval of the government's policies are being attacked, both physically as well as verbally through a carefully curated online troll army which specializes in gendered intimidation. The ruling government has been trying incessantly to curb dissent by invoking a broader culture of hurt feelings on the grounds of religion. This has been quite successful too but puts artistic expression and creative thoughts at a risk. Even though English stand-up comedy has been subject to much criticism and negative publicity since its inception, it is only recently that comedians have started receiving death threats and police complaints for the nature of topics they evoke. The comedians' role in speaking truth to power becomes all the more crucial in such a scenario. At a time when the democratic institutions in the country have succumbed to the pressures of the State, it becomes quite important to consider the impact this culture of repression has on comic expression. By situating the arguments against the backdrop of the increasingly aggressive advances of the State, the study uses political comedy and the representation of caste in it to determine the limits of free speech in the country today. This research can, therefore, ultimately be understood to be a discussion on the nationalist imagining of caste politics in the cultural domain. It is an effort to think of India's popular culture through an analysis of its socio-political aspects.

Research questions

This study, then, can be broadly conceived to be examining how questions of caste find representation in English political stand-up comedy on the Internet in India. However, to do this, I adopt a layered approach to the issue. I aim to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of the problem by looking at three different aspects of the phenomenon, each of which I then operationalize through a set of related questions.

First, I seek to understand English political stand-up comedy as a means of resistance. In order to do this, I ask, how do the six comedians convey resistance to the dominant ideology through their comic monologues? What language do they use? Do the comedians resist the broader culture of repression in their discourse? What purpose does this resistance through comedy serve them and their audience?

Second, I aim to delineate if caste is part of the comic discourse. In other words, I ask, in critiquing the dominant narrative, do comedians ever take recourse to caste as an analytical tool? If so, how do they talk about caste? What is the language that they use? How does this inform a politics of representation for lower caste groups?

Third, in this study I intend to determine how the comedians' socio-political locations determine their comic content and their decision to talk (or not) about caste. For this, I ask, what are the ways in which the comedians reflect on their personal identities in the clips? Do they ever draw from their caste identities? How do their personal reflections shape their content?

Overview of theoretical framework

I employ a range of theoretical and conceptual categories which then inform specific aspects of my research. I was particularly interested in learning how these different theoretical formulations speak to the relevant literature and therefore take up careful exploration of each of these concepts, substantiated by empirical evidence, throughout the course of this research. But, admittedly, owing to the paucity of scholarship on comedy and caste representation in India, much of this analysis looks at Indian political developments from a decidedly Western theoretical lens. I begin by framing my research questions within the broader concept of post-caste or castelessness that is a pervasive feature of contemporary Indian public discourse. This concept deals with the belief that caste is a thing of the past or that it no longer matters (Mosse, 2020). And as such, this forms a central theme in my research. I consult scholarship by several Indian sociologists and political thinkers to achieve a rounded understanding of the various manifestations of post-caste in the contemporary public discourse. I see how the lower castes resist the post-caste assumption by fashioning their own sense of castelessness. I use this conceptual formulation to see if English political stand-up comedy revels in a similar denial of caste. By focusing on the caste identities of the comic performers, I argue that castelessness is essentially an invisibilization of caste privilege.

The Internet and the various social media platforms form another important aspect of my research. In trying to explicate how these new media technologies afford new channels of political communication, I introduce Jurgen Habermas's concept of the public sphere (1962). The public sphere, in Habermas's conceptualization, is seen as a domain of social life where through a free exchange of thoughts and ideas, opinions are formed. It can be understood as a

theatre in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk. The State, as such, is considered a counterpart and not intrinsic to the public sphere. In fact, the public sphere produces and circulates ideas critical of the State (Habermas, 1962; Fraser, 1990). In trying to see the relevance of this understanding of the public sphere in contemporary India, I draw connections between the social media platforms and the different attributes of the Habermasian public sphere. I further analyse if the participatory culture of these online forums enables and encourages Dalit resistance in anyway.

But Habermas's idea of the public sphere has been severely critiqued on the grounds that it is normative and not inclusive of women and other minorities (Fraser, 1990). I see if this critique also holds true for these 'new' public spheres in the Indian context and if they too impede Dalit participation. In explicating Dalit online presence, I pay attention to the multiple divisions within the Dalit identity. I see how these internal factions also translate into disparity in their online presence. I stress then the importance of acknowledging the multiple counter-public spheres, a concept advocated by Nancy Fraser (1990), to which Dalits divided by language, region, gender and subcastes, take recourse for political expression. Fraser understands counter-publics as parallel arenas that further discursive practices. They function as spaces where subordinate social groups formulate oppositional identities, interests. Fraser argues that the counter-publics are formed as a response to the exclusions of the dominant public sphere. She also contends that counter-public spheres are the background for the formation and enactment of social identities (Kampourakis, 2016).

I thereafter turn to an exploration of the nature of the English political stand-up comedy as is practised in India currently. I underscore how the comic performers are defining and redefining the limits of acceptable speech by invoking difficult topics in their commentaries. Given their potential to speak truth to power, I bring in Michel Foucault's notion of parrhesia (1983) and see if the comedians can be considered parrhesiates. With its origin in Greek literature in 400 BC, the concept of parrhesia has featured consistently in Greek and Roman literature throughout history and has had multiple interpretations in philosophy, politics, and the performative arts. In this form of free speech characterized by the liberty to say absolutely anything, the speaker is expected to give an exact account of what is on their minds so that it is clear to the audience. The speaker also has to make it clear through direct words and phrases that what they are expressing is their own opinion that has emerged from their experiences. Parrhesia assumes a pejorative sense in Plato's philosophy where it is considered to be mindless

chatter (Foucault, 1983). But above all, it is a form of speech that privileges the truth. I use this concept to see if the comedians are sharing experiential truths to critique State injustices.

This brings me to reckon with the repressive tactics so often employed by the Indian State to rein in free thoughts. The State repression of free speech, in fact, forms the backdrop of this research and one of the principal reasons why I decided to undertake this study. In trying to understand the specific tactics employed to curb comic expression, I use Michael Billig's concept of 'unlaughter' (2005). Simply understood, unlaughter is the absence of laughter where it might have otherwise been expected. It signals disapproval and can been be conveyed in multiple ways that might also include violent repressive techniques (Billig, 2005). I use this concept in conjunction with empirical evidence to argue that the government and its allies practise unlaughter to restrict political criticism through humour. In the analysis, I also engage in a discussion of how the comedians negotiate this culture of unlaughter by employing their own rhetorical devices.

I further analyse the social function that political comedy can offer in such a repressive setting. This leads me to the final theoretical concept, the Relief theory of humour. Formulated in the 18th century and one of the three main theories of humour, namely Superiority, Relief and Incongruity theories, several philosophers such as John Locke, Herbert Spencer, and Sigmund Freud have engaged with this particular strain of thought. In its most simplistic understanding, this theory states that humour can serve as an avenue for the release of pent-up nervous energy. For this research, I use John Morreall's conceptualization of the Relief theory of humour (2014) in which he states that laughter serves the function of channelling superfluous nervous energy. I take this a step further to see how this release of angst through the act of laughter is a collective process that brings together all those participating in the comic moment. I use this abstraction of relief to understand how English political comedy in India performs a social function by providing a basis for regroupment and withdrawal from the advances of the State and transforms into a channel for expressing collective anguish and despair, especially when other means are unavailable.

Brief summary of the chapters

In this thesis, I study the problem from different angles and with each chapter my analysis deepens. The first four chapters in this dissertation review the relevant literature while offering detailed explanations of the theoretical concepts. In Chapter 1, titled, "Caste in India", I trace

the origin of caste in the Indian context, while aware that such an endeavour is riddled with incapacities of empirical verification. Taking resort to socio-historical and religious theories that explain its emergence, I attempt to underscore the main principles that drive the phenomenon of caste into perpetuity. I then move on to an analysis of how the caste system came to be politicized through the colonial census and the sharp increase in lower caste self-consciousness. I problematize the identity of the lower-caste or the Dalits as a category to explicate the multiple political connotations the term inheres. Following Cosimo Zene's line of thought (2011; 2013), I compare the category, in total, to Antonio Gramsci's idea of the subaltern and analyse how the subaltern consciousness finds expression in the Dalits' struggle for resistance. This brings me to consider the different aspects of Dalit cultural politics or the different means through which Dalits have been reclaiming their right to creative expression that the upper caste cultural practices have historically denied them. I take up the idea of castelessness to see how this assumption mars any real progress made by the lower castes towards self-emancipation. I end this chapter by placing the issue of caste in the discourse on Hindu nationalism, an issue that has increasingly become important since Narendra Modi ascended the pulpit in 2014. I see how the imagination of the Hindu *Rashtra* is an exercise in futility because the political mechanisms of the current government have not been able to guarantee better life conditions for the Dalits; if anything, it has led to further factions that make the idea of a unified India unrealizable.

In Chapter 2, titled, "Caste and media in India", I delve into the politics of caste discrimination inherent in media practices in India. I begin by explicating how the elitist imagination of the nation finds expression in the traditional news media in the country. I try to understand the different ways in which this is achieved and how this impacts the Dalit senses of identity. I argue that the mainstream news media reproduce an exclusionary image of India in the national public sphere which eliminates the question of caste altogether. I then move on to analyse how the Internet has enabled the proliferation of several social media platforms that could today be understood as a 'new' form of public sphere (Habermas, 1962), one that is much more inclusive and participatory. Through an example, I situate how the new media platforms are effectively being used by Dalit groups to raise important issues about caste and to fill in the missing narrative about caste in the national public discourse. Thereby, I move on to analysing the different aspects of online Dalit mobilization. I look at how through a wide variety of resources, Dalits have been pushing for a more inclusive public sphere. This leads me to consider the negative aspects of online Dalit mobilization. Digital divide, lack of social capital and internal

differentiations within the political category are some of the reasons that hinder processes of online caste activism. I instead consider the possibility of multiple Dalit counter-publics (Fraser, 1990) that exist as parallel discursive spaces differentiated by demographics and political ideology. I argue that through the plurality of their existence they advocate for a more equitable imagination of the nation.

Chapter 3, "Comedy in India", introduces English political stand-up comedy on the Internet and analyses its role as a means of resistance in contemporary India. In this chapter, I realize that dissent on the Indian web has to be contextualized amidst a broader culture of humorous resistance over the course of the country's history. Therefore, I begin by examining humour, more specifically performative political humour, through early modernity, colonial rule and in contemporary India. This brings me to English stand-up comedy. I acknowledge the impact that the Internet has had on this genre of humour and at the same time, look at how this comedy is indicative of certain linguistic practices that ultimately point to broader distinctions on the basis of caste and class. I attempt to underscore how English stand-up comedy is trying to reconcile between the two halves of a linguistically divided nation. I realize that not all comic content can be regarded as political. I look at the reasons why comedians shy away from broaching controversial topics. This leads me to political stand-up comedy as a subgenre within English stand-up comedy. I elaborate on its ability to raise uncomfortable topics, to question the higher echelons. This prompts me to compare this form of comedy with parrhesia in the Foucauldian sense (1983). I conclude this chapter by delving into the inconsistencies of this niche art form, but cognizant of the ways in which it offers new ways of understanding the Indian cultural landscape.

The final chapter in this section, Chapter 4, titled, "The limits of free speech in India", takes up the task of delineating the limits of free speech in India and attempts to underscore how this impacts comic exchange in the country. I begin this chapter by analysing how free speech is a contentious issue in India with considerable restrictions for the sake of maintenance of ordered security. I question how the censorial powers of the State are being used by the Hindu nationalist groups to construct the rhetoric of the 'anti-national' and push their agenda for an imagined Hindu nation. Through examples of assaults on intellectuals, journalists and even students, I try to show how the Hindu Right is coercing people into submission. This brings me to consider recent developments during Narendra Modi's regime. I argue that Modi is using a combination of legal and extra-judicial means to stifle free speech and dissent in the country. I specifically look at how hate speech is being manufactured online to intimidate people, mostly

women, who are vocal about the failings of the State. I next analyse the repercussions this has for political stand-up comedy in India. Here too, I cite examples to show that the government is actively using a range of means to stop comedians from dabbling in political topics. I understand these tactics as specifically deployed to fuel 'unlaughter' (Billig, 2005). I end the chapter by considering the social functions of humour in such a situation. Using the Relief Theory of humour (Morreall, 2014), I argue that in such a repressive setting as this, political stand-up comedy acts as a source of relief from the strains of living in a stifling atmosphere.

Chapter 5 explicates the methodological underpinnings of this research and the methods employed to arrive at a conclusive analysis. I explain why discourse methodology is best suited for the purposes of this study and also explain how I went about conducting a digital ethnography on YouTube. I briefly touch upon my positionality as a researcher within this project before moving on to a detailed account of the sampling procedure, the data collection and recording methods, and an overview of the six comedians selected for the study.

Chapters 6-8 deal exclusively with the analysis of the findings. Each of the three chapters corresponds to a specific research question and provides detailed understandings of how the findings inform these questions as well as the theoretical framework. Chapter 6, "Resistance through humour in English political stand-up comedy in India", looks at how the comedians use humour to critique the idea of the nation so often peddled by the State. I explore the topics that they each evoke in order to construct an alternative understanding of the nation and I also consider how the aspect of resistance is conveyed through their political commentary. I analyse the precise language choices these comedians make when conveying dissent and how the comedians' rhetoric is frequently informed by associated theatrics that go on to consolidate their critique. I then move on to explore how the comedians negotiate the culture of unlaughter in their clips. Seeing it as a form of resistance to the mechanisms of the State, I explore the specific ways in which comedians combat repression through humour. In the final section of this chapter, I consider the social functions of resistance through humour. I see if the comic moment serves as an avenue for venting, a source of relief from the constraints of the dominant ideology.

In Chapter 7, "The representation of caste in English political stand-up comedy", I take up the important task of determining if English political stand-up comedy evokes questions of caste in any form. I study the precise manner in which caste finds representation in the comedians' discourse. I then go on to explicate the politics of representation inherent in the comic

monologues and how this impacts Dalit efforts for self-determination. I see if the genre of political stand-up comedy reproduces the biases that are existent in the national public discourse. I finish the chapter by reflecting on the issue of political correctness and its possible implications in this form of comedy.

Chapter 8, titled, "The politics of performing an identity" deals exclusively with how the comedians draw upon their personal identities, their social locations in their political critique. I ascertain if any of them reflect on their caste identities in their discourse. I see if the comedians can be considered parrhesiates then judging by how they use personal experiences to construct their comic narrative. In the "Conclusion", I summarize key findings and analysis and list out some of the limitations of the study. I also point to future directions of this research and conclude by re-asserting how the findings tie into the objectives of the study.

Chapter 1: Caste in India

Brief overview of the origin of caste

"*The processes of caste-making were going on throughout history and are happening even at present*" (Irawati Karve, 1961, p. 58 in Berreman, 1967)

A comprehensive understanding of the meaning of the word 'caste' is difficult to achieve. This is primarily because of its complex nature, increasingly flexible manifestations over time, and the enormous geographical breadth it encompasses. It is still harder to determine the social and historical forces that sustain the phenomenon. Recent studies show that caste, as a form of social exclusion, economic deprivation and humiliation, exists in different South Asian countries and beyond, albeit in different forms (Jodhka & Shah, 2010; Gorringe et al., 2017). Undeniably, in the last few decades, public and political arguments over the institution of caste have intensified, and now, more than ever before, there is a need to understand how it is being reshaped by contradictory and confusing discourses.

Said to have been derived from the Portuguese word '*casta*' meaning pure breed, there are several theories that explain its emergence and continuance in the Indian subcontinent. Socio-historical analyses posit that the origins of caste as a system of stratification began with the arrival of the Aryans in India around 1500 BC. The literary records of the Indo-Aryan culture contain the first mention and a continuous history of the factors that make up caste distinctions (Ghurye, 1969 in Deshpande, 2010). Some castes have had long histories as such while others have been identified as immigrant groups, emerging as castes from tribal status (Berreman, 1967). Irawati Karve is of the opinion that there may have been castes in India prior to the Aryan period, and that the invading Aryans superimposed their own castes at the top of the hierarchy. In the process, some indigenous caste groups were incorporated into the folds, but the majority of them were added at the bottom of the hierarchy to comprise a new, lower category (Karve, 1961 in Berreman, 1967). This seems to offer one explanation of the origin of the outcaste category, where the communities exercising polluting professions such as cleaning up human excreta or disposing of the dead were considered as 'untouchables'.

Religious theories postulate that the earliest reference of caste can be found in the Rig Veda, one of the holiest texts in Hinduism. The text says that the four castes, Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Sudra originated from different body parts of Brahma or the supreme creator. The

Brahmins, the twice-borns and the caste at the very top, came from the mouth of the creator. These were the priests, responsible for the intellectual upliftment of the community, the Kshatriyas — the warriors — came from his arm, the Vaishyas, responsible for trade and commerce came from his thighs and the Sudras, tasked with manual labour, came from his feet (Vallabhaneni, 2015; Deshpande, 2010). The untouchables were considered the 'unborn', with no physical link with the supreme being (Ghose, 2003). Although speculations about the origin and development of different castes evade empirical verification, the consequences of this hierarchization and its continued significance throughout history do not.

A broad-based overview of caste in a limited space, as this study tries to accomplish, poses restrictions on a nuanced understanding of the phenomenon. Nonetheless, it does help in gleaning some of its more important attributes. Caste ascriptions can be broadly understood as endogamous, ethnic groups with hereditary membership within a larger society. This closed, status-ranked community is highly involuted and politicized (Guha, 2013). This imposes limits on interaction with people from another caste group (Deshpande, 2010). The terms *varna* and *jati* are both often translated as caste. *Varna* translates to 'colour' and is used to refer to the formal four-fold caste classification. It is said to have been employed in contrasting Aryans and non-Aryan residents of the Indian subcontinent and the social order between them (Vallabhaneni, 2015). In contrast, *jati* refers to smaller groups, numbering in thousands, which cannot necessarily be linked directly to the four *varnas* and, in fact, sometimes cut across them with variations across different regions of the country. Thousands of *jatis* can exist among and across each *varna*, and these *jatis* too may be ranked according to ritual purity, at least theoretically. In practice, however, many of these *jatis* may be considered to be at similar levels for the purpose of social interaction and so on (Vaid, 2012). Dr Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, a lawyer and the national leader of the anti-caste movement, described the problem of caste as "a vast one both theoretically and practically. Practically, it is an institution that portends tremendous consequences. It is a local problem, but one capable of much wider mischief, for as long as caste in India does exist, Hindus will hardly intermarry or have any social intercourse with outsiders; and if Hindus migrate to other regions on earth, Indian caste would become a world problem" (Ambedkar, 2004, p. 132).

Caste categories are shaped considerably by an exercise of socio-economic power, occupational guild, kinship strategies. Nicholas Dirks argues that structures of power play a central role in the social organization of caste that is fundamental to the process of hierarchization. Caste, if it ever had an original form, was inscribed from the beginning by the

relations and conceits of power (Dirks, 1989). But it is through the cultural ordering of purity and pollution that the caste system derives its religious legitimacy (Guha, 2013). Louis Dumont, the most influential proponent of this view, suggested that caste is fundamentally religious, and that religious principles actualize themselves in the domain of purity and pollution (Dirks, 1989). Theoretically, the notion of purity and pollution promotes mutual repulsion among castes which is crucial to the idea of caste hierarchy. This is particularly evident in matters of commensality and marriage. Marital relations can only be established among members of the same caste or sub-caste. Violations of this rule often leads to the excommunication from one's family and caste and can sometimes result in even death. In September 2020, a Dalit man married to an upper-caste woman in Hyderabad was strangled to death by the woman's family ("Hyderabad Man Killed by Wife's Family over Inter-Caste Marriage", 2020). Until some years back, the castes could not share food or water and a lower caste was seldom allowed to enter areas where the upper castes resided (Asia et al., 1999). In December 2020, a 25-year-old Dalit man in Madhya Pradesh was beaten to death by two upper-caste men because he touched their plates full of food (Kakvi, 2020). Suffice it to say, notions of purity and pollution are still existent in contemporary India.

When it comes to occupation, every caste is associated with a particular one which its members are required to follow (Deshpande, 2010). One cannot therefore think of caste without taking into consideration its role in the economic system (Guha, 2013). The element of repulsion extends beyond the ritual domain into inter-caste relations in the social and economic domains and leads to segregation of castes and even the practice of untouchability. There have been considerable changes to the meaning of caste hierarchies throughout the ages. Relatively more access to education means that a greater number of individuals from lower castes have been able to avail themselves of the employment opportunities so long denied to them. In contemporary India, seldom can one correlate caste and occupation any longer (Vaid, 2014).

However, the principle of repulsion that is a core feature of caste hierarchy has persisted. This very often finds expression in exhibits of violence and brutality against the lower castes or untouchables. These castes are denied rights to land, forced to work in degrading conditions and routinely abused at the hands of the upper castes. Segregation and repulsion work in such distinct ways that entire villages remain separated by caste. The imposition of social disabilities on persons on the basis of their caste has meant that in many parts of the country the lower castes lived, and still continue to live, in abject poverty with very few opportunities to escape these conditions. These social groups are tasked with the most menial jobs and their low wages

are usually justified on account of their low caste status (Asia et al., 1999). The women, however, are the most impacted with having to face the brunt of triple marginalization of caste, gender and class. The women's bodies often become the sites where violent caste wars are played out. These garner little or no attention from the media and are promptly erased from public memory. The nature and form of caste violence, like the hierarchy itself, has undergone changes throughout history. Nonetheless the governing principles of pollution and purity still ensure that the lower castes continue to face adverse living conditions, humiliation, and violent oppression.

The politicization of caste

The 19th century saw the rise of several religious and social movements that sought to reform the caste system in India. The Brahmo Samaj, founded by Raja Ram Mohan Roy, led a relentless fight for the abolishment of untouchability. Another reform movement, the Arya Samaj, founded by Dayanand Saraswati, was instrumental in its endeavour to help people of the lower castes in their fight for self-assertion (Gangaiah, 2010). The lower castes were finally allowed to enter temples, a right that had so long eluded them. Several activist movements around this time were established to free the untouchables from the suppression by higher castes (Vallabhaneni, 2015). Some of the caste taboos were also relaxed during this time.

Under colonialism, but more specifically after the mutiny of 1857, caste was appropriated and, in many respects, reinvented. The British rule is believed to have created an autonomous caste structure with the Brahmins clearly at the top. The British could bring about changes in the caste system because of its consistent political significance (Dirks, 1989). Susan Bayly proposed that trends to hierarchy visible in the 18th century were reinforced in colonial times even though anti-caste movements also found the space to organize themselves (Deshpande, 2010). The colonial strategy of enumeration through census played a role in the substantialization and politicization of caste. The 1901 census effectively reinscribed a Brahminic ideal of caste, privileging the issues of social precedence over functional explanations (Reddy, 2005). The census became an important means of systematically collecting information on caste. On the effects of linking caste identities to numbers during the colonial census, Arjun Appadurai is of the opinion that the deluge of numbers created an illusion of bureaucratic control over indigenous reality. It was a countable abstraction of both people and resources and was the first time that castes were being understood exclusively as

numbers (Breckenridge & van der Veer, 1993). This simultaneously led to a revival of the caste spirit whereby the lower castes looked upon the census as an opportunity to wrest some of the rights so long denied to them by the upper castes. Some lower-caste associations sought to raise the caste status of their members and therefore presented a challenge to the established social order (Witsoe, 2013). The Government of India Act of 1919 granted the 'untouchables' or 'Depressed Classes' representation in legislative bodies eliminating the legal inequality between the different castes to some extent. In 1935, the British government listed 400 groups considered 'untouchables' as well as many tribal groups that would be accorded special privileges to overcome deprivation and discrimination. These groups thereafter came to be known as the Scheduled castes (SCs) and the Scheduled Tribes (STs) (Vallabhaneni, 2015).

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, better known as Mahatma Gandhi, the lawyer and anti-colonial nationalist who propagated the idea of a non-violent resistance to the British rule played an instrumental role in the fight against untouchability. He adopted the Sanskrit term *Harijan*, roughly translated as children of god, to denote this caste category. The term imbued a positive connotation that was largely in line with Gandhi's ideology that untouchability was a moral issue that can be resolved by a simple change of heart of the upper-caste Hindus. Sharply in contrast to Gandhi's views were those of Ambedkar's. He thought that the term *Harijan* was patronizing of the lower castes (Vallabhaneni, 2015). To Ambedkar, the subordination of lower castes was primarily a politico-economic issue and could be corrected only by changing the social structure through legal, political, and educational means (Deshpande, 2010). Ambedkar instead encouraged the use of the term Dalits, translated as the broken or downtrodden that is used to denote both pride and resistance to exploitation (Vallabhaneni, 2015). Ambedkar's complete rejection of Hinduism happened when he, and a group of his followers, converted to Buddhism a few years later.

Post-Independence in 1947, Ambedkar, as a key member of the Constitution Drafting Committee, instituted certain key reforms in the Constitution of India that prohibited discrimination on the basis of caste and abolished untouchability. Further, it guaranteed preferential treatment towards the SCs, STs and the Other Backward Classes (OBCs), a non-untouchable, lower-caste category who were economically and socially at a disadvantageous position. The Constitution guaranteed them a certain percentage of seats in electoral politics, government jobs and seats in governmental educational institutions (Vallabhaneni, 2015). As a result of these affirmative action policies or reservations as they are widely recognized, there emerged small groups of youth who deeply resented the attitudes of the higher castes. They

realized that the benefits and concessions given to them under the Constitution were only a small acknowledgement on the part of the society of the grave injustice done to them over the course of history (Srinivas, 1979).

The increase in self-consciousness of Dalits as a group has been complemented by an increase in hostility towards them by the upper castes. This was perhaps most evident in the Mandal era. In the 1980s, the government of India set up the Mandal Commission that sought to reserve even more seats for the OBC category bringing the total amount of reserved jobs to 49.5 per cent (Gupta, 2005). Consequently, many caste groups began claiming OBC status to avail themselves of the reservations. The implementation of the recommendations of the Mandal Commission Reports in 1990 led to nationwide unrest and violence mainly instigated by the upper castes. The upper-caste Hindu community has considerable internal cleavages that are a result of ideological and political differences. But, during the Mandal Commission uproar, a huge section of the upper caste population came together to argue against the reservation policies (Balagopal, 1990). Many upper-caste youths tried to immolate themselves to protest against these policies. They contested the quotas on the grounds that it would help those who had already gained advantage from reservations to accumulate greater benefits (Ghose, 2003).

The reservations in parliamentary positions saw an increase in the number of popular participation by lower-caste groups in the electoral process (Witsoe, 2013). Electoral politics began flattening the caste hierarchy into ethnic blocs (Guha, 2013). It had widely been believed that caste, as a social institution, would wither away after Independence but instead caste began to be envisioned as trans-local communities that could be democratically mobilized into ‘vote blocks’ represented by caste-leader politicians. The lower-caste movement aimed to highlight the continuance of pervasive caste inequalities. These movements, however, did not pose a broad-based challenge to the dominance of the upper castes (Witsoe, 2013). These associations were essentially conglomerates of several *jatis* in each state. These *jatis* were economically and socially heterogenous. More often than not, these clans had, and still continue to have, bitter rivalries with each other (Srinivas, 1979). Dipankar Gupta suggests that in order to understand contemporary caste politics in its depth and vivacity, it is necessary to understand that in the caste situation there are multiple nodes. The hierarchy is not so clearly defined any longer and the lower castes are not always against Brahmins but instead competition is built in at various levels. Caste alliances in politics are instituted every so often and are then promptly forgotten (Gupta, 2005). But in most cases, there is an ephemeral sense of caste consciousness that is largely shared by members of a caste group.

Caste remains one of the most durable forms of political organization in India. It has historically been a means of oppression, but the emergence of Dalit politics shows that it can also seamlessly provide a basis for struggle against oppression. It has the potential of being a purveyor of collective identity and an annihilator of the same hierarchical order from which that identity is derived. This consciousness extends beyond the category of the Dalit alone and has come to symbolize a broader group of those who have been oppressed and excluded from the social strata (Kothari, 1994). An understanding of the history of Indian democracy has to necessarily consider the politics of caste and the activism of anti-caste radicals who struggled to render caste as a culturally and historically specific form of embodiment, and a universally salient practice of inequality. This explains why caste has grown in significance as democracy has taken root in India, producing a form of politics that gives precedence to collective rights and group emancipation rather than individual autonomy (Rao in Bhagavan & Feldhaus, 2009).

The Dalit as a socio-political subject: Problematizing the Dalit identity

"*Becoming "Dalit" is the process through which the caste subaltern enters into circuits of political commensuration and into the value regime of "the human"*" (Rao, 2009: 264).

Dalits have been burdened with imposed identities throughout history — the untouchables, the Depressed Classes, *Harijans* and more recently, Scheduled Castes. While upper castes have had the privilege of bringing forward their culture into the secular contemporary era, Dalits have had no option but to remain bound to their ascriptive identities alone (Satyanarayana, 2014). The Dalit represents India only as a Dalit — acknowledging where they come from, representing their community and recognizing their gradually improving place in society (Pandey, 2009). Caste status is then regarded the only qualifier, the only significant attribute for these categories. This has enabled them to change the narrative around caste by refashioning it as a new politically powerful identity of self-assertion and pride. The term Dalit as self-designation emerges out of the humiliation and oppression they have had to go through. Caste, then, is simultaneously a marker of solidarity, fraternity and unity. When the term Dalit is uttered by a non-Dalit it might assume the character of a derogatory remark. Yet for Dalits themselves the term has become a place of resistance and a reason for struggle (Zene, 2011). For Dalits, the shared experience of caste represents the internal life of the community, its culture. An understanding of India's political modernity is therefore incomplete without an exploration of the multiple meanings of the Dalit category, the ideologies it encompasses, and

a conceptualization of the Dalit as socio-political subject located in the broad spectrum of the historical evolution of caste.

Ambedkar constituted the Dalit as a specific political subject, a political minority in need of State protection. In doing so, he asserted the primacy of the political as the ground for human recognition. Distinguished by material deprivation, physical vulnerability, and stigmatized status in the caste order, Dalits represented an altogether different principle of minority (Rao, 2009). Ambedkar paid attention to the way people's subjectivity is damaged by oppressions of caste and prejudice. For him, the coming into existence of the Dalit category was a historical event brought about by objective social conditions. The concept of spatial and social distance from the Hindu social order is central to the idea of Dalits. They are 'outside the fold', and never a part of it (Muthukkaruppan, 2014). Among Ambedkar's many responses, the negative description of Dalit as non-Hindu, and a form of political potentiality, was distinctive (Rao in Zene, 2013). The politics of naming allows an addressal of the Dalit category as a field of contestation, a political category with a history (Rao in Bhagavan & Feldhaus, 2009). Ambedkar used existing political language and tools of redress to recreate the Dalit identity by re-evaluating the Dalit stigma (Rao, 2009). His conception of the Dalit was therefore a culmination of historic violence but also hope, a portent of the future. Kancha Ilaiah coupled the term Dalit with *Bahujan*, or the oppressed minority, to broaden the range of the term so that it included an even wider group of oppressed and exploited majority. It was, however, the Dalit Panthers, a group of caste radicals inspired by the Black Panthers movement in the United States, that elevated the category of the Dalit as a political subject beyond the problem of untouchability and constituted a radical base for self-determination of political goals around it. The Dalit Panthers, by articulating the analogies between the injustices in the US and India, forged a connection between Black and South Asian struggles. The name 'Dalit Panthers' evoked notions of Black power to present militant Dalit resistance (Slate, 2012). The Dalit was subsequently produced as a subject of radical politics (Muthukkaruppan, 2014). This is, however, not to say that Dalits constituted the only kind of minority in the country. The Muslim minority that shared many features of deprivation with the political category of Dalits such as material and economic deprivation was also a key political category in late-colonial India.

The Dalits have also been conceptualized as the 'subaltern' in the Gramscian sense. The subaltern is often conceptualized as a political subject from a precapitalist past that appears to be the source of oppositional consciousness (Rao, 2009). The subordination inherent to the existence of the Dalits brings them into a frame of subalternity. At the basis of their

subalternity, lies the ideology of untouchability that defines them as less-than-human which is ramified in very concrete terms in their daily lives (Zene, 2011). Aspects of Dalit subalternity are constructed through a constant creative and material dialogue with the dominant communities, albeit operating within strict restrictions (Jacobsen, 2020). TK Oommen suggests that Dalits constitute the most inferior of the subaltern category, an inferiority that is anchored in the ritual dimension and economic and political condition (Oommen, 2017). The existence of Dalits as a subaltern group, then at once points to a failure on the part of the democratic State (Zene, 2011). The usage of the term 'Dalit' by these subaltern groups conveys the transformation of the social and political relations that cause their marginalization. The term, then, epitomizes the subaltern group's consciousness of their social position, it is a part of their political struggle to reject the terms of exclusion on which discrimination is premised (Shukla, 2017).

Fragmentation forms an essential part of subalternity. Therefore, the subaltern groups should be thought of having varying levels of political organization (Shukla, 2017). The same arguments can be made for understanding Dalits as a homogenous category, a unitary negative consciousness with a passive and/or oppositional role to play. Such a conceptualization entails the erasure of the intersectionalities of class, gender, language, and age that impinge heavily on the category at different nodes. Dalits experience different degrees of self-consciousness and find themselves at different stages of overcoming their subalternity (Zene, 2011). The Constitutional provisions guaranteed to the Dalits have enabled some to transcend the conditions of subordination so long imposed on them and become a part of an upwardly mobile middle class. The creation of newer jobs with the modernization and liberalization of the Indian economy has led people away from their hereditary occupations to occupations that were originally the prerogative of the higher castes (Vaid, 2014). This collusion between caste and class has entailed that aspirations and ideologies across the category are not always homogenous. Linguistic and regional differentiations further faction up the Dalit category. They do not constitute a mass electoral constituency and in many instances, these differences result in the dissolution of Dalit activism into splits and factions (Ghose, 2003). Unity and connectedness of these variant groups is often fickle and hence easier to disintegrate at the behest of the dominant group (Shukla, 2017). At the ground level, the SCs and the OBCs have little in common, with many OBCs perpetrating violence on the SCs (Kothari, 1994). This was particularly the case in the Khairlanji massacre in 2006. A family of four SCs — a woman and her two sons and a daughter — in Khairlanji, Maharashtra were stripped naked, paraded, raped,

and ultimately murdered by about 60-70 villagers, who belonged to the OBC caste ("The Entire Village Was Involved, Sir. Entire Village"— Bhaiyalal Bhotmange", 2017). Thus, in spite of its revolutionary potential, the internal factions make the possibility of any real Dalit solidarity challenging.

Despite the contradictions among this category, what supposedly weaves them together as a group are the shared cultural and economic experiences and the knowledge of production practices that they possess in common (Muthukkaruppan, 2014). In the last few decades, the Dalits are continually making their voices heard and their presence felt (Thomas, 2018). It is through their subalternity that Dalits are confronting unequal caste relations. The emergence of a new generation of leaders has enabled the mobilization of consciousness as a transforming agent of subalternity. The Dalits manifest moments of self-consciousness of their condition and offer palpable examples of resistance to overcome their subalternity. It is through political and cultural expression of the Dalit-subaltern consciousness that this category is continually conveying how they want to be seen (Zene, 2011).

Dalit cultural politics: Resistance and resilience

Culture has been regarded as intrinsic to the idea of the Dalit. It is important to look at the category as a construct achieved by recruiting the hidden culture and written and oral history (Guru & Geetha, 2000). It is culture that effectively conveys the self-consciousness of Dalits as subaltern and enables them to turn a negative description into an identity of self-assertion. Culture then encompasses all those areas of artistic and political expression where Dalits voice their opinions, find the strength and motivation to demand inclusion (Zene, 2013).

The term Dalit culture has been used to refer to a need for a new political activism where equality and dignity are of primary importance. This culture involves building solidarities across language and regional divides. What the majoritarian Hindu culture presupposes as vulgar and uncouth can be effectively usurped to upend that very culture. According to this view, Dalit culture remains political, participating in acts of defiance against the dominant culture by practising a protest culture (Muthukkaruppan, 2014). This cultural politics finds expression in folklore, religious practices, performative arts.

Dalit literature has been a particularly important avenue for venting collective angst. It has transformed into a space of resistance. It provides the subject who is unable to escape the

structures of caste, an alternative. This literature conveys how the forces of domination are experienced and internalized and provokes the reconstruction of the Dalit self. It is meant to expand the consensus, drawing upon knowledge that cuts across differences in class, gender and income (Zene, 2013). Dalit personal or autobiographical narratives, by foregrounding complexities of subaltern subjectivity, provide space for a review of the notions of agency and consciousness (Kumar in Zene, 2013). It is important to realize that it is fallacious to locate Dalit literature in the broad spectrum of Indian literary tradition. Instead, it should be recognized as a separate and distinct reconfiguration of modernity, one that provides new modes of identity and experience different from the dominant nationalist cultural tradition (Satyanarayana, 2019).

Food has emerged as a particular point of contention. Strict rules of vegetarianism for upper castes and prohibitions on commensality are some of the means through which the caste hierarchy is ritually sustained. Food, thus, has become a sphere where Dalits have been affirming their cultural identity. In university campuses across the country, student groups have been demanding the inclusion of beef — considered sacrilegious in Hinduism but consumed by some Dalit groups — in the menu during student festivals. The intention is not to heighten the divide between vegetarians and non-vegetarians but to create an inclusive space wherein multiple cultural dimensions can be incorporated and respected (Pathania, 2016).

Dalit festivals are another important site for the performance and public dissemination of the Dalit cultural identity. Today, festivals like Ambedkar Jayanti — birth anniversary celebrations of Ambedkar — take the form of civic affairs, with large groups of people descending on important thoroughfares in the urban areas. These festivals are examples of how Dalits are capable of being much more than mere spectators and instead reclaim their right to perform their caste identities and cultural codes (Beth, 2005). In a similar vein, Dalit cultural life has been marked by an increase in intellectual activity. These practices seek to establish Dalit claims as separate from the upper caste dominated discourse. These activities involve a pursuit of the recognition that is denied by the upper castes. Thus, Dalit intellectual activity should be understood against the backdrop of the denial of the authenticity of the claim to intellectual representation (Guru & Geetha, 2000).

Caste and castelessness

The assertion of subalternity by Dalits is counteracted by claims to castelessness by the upper castes (Deshpande, 2013). Caste, today, is understood in one of two ways depending on the positionality of the person viewing it — it is either highly visible for the lower castes, for whom their caste identity determines their life choices, or it is hardly there for the upper castes for whom the utility of caste is over. Satish Deshpande is of the opinion that the upper castes, have encashed the privilege their caste position offers and now believe themselves to be 'casteless'. The upper castes have come to symbolize a progressive and casteless India while the lower castes are tasked with intensifying their caste identities as a form of identity politics to access reservation schemes (Deshpande, 2013). Claims to castelessness have emerged strongly in response to subaltern movements that challenge untouchability and upper-caste hegemony (Subramanian, 2015). The invisibilization of caste is perhaps most intense in the domain of education. The 'general category' students, a euphemism for upper-caste students, largely think of themselves as casteless. Claims to a casteless 'merit' are frequently invoked to refer to their caste capital — the material and symbolic privilege that their caste ascription awards them — which, in turn, consolidates their upper caste identities. In comparison, the 'reserved' category students have to constantly defend their educational credentials in order to avail themselves of the same resources that are available to their upper-caste classmates (Suresh Babu, 2020).

The historical narrative of Indian modernity refused to see caste as an active subject of Indian history. In the construction of the nation, caste was thus deliberately invisibilized and detached from political processes and consequently denied historical subjectivity (Chatterjee, 1993). The contemporary manifestation of the denial of caste, David Mosse argues, is primarily of three kinds: The ontological denial whereby the upper castes claim that caste is not valid and is a fabrication, the temporal denial wherein it is believed that caste is a thing of the past, and a social denial which is an aspiration to appear casteless. Arguments are often made of caste being a personal affair that should not be made into a subject of public debates. Caste atrocities are seen as aberrant cases of a normally benign hierarchy (Mosse, 2020). Those who benefit from caste would want it to be done silently, through leveraging merit to secure new arenas of expertise and accumulation against lower caste rights (Subramanian, 2015). The act of naturalizing caste while simultaneously trying to deny it any specificity functions to invalidate caste as a relevant category in the public sphere and politics (Pandian, 2002).

Codification of castelessness has meant that upper castes do not have to give up their privileges as long as they do not invoke their caste explicitly. It has also enabled caste humiliation to be expressed in subtle ways (Vithayathil, 2018). A new form of caste politeness is extended towards the Dalits, the language of which is not violent but is definitely not inclusive (Waghmore in Srivastava et al., 2019). A range of contemporary discourses and practices exist that authorize discrimination and exclusion without any recourse to overt mechanisms. For instance, the emphasis on suitors from a 'good background' during arranged marriages or the insistence on allowing only vegetarians to rent a place by landlords, are some ways in which discrimination gains new life through castelessness. Among the Indian diaspora, castelessness finds expression through the disavowal of the belief that caste is intrinsic to the Indian culture (Mosse, 2020). Thus, what gets encoded as Indian culture is the culture of the caste elites. The Dalit cultural traditions are excluded from any imagination of a nationalist tradition (Pandian, 2002).

The process of invisibilization of caste as intrinsic to modern India has progressed for more than half a century and has been achieved through a negotiation via nationalism that installed the new, emergent nation as upper-caste Hindu. Talking about caste became anathema – and was seen as a throwback to earlier, pre-modern times, as well as being 'divisive' in terms of the nation (Nigam, 2019). Castelessness was often expressed under a garb of secular modernity (Vithayathil, 2018). Castelessness strips caste of its relational quality and sees it solely as a colonial formation with no place in the modern political arena (Mosse, 2020). The tension between modernity and the desire to keep caste out of the public sphere is particularly characteristic of post-colonial India. Thus, caste, as the other of the modern, always belongs to the lower caste. The Indian 'modern' proscribes and stigmatizes the language of caste in the public sphere. It demands that caste can live only secret lives outside the public sphere (Pandian, 2002). This has resulted in the propagation of the myth that caste is dead. Endorsed by public intellectuals and noted academics, the common conception is that caste is losing its tenacity (Gupta, 2005; Srinivas, 2003). Suryakant Waghmore suggests that caste in private life is not withering away. If anything, it is resurfacing in newer, more flexible forms. The various scholarship that confirm the obituary of caste are thus misguided and premature (Waghmore in Srivastava et al., 2019).

The denial of caste among the privileged can be contrasted with a castelessness of a different kind that is emerging from the Dalit community. Through a transformation of social consciousness, Dalits are increasingly mobilizing to leave the life of untouchability and

humiliation in the past, striving towards a new kind of civility where caste no longer matters. Demands for equality of treatment, challenges to exclusion and subordination are on the rise. Dalits are pushing their castelessness and refuse to see themselves as Dalits in relation to the upper castes but are slowly thinking of themselves as those with humanity (Mosse, 2020). Through cultural and literary practices such as organizing food festivals in universities that encourage the consumption of beef considered sacrilegious by upper-caste Hindus, and by organizing Dalit literary festivals, Dalits are imagining a casteless community. It is through their experience and thought that this community is contesting their existential brokenness by reimagining spaces that are open, resistant and equal, spaces where they are not reduced to their caste identity alone (Leonard, 2019).

Nationalism and caste: Notes from Narendra Modi's India

The question of caste lies at the heart of the Hindu nationalism project, which along with secular nationalism, had managed to silence it. But it is now out in the open. The proliferation of media ecosystems has made it difficult to ignore. Hindu nationalism or *Hindutva* is generally understood as an ethno-religious movement. It rests on the ability to re-assimilate the Dalits and other backward classes into the Hindu order. This unified Hindu order was supposed to be a community of equals with no place for caste distinctions. This cultural imagination fails to acknowledge the multiple differences in culture, tradition and religion built in at every level of the Indian populace (Nigam, 2019). Christophe Jaffrelot, however, argues that *Hindutva* rests primarily on identity markers. The question of Dalits and other minorities is not incidental to the *Hindutva* project but lies at the core of it (Jaffrelot, 2021). This nexus between Hindu nationalism and casteism is perhaps the most evident today when India is under the leadership of the Narendra Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government.

Modi came to power in 2014 promoting a brand of national populism that promised to transcend caste barriers. His rhetoric was that of a defence of Hinduism against threatening non-Hindus. The BJP has been primarily associated with an upper-caste ideology, but Modi sought to reformulate that in order to draw in support from the lower castes. Coming from a backward caste himself, Modi planted his *chaiwallah* or tea seller image at the forefront of his electoral campaign in a bid to give off a plebeianized image of himself and his party, a sentiment that he knew would resonate with the OBCs. Resultantly, the percentage of OBCs who supported and voted for the party saw a massive increase over the course of three elections

(Jaffrelot, 2021). Modi promised a realignment of society in terms of economic factors and economic development for all as opposed to caste-based politics.

Modi's victory in 2014, however, brought to the fore the tensions between the party's casteist ideology and the lower castes' struggle for their rights. University campuses transformed as hotbeds for violent clashes on the basis of caste differences. The death of Rohith Vemula, a doctoral candidate at the University of Hyderabad, in 2016, firmly placed the issue of institutional casteism into national consciousness. The reactionary responses revealed the ruling party's complicity in the issue. After Yogi Adityanath was elected the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, elaborate arrangements were made to purify the official residence that was previously occupied by lower-caste politicians (Jaffrelot, 2021). Similarly, the BJP rule has emboldened the Hindu extremists to translate their contempt for minorities, but specifically Muslims and Dalits, into systemic violence. Love *jihad*, that prevents inter-religious marital unions between Hindus and Muslims, has been very often used as a ploy to unleash violence against Muslim minorities. In this, collateral damage has also been done to Dalit communities. Under the pretext of cow vigilantism, the upper-caste mobs very often inflict violence on Dalits on suspicions of having consumed or transported beef (Kandasamy, 2019). The party's anti-Dalit stance became particularly evident when in 2016, four Dalits in Una, a small town in the western state of Gujarat, were publicly flogged by Hindu extremists for skinning a dead cow (Kateshiya, 2016). The Dalit community, many of whom are relegated the task of skinning dead animals to make leather in order to make a living, took to the streets to protest. The inclinations of the State find expression in the conduct of the police. The lower castes are penalized, brutalized and in many instances, the perpetrators go scot-free. This evolution is well illustrated by the way Dalits have been singled out in the state's action against so-called 'urban Naxals' (Jaffrelot, 2021).

At the ground level, to satisfy its conventional conservative social base and to broaden the appeal of *Hindutva*, the BJP applies a social agenda based heavily on casteist, elitist symbols that is distinct from its political strategy (Wankhede, 2018). The many decisions taken by the government fail to consider the impact they have on the Dalit community. Development — Modi's most important election rhetoric — rings hollow for those forced to live on the margins of the society. Reports suggest that violence against Dalits in the western state of Gujarat alone has seen a 35 per cent surge since 2014 (Smitha, 2019), not to mention that many such similar incidents remain — or rather are forced to remain — unreported. In 2017, a Dalit man was killed by the upper castes in his village in Gujarat because he grew a moustache: an indicator

of upper caste status (Das, 2017). In Tamil Nadu, a Dalit man was assaulted by three caste Hindus and forced to eat human excreta (Vasudevan, 2019). The BJP's rise to power has enabled upper-caste politics to stage a comeback along with a proclamation of upper-caste orthodoxy through vigilantism. The prime minister's silence through it all is deafening. Modi has earned himself a reputation for being silent after incidents of mob rage against caste and religious minorities which goes on to illustrate his ideological complicity in the violence. This tacit support ensures that many more such incidents keep happening with each passing day.

Attempts to assimilate Dalits into the Hindu social order, hence, appear to be a failed project. The inevitable conflict between *Hindutva* and the Dalit cultural symbols is clearly visible. The Dalit question lies at the core of the creation of a modern Hindu self. The project of a Hindu *Rashtra* or Hindu nation falls flat if the Dalits are not incorporated into it. The promise of a nation is incomplete as long as Dalits remain outside the fold and continue to resist any attempts to assimilation (Nigam, 2019).

Chapter 2: Caste and media in India

The project of attaining a common history of the Indian nation is an impossible task. Partha Chatterjee is of the opinion that in the process of nationalist history making, traditional values that symbolized the indigenous culture were repeatedly invoked. But this process of writing the nation's history also obliterated the many 'undesirable' attributes from the nation's past that reflected its un-modern status. Negative aspects such as sectarianism, vulgarity and sexualized femininity were eradicated from the new nationalist history of the country (Chatterjee, 1993). Resultantly, the organization and mobilization of Indian nationalism throughout history has established it as an elite concept that silences subsidiary narratives, glosses over history to produce a homogenous idea of the nation. The emphasis is shifted from plural states that take into cognizance the rich diversity in history and culture to reimagining one nation-state in which socio-political power is concentrated in the hands of elites (Gorringe, 2008). Caste as a marker of traditional Indian society with its hierarchy, rigidity and backwardness was an anathema to the modern imagination of the nation. Therefore, one way of dealing with it was to deny caste as a core feature of Indian society altogether (Chatterjee, 1993). The nation that emerged was thus explicitly imagined as upper-caste, Hindu and primarily male. The understanding of the nation as such erases the contestations and resistance to the idea of nationhood so often offered by caste subalterns and neglects the contributions made by them. Since the formation of the Indian nation-state, large swathes of Dalit socio-cultural activity have been relegated to the sphere of 'low culture' or have been completely ignored in order to privilege the idea of a coherent nation-state (Gorringe, 2008). The definition of the nation as Hindu readily accepts a modified version of the traditional caste exclusiveness. Equality is seen in vague, amorphous terms with no grounding in material reality. This elite nationalist imagination sees unity in cultural and spiritual terms but all social relationships between castes are deliberately kept outside the realm of the national public sphere (Omvedt in Mahajan & Reifeld, 2003). This view has been especially favoured by the nationalists and Marxist social thinkers (Chatterjee, 1993). These hegemonic politics result in a distancing from the lower castes (Fernandes, 2000). The mass media in India have evolved simultaneously with the idea of the nation, as one of the ways of constituting a national identity. It is an important means through which the elitist, exclusionary imagining of the Indian nation is disseminated and consolidated in public memory.

Caste in the mainstream news media in India

The mainstream news media in India is exceptionally diverse and encompasses newspapers, periodicals, TV channels, radio stations and more, in at least twenty-two languages. It also involves an impressive range of participants, including countless non-profit and religious organizations, political parties, social activists, and public intellectuals (Frøystad, 2016). The media industry in India is very particular in the construction, transformation, and commoditization of the subjects of coverage. It engages discursively with the dominant ideology (Patil, 2011). The idea of a national solidarity is particularly important in the media discourse and in defining the national perspective, the media reflect a perception of togetherness that often disregards the communities defined by difference. The image of the national mainstream so often propagated by the media, thus, stands above the minority groups seeking to assert their claims. This is particularly evident in the coverage of any issues concerning Dalits and Muslims or other minorities. Incidents are either denied or given a completely different spin so as to not inconvenience the idea of national solidarity. In May 2021, following the alleged rape and murder of a tribal girl in Assam by three upper-caste people, the headlines in some of the popular news dailies conveyed how Brahmin bashing was not a solution. None of the coverage included the identity of the perpetrators, and the role that caste played in this violence was largely invisibilized (Pegu, 2021). This is especially problematic since it is through the media that minority identities are defined and represented (Muralidharan, 2021a). The mainstream media in India, then, perpetuate values that do not aid the minority groups to interpret their reality. For the Indian elite imagination of the nation, the minorities — caste being one of them — present a problem. Dalits present a threat to the idea of modernity that the media celebrate. Therefore, incorporating them into the folds of the national mainstream becomes a challenge. The media in India counter this problem by excluding the question of caste altogether.

The politics of caste discrimination is embedded in the politics of media practices in India (Patil, 2011). The media in India engender caste stereotypes; news about Dalits perpetuates dominant perceptions about the caste groups. Reports on the violence and conflict involving caste groups are circulated with a political undertone that signal to the existence of social discrimination but beyond that nothing much is explicated in the media. The national media ideologically reinforce the material weaknesses from which the Dalits suffer (Jeffrey, 2001). Issues often go unreported unless there is a significant backlash from lower-caste and/or social activists. A case in point could be the incident in February 2020 in Rajasthan when a Dalit man

was violated with a petrol-laced screwdriver by a group of Rajput (upper-caste) men. Only when the video went viral on social media was there any reportage of the violent attack in mainstream media (Rawal, 2020). In the few accounts about Dalits, reports emphasize the violence against Dalits instead of questioning the system that sustains caste violence (Balasubramaniam, 2011). Even then, there is a pervasive lack of sensitivity. Reports make no excuses to mask the essential identity of the victims, mostly women, but the accused are rarely identified by their caste (Singh, 2017). This was particularly evident in the reportage about the rape and murder of the tribal girl in Assam. The girl's lower-caste tribal identity was repeatedly highlighted but that of the three accused was not (Pegu, 2021). Dalits are featured in the news as violated or humiliated, victims of crime but reports about the individuality, traditions and normal life of lower-caste groups are scarce. To the populace consuming national media, Dalits appear as poor, naïve, and ignorant, victims of violence. They can never be people who wield agency (Fonseca et al., 2019). Goutham Raj Konda, an urban researcher, and a Dalit, is of the opinion that there is little space and attention given in the mainstream media to everyday struggles of the Dalit. Daily experiences inherent to marginalization, isolation, and poverty are missing in the popular discourse. There is thus an immediate need for Dalit experiences of everydayness need to be resonantly voiced (Konda, 2021).

A reason behind this could perhaps be found in the lack of Dalit representation in the newsrooms. In 1996, journalist B.N. Uniyal found that there were no accredited Dalit journalists in New Delhi (Uniyal, 1996). In 2006, a survey in New Delhi reported that the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes were not represented in even one of the 315 posts of decision makers in mainstream news media (Chamaria et.al, 2006). Dalits are mostly perched in the lower rungs in the newspapers and television channels (Kumar & Subramani, 2014). An Oxfam India report in 2019 that studied the representation of different caste groups in the Indian media suggests that not much has changed in this regard in all these years. After a careful exploration of 13 English and Hindi newspapers, 14 television news channels, 11 digital media outlets and 12 magazines, the study concluded that the caste bias still manifests itself in the composition of news producers in India. Through a survey, administered by a questionnaire that sought to record the caste details of the informants, the study found that there is almost no SC, ST or OBC journalists in the Indian news space. The report also outlines evidence on how vast sections of the marginalized caste groups lack access to the media platforms which ultimately result in their invisibilization in the national media discourse. Around 72 per cent of the articles on news websites are written by people from the upper castes. Over half of those

by-lines on issues related to caste in Hindi and English newspapers were distinctly upper caste. This monopolization of the news space by the upper castes impedes the Dalits' entry into the same. As a result, the majority of the country's population perceives Dalits as a subject of news rather than active news creators or messengers. This bias within media organizations contributes to the lack of acknowledgement of the extent of caste discrimination in India (Oxfam India, 2019).

The absence of Dalit journalists cannot be directly traced back to a process of conscious discrimination. News firms stress that caste is not a criterion for hiring. But journalist networks, social capital — subtle indicators of caste status — do, in fact, influence the recruitment process (Balasubramaniam, 2011). The Dalits' 'lack of qualifications', inadequate proficiency in the English language, are often cited as reasons to explain their absence in the newsrooms. These point to the structural and material inequalities that impede the Dalits' entry into not just the news space but also the national public sphere. In order to be taken seriously and avoid discrimination, Dalits have had to 'pass' as non-Dalits in the newsrooms (Jeffrey, 2001). Yet, there are no efforts to correct the situation.

Introducing further complexities are the big corporations, some of whom control all of the media outlets. The ownership structure makes the mainstream media in India undemocratic and discriminatory. The complex dynamic of advertising and corporate interests means that competing outlets are in a race to maximize profit by reaching the class that consumes their ideas. The content created in the process caters to the demands of the elite sections who constitute the majority of the national consumers. For instance, the issue of caste-based reservations and agitations around it often receives prolific coverage because it resonates strongly with the upper-caste populace, most of whom advocate for the abolishment for the practice (Jeffrey, 2001). The problem of lack of diversity in the traditional news media in India has, thus, both caste and class aspects (Mandal, 2020).

This unmistakably raises the question of who speaks for whom. Members of marginalized caste groups are shut out of debates on caste issues. Panel discussions on caste atrocities barely report the presence of lower-caste representatives (Oxfam India, 2019). The Dalit voice is simply not heard on the mainstream news media in India, even in discussions about them. The upper-caste news professionals appropriate the situation to fit their narrative resulting in story coverage that lack the insights and perspectives that only a member of the caste group can offer. The masses are thus presented with reportage that only cover issues from a particular (upper caste)

perspective and do not touch upon the whole range of complexities inherent in it. In many instances, caste-based issues are presented in a way whereby the caste overtone completely missing or is supplanted by a false narrative (Balasubramaniam, 2011). This was particularly the case in the Hathras incident where a 19-year-old Dalit woman was brutalized by upper-caste men. The incident was portrayed in public consciousness as one that was chiefly about women's safety in India whereas, in reality, it was about Dalit women's safety in the country. Diversity in who tells the news, then, offers the possibility of a wider range of perspectives to come together to produce nuanced coverage, arguments that could potentially offer multiple interpretations of a problem.

Media denial of caste is so pervasive that when activists mobilize around issues of caste, the upper castes refuse to acknowledge it because they have not seen it on the mainstream media. Instead, activists are blamed for spreading fake news and instigating casteism that upsets the upper caste conception of a harmonious nation (Oxfam India, 2019). The media in India do not merely reflect reality but also create it to some extent. In such a scenario, a lack of representation of Dalits in the discourse on news deliberately results in a diminished sense of identity and self-affirmation among the caste group who do not find themselves anywhere on the media. Moreover, the overemphasis on conflict and violence solidifies the negative stereotypical images of Dalits leading to further gaps and cleavages between the different caste groups (Fonseca et al., 2019). The concentration of media power in the hands of the upper castes makes any unbiased reading of a situation impossible. What results are listless echo chambers that resound similar opinions without affording any alternate reading of the situation.

Public sphere(s) in India

The mainstream news media in India, as an important aspect of the national public sphere, mirror the exclusions and biases inherent in the idea of an Indian nation. In this context, Gopal Guru notes that the post-colonial public sphere in India has been characterized by the notion of purity and pollution since its inception (Guru, 2006 in Thakur, 2020). This has resulted in a national public sphere that rests solely on the cultural values of the dominant groups. It is premised on a false sense of unity where access is restricted for the disenfranchised. For them, the public sphere is nothing but a mythical proposition (Thakur, 2020). But with the Internet and online media channels slowly making inroads into India, the conception of the public sphere is gradually changing.

Over the past few years, political communication in India is largely being channelized through online social media platforms. The government in India has made successive efforts to facilitate the infrastructure necessary to realize a Digital India program with universal access to online services and a fully integrated data infrastructure. The State is a key player here that shapes market norms and infrastructural development (Athique & Parthasarathi, 2020). One primary feature of the different media platforms is that they allow synchronous, direct communication between participants instead of a top-down approach to taking in information (Rodrigues in Athique & Parthasarathi, 2020). The advent of social media in India has to be situated within the context of wider social processes such as globalization, changes in cultural politics and the emergence of new articulations of identity politics. The 2014 elections, in which Narendra Modi was elected prime minister, is believed to have harnessed the power of social media as an effective tool for public communication. This also signals a shift in emphasis from the traditional sources of communication to realizing the potential of online media platforms to privilege diverse opinions.

Currently in India, social media include popular sites such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and Instagram and messaging applications such as WhatsApp. As of January 2020, India has approximately 688 million active Internet users, 86 per cent of whom use Facebook. It is also the country with the greatest number of WhatsApp users (Keelery, 2020). With the onslaught of Internet, social media platforms have reinvented social activism in unprecedented ways. People from different parts of the country are now able to come together to collaborate and voice their concerns. Virtual feelings of communion have enabled political expression and mobilization of interests cutting across caste, class and gender barriers (Biju & O., 2011). The social media in India have facilitated a participatory framework that is not completely motivated by dominant interests. In many ways, social media platforms in India are thought to constitute a 'new' form of public sphere in the Habermasian sense of the term.

For Jurgen Habermas, the public sphere is a discursive space free of State intimidations (Habermas, 1962). People who were previously excluded from spaces of discussion come together to form opinions through rational discussions here. In this scheme of things, ideas are valued on the basis of their merit instead of the social status of the person presenting them. A mix of informal and formal institutions, the public sphere is the space for dissemination of ideas to a wider audience. Habermas emphasized the role played by the media in disseminating public opinions (Dey, 2020). In contemporary India, the social media platforms, bolstered by widespread Internet reach, manifest many of the features of the Habermasian conceptualization

of the public sphere. A study about the social media coverage of the Delhi gang rape of 2012 (A young woman was raped by six men on a moving bus and then thrown off it. The victim later succumbed to her injuries) reveals that social media have enabled new spaces of storytelling and a new participatory culture of online conversation (Belair-Gagnon et al., 2014). But perhaps, social media's efficacy as a new form of public sphere in India was best illustrated by the protests and mobilization that followed Rohith Vemula's death in 2016.

Rohith Vemula, a doctoral student at the Hyderabad Central University, committed suicide by hanging himself on January 17, 2016 after he was subjected to caste oppression at his educational institute. The mainstream media's response to the death was tepid at first. It was only when anti-caste activists on social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook took the issue far and wide that the mainstream news media in India started covering the story in more detail. Protests were organized in educational institutions all around the world with the hashtag *#DalitLivesMatter* trending for days on Twitter (Paul & Dowling, 2018). The uproar about Vemula's death was not restricted to the online echo chambers alone; social media brought the issue out on the streets which saw large-scale mobilizations and social protests all over the country. The social media coverage of the incident enabled an open discussion on institutional casteism, an issue that was hardly been discussed on the mainstream news media in India. It encouraged others who had undergone similar experiences to speak up. For a change, Dalit voices were being heard and the masses were finally becoming aware of the discriminatory practices built in at the institutional level. The discussions on the social media had far-reaching implications for the government which was then compelled to at least acknowledge that caste-based discriminatory practices exist. This incident also serves as an example of how the Internet and online media platforms are being used by the Dalits to reimagine a more equitable public sphere.

Dalits' use of online media platforms

Over the decades, restricted access to mainstream media has compelled Dalits to develop their own — severely limited — media and practices. Dalits have tried to run their own magazines and newspapers but owing to caste supremacy and poor economic conditions, many of these outlets are no longer in existence (Kumar & Subramani, 2014). There has been a separate category of Dalit literature, popular in vernacular languages, since at least the early 20th century. But Dalit media could never become a part of the mainstream media in terms of

circulation and impact (Mandal, 2020). With the proliferation of the Internet in even remote corners of the country, certain sections of the Dalit population are using social media platforms and other online communication portals to resist the dominant narrative and contest for a more inclusive public sphere that represents their interests. This shift also stems from a deep distrust in the mainstream media. Dalit groups, faced with decades of invisibilization, no longer have faith in the traditional sources of information to represent them adequately (Paul & Dowling, 2018). The online media platforms, on the other hand, have enabled caste groups to take part in the national discourse (Thirumal & Tartakov, 2011).

Today, YouTube, Facebook and Twitter have emerged as important sites where Dalits are voicing concerns, seeking community support. Apart from these, various platforms exist that focus on everyday Dalit concerns. Issues range from shelter, unemployment, to inequality in access to education — topics which would not have been otherwise covered by the mainstream media. Justice News, a website run by a Dalit journalist, publishes news about atrocities on caste minorities. The YouTube channel, Dalit Camera, is a site of social protest through digital archiving. It hosts discussions, poetry recitals, songs, and showcases literature on caste (Paul & Dowling, 2018). The website, Round Table India, offers news, and editorials on Dalit issues. Different magazines feature first-person accounts of caste-based discrimination faced at different public institutions (Raza, 2018). Interestingly, these tools of online activism are now creating pressure on the mainstream media to cover news about caste it has been so far ignoring. In doing so, these avenues also serve a corrective function to point out the errors and bias carried by mainstream journalism.

The communicative aspect of online media presents an opportunity for the Dalits to make their plight visible to other castes. For the populace presuming that caste is a thing of the past, Dalit forums have opened up a space where contrasting life worlds come into contact. Social media forums not only present a potent tool for Dalits to organize socially but also provides the masses with a rich repository of indigenous perspectives and knowledge from the margins (Paul & Dowling, 2018). Online Dalit mobilization is also shattering the negative stereotype that Dalits are unable to read, write and create quality content. The wide range of subjects covered by the different portals illustrate the extent of Dalit intellectual capacities (Verma & Misra, 2017). The ease of communicating in vernacular language is another important reason why more Dalits are turning to social media. Access to higher education, including English education, has always been a challenge for the marginalized groups. But now, Facebook is available in more

than eleven Indian languages and Twitter, too, is available in six vernacular languages, making it much easier for Dalits to communicate among themselves (Thakur, 2020).

The Internet asserts a claim of Dalit belonging. It serves to remind that Dalits, too, are a part of the public discourse. At the same time, cyberspace allows Dalits to explore and celebrate their identity as producers of messages and images (Thirumal in Gajjala et al., 2008). In mainstream public discourse they appear as members of a community rather than as individuals with personality, motivations and aspirations. The Internet allows Dalits to assert their identity in their own terms, instead of the dominant perception about them. This social mobilization aids in formulating arguments and theories that assist them in making meaning of their caste realities and offers possibilities of combating it (Venkateswarlu & Tarakeswara Rao, 2017). The Dalit on the Internet is, then, recognized as an individual expressing their views, making their voices heard (Thirumal & Tartakov, 2011).

The negative aspects of online Dalit mobilization: The multiple counter-publics

In elaborating on the democratizing potential of online media platforms, I would perhaps be remiss not to consider the factors that negatively impact the Dalits' use of online media as a tool for reimagining the public sphere. The digital media in India have not entirely been able to live up to the expectations of a pluralistic democratic space. The criticisms levelled against the Habermasian concept of the public sphere point to its exclusionary nature and its inability to accommodate adequate representation of a wide population (Fraser, 1990). Comparably then, in the Indian online space, dominance of upper-caste elites remains paramount. This group disproportionately controls the resources which makes entry of Dalits relatively difficult. The big corporations that control most of the media houses have tapped into the potential offered by the digital media resulting in the hegemonic structure of the mainstream media being reproduced in this sphere as well. The promise of freedom of speech on social media in no way guarantees equality of speech (Mandal, 2020). In any case, increased governmental control of the content being produced on digital platforms coupled with online vigilantism go on to show that the social media are not completely free from State coercion.

Complicating this further is the problem of digital divide. For the Dalits, most of whom live below the poverty line, access to basic infrastructure such as sanitation and clean water is an everyday struggle. Internet use, seemingly then, is a luxury. Of the socially disenfranchised, only a minor fraction of the growing Dalit middle class has a presence in the online public

sphere. Dalit access to the Internet is then restricted to the urban, college-educated youths who have acquired the social and cultural capital necessary to navigate the cyberspace (Thirumal & Tartakov, 2011). Even though there are instances of people who have been able to transcend material and ideological bars of caste inequality and enter the online public sphere, the numbers are still too few and far between. Unsurprisingly, the online Dalit presence is almost exclusively predominated by Dalit males. In the discourse on inclusion, the mental image is that of a man. Dalit women are still not part of the landscape (Sheth, 2015).

Moreover, the Dalit middle class on the Internet often takes on a bourgeois identity rather than furthering the causes of their community. In its participation in cyberspace, Dalit discourse may tend to mirror the dominant mode of online representation (Jeffrey, 2001; Chopra, 2006). Neither can the Dalit be understood as a monolith. The internal differentiations within the political category, in the form of linguistic and regional differences, also get reflected in Dalits' online presence. For instance, an examination of Dalit Camera's blogs reveals that Dalits from Northeast India have been provided little online space for self-expression (Paul & Dowling, 2018). The absence of a wide-scale Dalit mobilization prevents this category from translating their motivations and political aims collectively into the digital space.

The question remains. How effective are these online discursive practices in representing the needs of the vast majority of Dalits, a disproportionate number of whom continue to live in the shadows without the means to meet basic needs? It is important to acknowledge that even within a more inclusive public sphere that claims to give voice to those hitherto excluded from the national discourse, there exists an eclectic assemblage of groups, each with a distinct narrative, a different reading of discrimination. A common political ideology, a basis for mobilization is practically impossible for these groups. Thus, instead of taking online media as the ultimate channel for Dalit political communication, emphasis should be placed on locating the multiple publics fragmented by subcastes, regions, gender, language and class (Thakur, 2020). Nancy Fraser's conception of counter-publics (1990) offers a possible way of understanding the parallel Dalit publics that enable their participants to formulate multiple interpretations of their caste identities.

For Fraser, the multiple counter-publics expand the discursive space by disseminating a wide range of ideas that do not immediately find expression in the public sphere (Fraser, 1990). In the context of Dalit political mobilization on the online domain, multiple Dalit publics afford a possibility of bringing together a range of perspectives on caste inequality and everyday caste

realities that remain hidden. Fraser argues that in stratified societies, participatory parity is realized through a contestation among the plurality of competing publics. Further, the unbounded character of the publics allows people to participate in more than one public and so memberships in publics may overlap (Fraser, 1990). This is a particularly important motif when trying to make sense of Dalit counter-publics. The history of subjugation, the experience of subalternity is common to the different Dalit counter-publics. In this sense, there is significant imbrication among the different counter-publics. The multiple Dalit counter-publics are not always present in cyberspace. Even when they are, they are sometimes hidden in obscurity, offering their participants a safe space for withdrawal away from the public eye. But nonetheless, they exist. And in existing as differentiated, parallel publics they further the democratic ideals that the dominant public sphere(s) so often seek to undermine.

Chapter 3: Comedy in India

The different forms of media in India have historically contributed to the discursive practices of the public sphere by engaging in a cultural celebration of an imagined Indianness. Take for instance, television programming in the country. Television is an important aspect of the public sphere in India. And for a long time, apart from the print media, it has been the principal means of portraying the idea of an India purged of caste differences and communal overtones. *Doordarshan*, the government television channel, programmed mythological stories with religious connotations that forged a nationwide television audience and consolidated the cultural basis of a burgeoning middle class. Television programmes then were used to foster a sense of national belonging, to create the ideal modern citizen, one who was part of the selective imagining of the nation. Another crucial avenue, the Hindi film industry, similarly promoted a masculine Hindu culture dictated by box office formulae. The idea of India that gained ascendancy in public culture thus relied strongly on Hindu, upper-caste values and middle class identities (Rajagopal, 2016 in Chaudhury, 2017).

However, in analysing how mediated art forms have promoted the dominant idea of a uniform nation, it would perhaps be fallacious to not consider the different genres of performative art that have simultaneously served as important means of resistance. Art in various forms has repeatedly contested the exclusionary understanding of the public sphere and in resisting it, has engendered new spaces of mobilization and collective being, thus broadening the scope of the national public sphere. The theatre in India has been one such means of affecting change. During the colonial times, theatre was used to raise awareness about the injustice of British rule and mobilize action against the oppressors. Even after Independence, drama as a performative sphere has continued to challenge the existing political and societal systems (Bhatia, 2004 in Nüske, 2018). The sometimes-overlapping performative genre of political humour has been yet another important medium of conveying resistance. Political satire and comedy, as a specialized form of performative humour, have a long and rich history in India with satirical plays and films being important vehicles of critique. But studies on the public culture in India have yet to recognize satire and comedy as definitive political acts (Punathambekar, 2015). It is important to realize that humour — both in interpersonal exchanges as well as a performative art — has always been an important aspect of the cultural politics in India. Any comprehension of the discernible shifts in Indian public life thus hinges

on an understanding of the range of political humour and its role in shaping public opinion through the course of the country's history.

History of political humour in India

There is a common perception in Western scholarship that humour did not exist in ancient India. Michel Clasquin (2001) argues that this cannot be further from the truth. Not only did ancient India have comic literature, but the social environment itself was far from a mirthless place. Humour in ancient India was mostly scatological and erotic in nature, to the point of often being openly pornographic. In the Western language translations, the passages with sexual connotations were heavily edited or omitted altogether thus leading to the loss of the essence of humour. Another possible reason why humour in ancient India is not given much attention is because there is an effort, especially in Hinduism, to theologize important passages until nothing funny remains. Through this attempt to 'clean up' Indian tradition, the message so often delivered is that Indian literature is serious and not humorous (Clasquin, 2001).

But ancient India did have a rich tradition of humour. In fact, the earliest discussions on humour in India can be traced back to the *Natyashastra*, written by Bharata, sometime between 200 BC and 200 AD. This ancient treatise on drama lists laughter as one of the primary genres of performance (Paul, 2017). This establishment of humour as a theatrical trope has consequently legitimized its presence in public and political spaces (Kumar, 2012). Ancient texts in Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism were often laced with satire and parody (Thomas, 1969). In Sanskrit texts, comedic juxtaposition was often used to critique religion (Seigel, 1987). Traces of political humour can be found in the verbal duels between the Mughal emperor, Akbar, and his advisor, Birbal, which goes on to show that humour as a means of speaking truth to power has a long history in the subcontinent (Naim, 1995). In the villages, the village jester was a well-known figure. Some would even assume the role of a court jester or *vidusaka* at the court of a local aristocrat (Clasquin, 2001). Leaders of prominent social movements such as the Bhakti movement would use satiric poems as a means of political critique. Vernacular literature around the same period also used humour as a mechanism to point out religious hypocrisy and exhibit irreverence to religious deities (Kumar, 2015).

The period of colonial rule witnessed the convergence of traditions of satire and parody with widespread discontent against social inequities. The oppositional press emerged during this time that resisted the advances of the Empire. Movement leaders would publish their opinions

in the newspapers and given their anti-Establishment stance, the newspapers provided space for humour and satire to thrive. Political cartooning that emerged during this time often invited charges of sedition and press censorship but the tradition continues to this day (Kumar, 2012). The satirical magazine, *Punch*, originally a British publication, was adapted to the Indian context with multiple linguistic iterations. These Indian versions were an integral means of political critique in the public sphere. Political satire flourished in spite of increased press censorship and totalitarianism. In fact, numerous other vernacular publications that directly challenged the colonial rule through political humour and cartooning began to emerge around this time (Kumar, 2015). The use of humorous critique has persisted in the modern Indian languages such as Hindi, Bengali, Tamil, each of which has devised its own literary traditions and customs of humorous political commentary (Paul, 2017).

Irony was a particularly important motif in Bengali literature. Literary humour in the region consisted of the lower classes satirizing the more fortunate. Even the upper classes would sometimes indulge in evoking fun at themselves through songs and oral humour (Kaviraj, 2000). In different parts of the country, public satirical performances aimed at the powerful continue to be an intrinsic part of festivals (Paul, 2017). In post-Independence India, poetry meetings or *hasya kavi sammelans*, became a regular feature at public meetings where speakers would present their political opinions through mirth and poetry. These gatherings shaped public opinions to a large extent and institutionalized oral, folk humour into an urban public event (Orsini, 2009). Political cartooning, too, considerably impacted the national media space with caricatures and jokes serving as important spaces of dissent during periods of political turmoil (Kumar, 2015).

Analysing humour as a means of resistance alone, however, is perhaps examining only one aspect of a complex dynamic. Humour can be anti-ritualistic but also hegemonic. And in India, humour has been effectively used as a means of oppression and discrimination over the years. Akshaya Kumar (2014) argues that in the days of primary orality, jokes, riddles and folk songs targeted the lower castes and women thereby consolidating the patriarchal Brahminical order. In days of agrarian economy, the different castes and their idiosyncrasies became the topic of comic encounters. As the informal, oral jokes started getting ritualized, caste and communal laughter were replaced by more official, politically correct means of mirth. However, caste humour continued to exist in private spaces, in interpersonal interactions away from the public gaze. In a more contemporary context, Sabha theatre, a specialized genre in Tamil language comedy theatre in Chennai, influences notions of what is considered good cultural taste. This

field is dominated exclusively by Brahmins who then go on to shape the artistic and cultural sensibilities of comic expression. Middle-class culture in the city thus is influenced by caste identities (Rudisill, 2007). In India today, humour remains a means to normalize caste exclusion and results in the disallowance of anti-caste humour to proliferate beyond the vernacular languages and assume a pan-Indian identity (Waghmore in Gorringe et al., 2015). The politics of humour is embedded in the national public sphere, both as a means of resistance and discrimination. In these contrasting capacities, humour contributes to the practices that shape public opinion and, in the process, creates new ways of thinking about cultural nationalism.

Humorous communication in contemporary India

Before liberalization, humorous communication had occupied a rather subdued and secondary space in Indian broadcast media. There would be a few programmes on *hasya kavi sammelan* or comic poetry gatherings on the television; the Hindi film industry produced a few comedy movies that relied mostly on homophobic and sexist tropes (James, 2020b). The radio, too, would broadcast a few programmes on comic performances. However, with the opening up of the economy in the early 1990s, a new middle class began to increasingly make its presence felt at the national level. This class had a distinct taste that was a culmination of global exposure and frustration with the State-controlled ideas of culture. In order to cater to this growing demand for new content, new channels started emerging which devised programmes geared towards entertainment alone. This new era ushered in unconditional production, consumption, and circulation of laughter. Humour on television became ubiquitous, intrusive even, and became an important motif in all forms of programming. The hyper-visibility of humour signalled to a new aesthetics of entertainment that was characteristic of the post-liberalization middle class cultural habitus. In this form, old practices of humour confronted newer, international forms of laughter. A case in point could be the stand-up comedy shows on the television. The format of these shows combined local traditions of *nautanki*, *tamasha* (popular forms of local theatre) with a Western model of comic performance. Shows such as the *Great Indian Laughter Challenge*, *Movers and Shakers* and more recently, *Comedy Nights with Kapil* relied on studio laughter, music to draw audience response. Not only that, but the television jokes were also augmented by theatrical embellishments, melodrama and overt bodily movements (Kumar, 2014). Along with this rehearsed performance of laughter, television in

post-liberalization India also saw the emergence of news parody and satire. Shows such as the *The Week That Wasn't*, *Gustakhi Maaf* (Insolence be pardoned) became part of a broader culture of political critique (Kumar, 2015). These shows used skits, songs to push against the dominant ideology and offered a different mode of engagement with the political (Punathambekar, 2015). The Internet, however, fundamentally changed media practices in the country and in doing this, reorganized the atlas of humorous communication.

The Internet is not a self-contained sphere but one formed through an intermingling of global flows and local particularities. The relative infancy of the Internet in India has allowed it to harbour subversive content free from calls for censorship until recently. The Internet, coupled with globalization, has enabled a space for transnational humorous exchange, whereby international modalities of comic expression have penetrated the Indian cultural space. The social media, particularly YouTube, have acquainted an entire generation of people to Western stand-up comedy, situational comedies, sketch comedy and other forms of performative humour. This comedy on the Internet has brought Western popular cultural references to a primarily privileged, urban population (Chaudhury, 2017). This section of the populace thus consumed content by Russell Peters, Louis CK and George Carlin and yearned for similar content in the Indian context. YouTube fuelled the global middle class urban youth's imagination of how comedy can be. It told them that comedy does not only mean mimicry as seen on television, neither does it always have to be reliant on gaudy make-up and histrionics.

Around the early 2000s, inspired by the Western models of stand-up comedy, live comedy venues in the metropolitan cities started opening up. Stand-up comedy shows presented itself as a fresh alternative to karaoke and electronic music nights in the pubs. This was complemented by the global recession of 2008 which saw many patrons return to India from the West. For this group with a distinctly Western cultural taste, the live comedy venues served up a dose of nostalgia (Paul, 2017). Canvas Laugh Factory, a franchise of the London-based Comedy Store opened a venue in Mumbai in 2009 that became a training ground where comics would experiment with material. Some of these found their way on YouTube which generated a huge number of views in a short period of time (Kay, 2018). The digital culture enabled the entry of this new form of stand-up comedy into the Indian cultural canvas while simultaneously offering this genre of performative humour more scope to flourish. Comedians started being recognized as important figures in the shift that the Indian media practices were going through both within the country and abroad. Within a few years, comedy collectives such as All India Bakchod (AIB), East India Comedy (EIC) began to upload satirical videos, humorous political

content on YouTube that catered to the aesthetic demands of this global middle class. In turn, the class interests of the new middle class determined the content in this art form (James, 2020a). Soon enough, the streaming platforms, driven mostly by economic goals, tapped into the potential of this genre, and started programming hour-long specials with some of the more popular comedians. Today, this new form of stand-up comedy is an industry in itself with huge annual turnovers and considerable corporate engagement. The Internet has institutionalized the stand-up comedy space into a recognizable, profitable cultural unit. And although the comedic space in India is relatively nascent as compared to its Western counterparts, it has become an important aspect of the popular culture in India thereby exerting considerable influence in shaping public opinion.

Stand-up comedy, in general, can be defined as "the oldest, basic, and deeply significant form of humorous expression" (Mintz, 1985, p. 71). A limiting definition of this comedy means that a performer stands on a stage and speaks directly to the audience without the help of costumes and/or props (Mintz, 1985). Oliver Double defines stand-up as an act which "usually involves a solo performer speaking directly to an audience, with the intention of provoking laughter, within the context of formalised entertainment, but it is an entity in itself, and is not contained within a larger narrative structure" (Double, 1991, p. 4 in Macdonald, 2018, p. 15). The Western model of stand-up comedy has been adapted to suit Indian cultural preferences to a large extent although the basic structure remains same. Performers speak directly to an audience about topics that resonate with both parties involved. These range from regional specificities, middle class values, popular cultural icons to even government ineptitude and patriarchy. Stand-up comedy in India is being heralded as a harbinger of change. The content disguises itself as jokes and challenges the hegemonic narrative by unravelling the mask of authority. The comedians are being lauded for going off the beaten track, for speaking the unspeakable (Paul, 2017). This genre of comedy has brought sarcasm, vulgarity, dark humour into public consciousness and normalized them in the public comedic vocabulary. The use of rougher, more coarse language allows it to question the class-related hegemony of the public sphere (Miller, 2020).

The Internet, however, adds a level of complexity to this dynamic. It takes the performance beyond the confines of the mostly upscale comedy venue to a wider gamut of online audience who then interpret the videos in their own way. Besides, the comments sections below the videos enable the wider public to engage in a discussion about the cultural messages that these clips give off. This has been particularly true since the global pandemic in 2020 which saw

comedy venues being shut down all over India. As comedians turned to live streaming and Zoom shows, the comments sections became the site where laughter was generated, the aspect of relatability captured. This form of stand-up comedy is widely recognized as 'English' stand-up comedy in India. This is partly due to its Western model and partly due to the language most often used in the comic discourse. However, a closer examination of this comic genre reveals certain fissures in the language practices of the country that are ultimately indicative of broader divisions along the lines of class and caste.

Language in English stand-up comedy

It is widely believed that the national elite form a significant part of the English-speaking population in India and are considered agents of modernization (Rajagopal, 2001 in Chaudhury, 2017). The politics of the English language in post-colonial India then points to material and symbolic inequalities wherein the language is an indicator of upward social mobility. English still remains an aspirational language for a large section of the population; it remains a dividing line separating an upper-caste, upper-class, 'liberal' India from a rural, 'religious-minded' vernacular-speaking India (Kumar, 2012). And while languages such as Hindi and English are central to the production of identities in the country, for the upper-caste and upper-class, English provides a space of unbridled expression that Hindi simply cannot (Hall, 2019). This association of English with urban, educated people necessitates the relegation of vernacular languages or even Hindi to the rural belts. The term 'English stand-up comedy' then at once distinguishes a population that has the means to take part in the comic discourse from those that cannot. The comedy venues, with their upscale locations and steep entry fees, serve to keep this distinction intact. Comedians are aware that their live audience are urban, English speaking youth (James, 2020a). Some of them acknowledge that the English language is a personal preference because it allows for better, easier and more effective communicative expression (Pinchevsky, 2020).

Interestingly, the term 'English stand-up comedy' is also broadly used to include a wide range of language choices that have been culturally appropriated by the Indian middle class. An important aspect of this is the practice of linguistic code-switching (Paul, 2017). Comedians switch effortlessly between English and Hindi and sometimes other vernacular languages while delivering the punch line or even explaining the premise of the joke. Most comedic routines rely on a combination of both Hindi and English, a new form of communicative currency

commonly known as 'Hinglish', which is reflective of the evolving cultural identities in contemporary India. Hinglish is a primary mode of communication in the private sphere and its use in stand-up comedy signals to the genre's ability to use private expression in a public setting. The use of expletives, sexual references further consolidate it as an authentic mode of socio-cultural expression (Miller, 2020). For some comedians, the use of Hinglish in place of English is a political act. Through a mix of languages, they aim to subvert the power and prestige that the populace so often associates with the English language. Interspersing English acts with Hindi words is an act of transgression, one that upsets ideas of linguistic norms. For some others, linguistic code-switching is an act of boundary levelling instead of boundary maintenance when they perceive that their audience composition is not uniform. This is particularly important when the Internet takes the video clips far and wide and allows a larger, more diverse, population to engage with the content. Switching between languages enables the comedians to draw in more audience response. The use of linguistic code-switching in English stand-up comedy thus affords a critique of the class and caste related hegemony of the public sphere (Miller, 2020). Comedians effectively use it to bridge the two sides of a linguistically split nation.

English political stand-up comedy in India

> "People ask me why I don't do jokes on religion. Really? 'cause I am not insane. Because we are not ready for jokes on religion… No, you are not ready…Why don't I do jokes about politics? Because the government is super chill [loud applause from the audience]. Our government is so bipolar it's not even funny… Why I don't do jokes about politics is 'cause I am scared. That's why. It's not like I cannot get punchlines of political jokes, I don't want to get punched on the face…" (Sebastian, 2018).

The emergence of English stand-up comedy has been widely heralded as necessary for the advancement of India as a whole. This performative genre has been lauded for bringing a fresh perspective on issues that are normally too controversial for the public discourse (James, 2020b). It is through sharp, critical commentary that English stand-up comedy has been emphasizing the need to relax the arbitrary moral values so often attached to social identities. Incidentally, only a select few comedians do in fact talk about issues that are overtly political. Most others prefer dwelling on the not-so-serious aspects of middle-class idiosyncrasies. The rare political monologues are preceded or succeeded by a disclaimer that the speech is not to

be taken seriously. Comedians are extra careful to not hurt anybody's sentiments. The reasons for this, as the monologue by comedian Kenny Sebastian quoted above suggests, are numerous. The digital boom in India has aggravated the culture of offence-taking whereby anything can be a matter of serious offence. The common perception is that Indians 'cannot take a joke' (BeingIndian, 2015). The government, unsurprisingly, has been spearheading this retaliation. It has emboldened a new brigade of troll army or online haters, who amplify the outrage regarding a particular comic content in a matter of minutes. Comedians have been charged with police complaints, their comedy venues have been ransacked and some have even received death threats. In a recent manifestation of the culture of offence-taking, comedian Agrima Joshua was given rape threats in graphic details on various social media platforms by self-fashioned nationalists. Joshua had dared to come up with a set on Chhatrapati Shivaji, a historical figure venerated in the western state of Maharashtra (Yadav, 2020). A process of self-censorship then invariably sets in which dictates the kind of content comedians feel comfortable putting up on different social media platforms without the fear of State retribution. Censorship also extends to the private sphere where comedians are told which topics — religion and particular political figures being some of the more important ones — are off limits in private, corporate shows (Kay, 2018). The limits of free speech in India is a complex issue that requires a more nuanced reading but suffice it to say that the culture of offence-taking in India has successfully created an environment of fear that hinders most comedians from dabbling in topics that could be considered even slightly political in nature.

In spite of State repression, there still exists a small number of comedians who have been constantly pushing back against the government's diktats. These comedians are the few rare ones who have been using political satire and acerbic humour to point out the government's fallacies. The political humour in these instances is a way of conveying dissent and resistance to the increasing advances of the State. Not only that, but stand-up comedians are also using political humour to raise uncomfortable topics, issues that do not always bode well with the 'sophisticated' cultural aesthetics of the global Indian middle class and are normalizing them as a part of everyday political discourse.

The comedian, Daniel Fernandes, has a video clip on YouTube titled 'Marital Rape' (2015), in which he picks apart the societal negligence and the regressive attitude towards marital rape. Recorded just after the Indian government declared that marital rape cannot be criminalized, in the video, Fernandes says, "I think marital rape is worse [than non-marital rape], because not only are you sexually violated but you have to wake up next morning and make your rapist

a sandwich" (Fernandes, 2015). Such a discussion is practically unheard of in mainstream media and the laughter that ensues, possibly unimagined. Kunal Kamra, a comedian best known for his sharp critique of the BJP-led government and also the many trysts with the police, jokes, "What is [Narendra] Modi*ji* doing between me and [Mukesh] Ambani? [the most influential businessman in India]? Why can't I directly vote for Ambani? Do I have a problem with Ambani? No. Make him the PM" (Kamra, 2019). The comedian is referring to the collusion between the government and the industrial giant whereby it is believed that Ambani exerts a considerable influence on the decisions that the government takes. Female comedians, specifically, have been commended for hitting out at the patriarchal nature of the society with their gigs on menstruation, body shaming and societal expectations — topics otherwise considered taboo in public discussion. Aditi Mittal in a video on YouTube titled, "*Sanitary Napkins | Things they wouldn't let me say*" (2016), jokes "I have realized that saying the words sanitary napkin in public is like standing in a Hogwarts common room and saying the word 'Voldemort'" (Mittal, 2016). In one particular clip, the comedian Vir Das uses religion to talk about broader themes of harmony and tolerance (Vir Das Comedy, 2019). As a comedian, Das brings his secular identity to the fore and is not afraid to criticize as well as hope for a more organic relationship between the government and religion (Russo, 2020). Political comedy therefore exists as niche subgenre within the broader spectrum of English stand-up comedy in India and in its ability to speak truth to power, it necessitates a comparison with the concept of *parrhesia* in the Foucauldian sense (1983).

Political stand-up comedy and parrhesia

Literally translated as 'to say everything', Michel Foucault (1983) understands parrhesia to be a special kind of verbal activity where the speaker considers truth-telling as a moral duty and uses their freedom to speak the truth. This form of public speech upends social hierarchies. Parrhesia is particularly relevant in the context of the stand-up space because the not-so-serious nature of the comedy show allows for serious ideas to be presented in a light-hearted manner. Parrhesia requires the speaker to believe what they say to be true. The speech then stems from personal experience and might not be universally correct (Macdonald, 2018). Parrhesia presents opportunities to engage and transform the symbolic and material circumstances that shape everyday life and unsettles people from their critical inertia. The space of the English political stand-up comedy in India provides scope to understand political parrhesia in which

the comedians are in a position of relative inferiority when compared to the institutions they are satirizing. The stand-up comedians thus can be understood as parrhesiates who are challenging societal norms, criticizing political majorities and accusing the State of injustice (Rossing, 2014). Political stand-up comedy in India, therefore, has successfully created a space where the comedians and their audience can negotiate, recreate and contest prejudices in a humorous manner (Sahoo & Das, 2018).

This comparison of English political stand-up comedy to parrhesia, however, also reveals certain inconsistencies within the art form. The primary one being authenticity. The question of capital inadvertently creeps into the discursive practices and the language of resistance is inextricably tied to the language of capital. And with recent capital investments in the sector, it is difficult to differentiate between the comedian who is sharing experiential truths and the one who is trying to increase likeability in order to remain relevant and generate revenue. Political stand-up comedy on the Internet in India is thus entangled in capitalist modes of cultural production which dictate matters of representation and autonomy (Kay, 2018). The socially progressive content, labelled 'woke' in Internet parlance, is often part of a brand building exercise that translates to monetary profit for the comedians. The element of social justice within political stand-up comedy could thus easily be fabricated. Parrhesia becomes a way of garnering more audience response (positive as well as negative) and staying in the limelight. Economic gains, tied to class interests is a determining factor of the extent of progressiveness in this performative sphere (James, 2020a). For political satire in comedy to thrive, it is important that this subgenre of comic performance goes beyond personality driven amusement and ideas of dissent that conform to those of the urban elite (Gupta, 2020).

In spite of these shortcomings, it cannot be denied that English political stand-up comedy in India has emerged as a critical agent of change that has provided the national cultural landscape a new language of contention. This language serves a dual role. On the one hand, it critiques the powers at the helm thereby opening up spaces for dissent and resistance to flourish. On the other hand, it reimagines the public sphere by raising and normalizing issues that capture the material and ideological diversity inherent in the idea of an Indian identity. English political stand-up comedy is a symbolic model of transgression, but that does not diminish its usefulness in bringing about long-lasting social change (Miller, 2020).

Chapter 4: The limits of free speech in India

"I think we need more satire and humour. Humour brings happiness in our lives. Humour is the best healer: PM @narendramodi" — @PMOIndia official Twitter handle (Modi, 2017).

"Muslim Stand-Up Comic Jailed — For Jokes He Did Not Crack" — Article 14 (Purohit, 2021).

On January 1, 2021, the stand-up comedian, Munawar Faruqui, was arrested at a comedy event at a club in Indore, Madhya Pradesh, for 'mocking the deities of another religion'. Faruqui's arrest stemmed from a complaint registered by the son of a Bharatiya Janata Party Member of Legislative Assembly, who himself is the secretary of the state unit of the youth wing of the BJP. After languishing in prison for over a month and having his plea for bail rejected multiple times, Faruqui was later granted bail by the Supreme Court (Singh, 2021). Witnesses at the comedy venue, however, indicated that Faruqui had made no such jokes or comments that could be considered hurtful to religious sentiments and that the complainant and his accomplices had started harassing the comic from the moment he took to the stage. The complainant, on the other hand, claimed that he had "overheard" Faruqui rehearse his jokes backstage ("Munawar Faruqui's Imprisonment a "Flagrant Disregard of Fundamental Freedoms,"" 2021). The police and the judiciary rushed to arrest Faruqui and the organizers of the show without proper evidence, purely based on the assumption that he 'would' crack those jokes. A huge section of people supported Faruqui demanding his release, but a greater number of people supported the decision to put him behind bars. The comedian's Muslim identity was highlighted repeatedly to assert that his jokes, if cracked, could upset Hindu religious norms.

This incident, like many others before it, shows that comedy and humour in India is a serious business, rife with limitations that are only compounded by the identity — religious, gender or caste — of the comedian. Faruqui's arrest is also proof that freedom of speech in India is a highly contentious issue. While the Constitutional limits to free speech have always been an important aspect of Indian public life, extra-judicial repression of freedom of expression has emerged as a particularly important motif in the current governance by the BJP led by Narendra Modi.

Free speech in India and the Hindu Right

The Constitution of India has historically allowed the freedom of speech and expression but with reasonable restrictions in the interest of public order. The argument for these restrictions was that an unbridled freedom of expression could not be allowed in a country with low literacy rates and with so many oppositional religious, caste and linguistic communities acting, sometimes violently, to promote their interests. Freedom of speech, therefore, has been intrinsically tied to the question of offence-taking (Lal, 2014). Judicial censorship on the grounds of respect has been one crucial means of balancing community sentiments and free speech (Acharya, 2015). These restrictive concerns about ordered security largely continue to determine the limits of free speech in the country (Narrain, 2016). Today, freedom of expression in India is limited in several ways. Sexually explicit scenes are prohibited in films and television, there is a strict protection from libel and considerations of national security are of supreme importance (Frøystad, 2016).

However, Rupa Viswanath is of the opinion that the justifications so often provided to curtail free speech have only served to protect the privileges of the upper castes and the upper classes. When dominant castes invoke hurt sentiments, the implication is that they should not be held responsible for the violent retaliation on Dalits. Post-colonial Indian laws have prioritized maintaining inter-community peace rather than protecting the victims of violence (Viswanath, 2016). This essentially means that instead of the onus being on the government to create an atmosphere where everyone can speak their mind, it is on the speaker to ensure that peace is not disrupted. And every time the government gives in to threats of disruption of public order, it legitimizes vigilante censorship, an extra-constitutional method of ensuring public harmony. This often translates into censorship of dissent and of creative expressions such as art and political satire through means not sanctioned by the State. Laws intended for impeding hate speech in the public domain have been used time and again to curb free speech citing outrage of public peace and order (Narrain, 2016). In fact, the very idea of peace and order is authoritatively manufactured and maintained, and as such is reflective of the dominant values and beliefs. Resultantly, hurt sentiments are largely the privilege of the numerical majority and social elites (Viswanath, 2016). This is perhaps glaringly evident in contemporary India when claims to an imagined Hindu identity by the Hindu Right have gained ascendancy in the public sphere and is in alliance with the censorial power of the State to undermine free speech (Acharya, 2015). This has created space for new kinds of censorship that conveniently

appropriate proscriptions meant for mitigating inter-community animosity to maintain the dominant beliefs of the Hindu community (Gould, 2017).

Contemporary Hindu nationalism is propagated by a group of related organizations with varying levels of intensity, including the BJP, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and the Bajrang Dal. Among these, the BJP is a political party while the other groups declare themselves to be cultural or social organizations, although the Bajrang Dal can be easily characterized as a group of Hindu hard-liners. All the organizations owe their allegiance to the ideology of *Hindutva* which equates authentic Indianness to Hindu cultural origins. It imagines a Hindu community which is at once, a nation, a race and a cultural community (Chopra, 2006). Since the 1920s, the Hindu Right has been propagating the idea of a high caste, chauvinist Hinduism in which eroticism, dissent and secular practices are treated as foreign imports and Muslims, Christians and atheists are perceived as threats to the idea of a Hindu India (Banaji, 2018). The Hindu Right draws support mostly from the middle classes and the upper castes, but it has also created a global nationalist network and draws extensive support from the Indian diaspora (Therwath, 2012).

Over the last two decades, the Hindu nationalist movement has resurfaced with renewed vigour. There is a proliferation of Hindu images in the public sphere (Chopra, 2017). History textbooks are being rewritten to eliminate even slightly positive historical accounts of Mughal rulers. These are being replaced with pro-*Hindutva* propaganda (Banaji, 2018). These pro-*Hindutva* writings often attribute modern mathematics and science to the ancient Hindu civilization (Therwath, 2012). The prime minister, Narendra Modi, at a conference, once famously declared that Lord Ganesha is proof that plastic surgery existed in ancient India, without any scientific evidence to support his claim (Rahman, 2014). Hindu supremacist schools are flourishing, and networks of vigilante publics are normalizing extreme violence. To complicate matters even further, media and the judiciary, supported by the political parties, are demonizing the liberal secular discourse. A popular rhetoric to have emerged is that of the ‘anti-national’ in which anything that does not align with the principles of the Hindu Right is deemed anti-national. Nationalism then becomes a euphemism for *Hindutva* (Chacko, 2019). Anyone who dares question is silenced as traitors, is told to ‘go to Pakistan’, the idea being that non-conformers do not have place in India and thus should go to Pakistan, a country with a historically contentious relationship with India, fraught with political tensions that continue to this day. At the ground level, the Hindu Right has also successfully mobilized a large group of vigilante publics who consider it their duty to maintain the ideals of Hindu publicness. This has resulted

in a spate of violence periodically against the communities perceived as ‘other’. Legal and political empowerment has meant that less efforts are being taken to disguise *Hindutva* violence (Banaji, 2018).

Academia has emerged as an important target for the Hindu nationalist movement. University students, professors have been attacked by right-wingers because they convey dissent. The colonial law of sedition has been evoked to imprison students and entire universities have been declared ‘anti-national’ ("JNU’s Journey from ‘Prestigious’ to ‘Anti-National,’” 2016). Journalists have been assaulted and even killed for choosing to uncover the truth and remain impartial (Ram, 2020). Most media channels are owned by big corporations that support the government. Through these platforms, the Hindu nationalist movement advances its political ideology vociferously. In the few remaining independent news sources, the spectre of censorship looms large. This manifests through direct threats of physical violence from right-wing groups or the fear of losing one’s job. Derogatory terms such as ‘presstitutes’ have become normalized in the Hindu nationalist vocabulary to describe an independent journalist (Mohammad-Arif & Naudet, 2020). Other problematic terms include, ‘sickulars’, ‘libtards’ often used to refer to a rational, secular individual. This amply illustrates that the assault on free expression is clearly winning in contemporary India. Debates and rational discourses are being supplanted by a culture of offence-taking. The Hindu Right is feeding on people’s propensity to get ‘offended’. It is manufacturing this culture that is aggravating communal tensions across an already polarized polity (Mirchandani, 2018). This is being augmented by weak institutions and an ineffective legal system that casually stands by or, in some cases, actively colludes with the State to suppress free speech further (Taylor, 2014).

The limits of free speech in Narendra Modi’s India

The latest ideological reinforcement to the Hindu nationalist movement occurred with the election of Narendra Modi as the prime minister in 2014. Modi’s campaign included propositions of Hindu cultural and political primacy in India (Chopra, 2017). Since its inception, the BJP government has used an assortment of legal and quasi-legal means to stifle free speech. The fear tactics so often employed are emboldened by an absence of public outrage. This allows the government to act with a sense of impunity. In all of this, Modi’s unwillingness to voice support for freedom of speech or even for those attacked sends a strong message of ideological complicity (Zargar, 2021). However, the impediments to free speech in

the country are being globally recognized. In 2017, the World Press Freedom Index published by Reporters Without Borders, ranked India at 136 out of 180 countries (Kay, 2018). In 2021, Sweden-based V-Dem Institute in its report on democracy, said that India had become an 'electoral autocracy' (V-Dem Institute, 2021). The *Hindutva* brigade, however, has wasted no time in rubbishing these reports, questioning their authenticity. These developments are not new; the magnitude is. The repression of dissent and alternate opinions has existed over the course of previous governmental regimes as well. The Congress repeatedly used colonial laws to imprison intellectual activists (Kumbamu, 2020). But these incidents have simply gained momentum in Modi's India that allows for the unchecked rise of *Hindutva* violence and inter-group animosity (Anderson & Jaffrelot, 2018).

The pandemic has revealed certain other means by which the government checks free speech. In April 2021, India went through an unprecedented surge in Covid-19 cases. With hospitals running out of ICU beds and an oxygen shortage of colossal proportions, people were dying on the streets, quite literally. Given the government's ineptitude, the civil society had been using social media to mobilize resources and amplify leads about hospital beds, oxygen tanks and medicines. In such a situation, the government had ordered Twitter to remove any posts that critiqued its handling of the virus ("India Covid," 2021). Since August 2020, the capital city of Delhi has been witnessing huge public demonstrations by farmers from all over the country who are staging a protest against the new farm laws introduced by the government. In this connection, a 21-year-old environmental activist, Disha Ravi, was jailed because she circulated a toolkit on social media that outlined how farmers in other countries could support this cause. She was arrested on charges of conspiring with foreign entities to subvert lawful governance in India (Muralidharan, 2021b).

Online news platforms and the social media operate with a relative degree of freedom, but the Modi government has sought to regulate their content and funding. Earlier this year, it issued a directive that stated that social media platforms will have to remove any content within 36 hours after an administrative or legal order has been issued (Zargar, 2021). This will allow officials and private individuals to object to any content they deem inappropriate. The list of objectionable content is unsurprisingly long which only highlights the ambivalence inherent in the State's handling of freedom of speech. Suffice it to say, it curtails one of the last remaining spheres of public interaction relatively free from the clout of the State (Bajaj, 2021). But this directive also proves that a total crackdown on dissent cannot be accomplished as long as thoughts and speech on social media go unchecked (Zargar, 2021). A perturbing aspect of this

new rule is that it demands that the online media platforms reveal the identity of the originator or the creator of the post considered harmful to public interest (Muralidharan, 2021b). This paves the way for public shaming and persecution and, not to mention, is a gross violation of privacy. There is no guarantee, however, that the new rules instituted to check extreme speech will not be used to consolidate political advantage. This is particularly important to realize since it is through the social media that the Hindu Right under Modi's leadership has built an ecosystem of rumours, fake news, propaganda and hate speech to routinize violence and push its agenda of a Hindu nation (Mirchandani, 2018).

State repression through online hate speech

In 2014, the BJP became the first major political party in India to harness the power of social media for electoral gains. The days preceding the election witnessed a flurry of intense mobilization tactics on social media, spearheaded primarily by Narendra Modi (Udupa, 2018b). Today, the social media in India continues to play a significant role in empowering Hindu nationalists and aggravating political tension in the country. It has been an important tool in propagating hate speech against minorities, especially since media literacy remains low. The BJP's IT cell and its supporters openly instigate ethnoreligious tensions without any fear of retribution and spread rumours that seemingly translate into offline harm (Mohsina, 2020). Rumours, in fact, have been a particularly potent means of instigating violence against Muslims and Dalits accused of cattle-trading. A new category of violence, 'bovine-related mob lynching violence' has emerged today that vilifies these minority groups that deal with cattle (Banaji, 2018). In most cases, cow vigilantes have acted upon rumours spread through social media to attack and even lynch to death Muslims and Dalits in possession of cattle (Mohsina, 2020).

The online *Hindutva* machinery is largely steered by urban educated youth from the upper castes with reasonable technological competence and proficiency in the English language. However, with the widespread availability of the Internet, the online *Hindutva* brigade is seeing an increased participation by lower-middle class youths from smaller towns (Udupa, 2018b). An undercover operation by a news portal revealed that a network of about 20,000 people works to incite communal hatred and silence dissent through forceful means on social media (Muralidharan, 2021b). These self-styled volunteers use a range of tactics such as abuses, swear-words, name-calling to put their views forward. Abuses are an assured way to draw attention and gain traction amidst a dense online traffic of verbal dialogue. This expanding

form of abusive exchange is now popularly known as 'trolling' and indicates persistent provocation through aggression. Trolling opens up new means of political participation and constitutes a key communicational context for online users (Udupa, 2018a). However, the online hate peddled by this network is distinct in its gendered intimidation (Udupa & Pohjonen, 2019). Women commenting on politics have to constantly confront abusive trolls who more often than not invoke images of illicit sex, prostitution and female sexual organs to silence them. In some instances, abuses escalate into a full-blown shaming punishment, the burden of which falls invariably on women in terms of governance of their sexuality (Udupa, 2018a). This extensive online ecosystem of trolling and threatening cannot be perceived as a form of extreme speech separate from the State repression of free speech that transpires in the offline world. Instead, the concerted attacks are a specialized mechanism of silencing and coercing individuals in cyberspace into submission.

The limits of comic expression: The case of unlaughter

> "Here's a fun story. Since the beginning of the year I have had 13 legal notices and a High Court hearing over jokes. Jokes. Literally jokes. Lawyers, fees, meetings, time. Freedom of speech definitely exists...it just ain't free" — Vir Das on Instagram (Das, 2020).

An analysis of stand-up comedy in India has to necessarily consider the different systemic and political practices that pose constraints on the comedic exchange. Comedians spend a lot of time inventing new ways to talk about politics without invoking the wrath of any political or religious groups. Indian stand-up comedy then is constantly an exercise in evading the fault lines of politics so often charged with emotions. In spite of this, comedians are repeatedly targeted, demonized and legally persecuted. An example can be made of Kunal Kamra, who has been particularly vocal about his views on politics. Kamra has been asked to vacate his apartment, his shows have been cancelled last minute ("Comedian Kunal Kamra Asked to Vacate His Apartment for His Political Opinion; FB Post Goes Viral," 2018). A *Hindutva* activist filed a police complaint against comedian Sanjay Rajoura because he questioned Narendra Modi's statement on Ganesha and plastic surgery ("No Country For Political Satire", 2020). Comedian Neeti Palta says, "I have a show coming up in Vadodara, and I have been specifically told not to do any Modi jokes" (BeingIndian, 2015). In 2016, comedian Tanmay Bhatt used an innocuous Snapchat filter to poke fun at two celebrities. What was designed to

be a playful parody evoked responses that ranged from aggressive and spiteful to even threats of violence (Kay, 2018). While online hate is unavoidable, female comics are regularly subjected to misogynistic abuse ("No Country For Political Satire", 2020). In such a scenario, it becomes difficult for the comedian to speak out against the failings of the Indian State and a process of self-censorship inadvertently sets in. The rhetoric so often deployed to censor comic expressions is that of political correctness (PC). While PC is a particularly important issue in Indian comedy, it is dictated more by ideals of respect rather than values of dignity. The Indian appropriation of PC therefore is yet another tactic to silence the voices that question institutional practices through satire and humour. It becomes a means to prohibit discussions on subjects that the government deems inappropriate. PC in the Indian context, thus, stands in contradiction to what the ideology actually stands for elsewhere (Samant, 2019).

It then becomes important to situate the argument for freedom of expression in Indian comedy amidst a broader trend of what Michael Billig (2005) terms 'unlaughter'. Billig conceptualizes unlaughter as the absence of laughter in a situation when laughter might otherwise be expected (Billig, 2005). Laughter is an important aspect of the humorous exchange between the stand-up performer and their audience. Jokes and humorous remarks are not merely uttered, but also have to be received (Billig, 2005). Collective laughter from the audience is the indication that the joke has been positively received. Unlaughter, then, is a crucial way of expressing disapproval of the humorous text. It stems not just from failed humour but is a deliberate communicative strategy by the audience. The silence that follows a joke expresses volumes that signal much more than just an absence of laughter. It is a political act (Weaver, 2015). By taking offence at the political jokes, the Indian State communicates unlaughter. Very often, unlaughter manifests itself in violent forms (Marsh, 2016). As is the case with Indian political comedy, unlaughter is routinely conveyed by the State and its actors through public shaming of comedians, legal actions and even violence. Munawar Faruqui's arrest, before he could even crack the jokes, was an act of unlaughter. This tension between laughter and unlaughter contributes to the appeal of political stand-up comedy in India.

Just as laughter serves a boundary-maintaining role by unifying those who laugh against the target of the ridicule, unlaughter brings together all those who disapprove of the humorous content (Malmqvist, 2015). The online trolls, the hecklers at comedy venues, the politicians taking offence at jokes and even the police, then, seemingly constitute a collective practising unlaughter. What this essentially does is heighten the boundaries between the joke instigators and the audience who are unwilling to take part in the comic moment (Smith, 2009). The

political stand-up comedians in India, however, are largely able to overcome these practices of unlaughter because a large section of the population laughs with them, appreciates their jokes. It is this support in the form of laughter that enables them to ridicule the various means adopted by the State to express its displeasure.

Indian political stand-up comedy as relief

An analysis of the repressive social-political milieu within which Indian political comedy functions, and the broader culture of unlaughter, necessitates a discussion on the social functions of political humour in such a situation. John Morreall (2014) suggests that one way of thinking about humour is to understand it as a release of pent-up nervous energy that could serve as a form of relief from the strain of either dominant political ideology or social mores. In what he conceptualizes as the Relief Theory of humour, Morreall says that the physical act of laughter in such cases is a release of hidden desires or energy that would have otherwise been utilized to repress oneself (Morreall, 2014). The laughter that political topics in stand-up comedy generate can therefore be characterized as a relief from the stifling atmosphere. The comic moment, however fleeting, provides respite from always having to be conforming citizens. The relief that is generated is a personal experience, but at the same time, it allows the audience to engage communally through a shared feeling of having been restrained by the State (Mills, 2011). This theory provides scope to understand how political humour can serve as a safety-valve, a pressure releasing mechanism that is crucial for the proper functioning of a democracy. In a country where grievances and concerns cannot always be expressed to the authorities concerned owing to the fear of retribution, comic exchanges can serve to alleviate some of the bottled-up stress.

In November 2016, the BJP government discontinued five-hundred and thousand-rupee bills, a move that threw the entire country into a mayhem. Weeks after the change, the ATMs still had long queues of people who were unable to withdraw money. The government ridiculed those complaining about not being able to endure this stress but did not attempt to make the transition any smoother. Comedian Varun Grover, at a stand-up show, says in Hindi, “I met an uncle who was carrying a chair, I asked him why and he said he’ll use the chair to sit outside the ATM” (Grover, 2016). The laughter that ensued can only be understood as a release of nervous energy that could not possibly be directed at the government but nonetheless needed to be vented out. Vir Das jokes, “Bollywood is on drugs, guys. This is the number one issue

plaguing India right now. Forget the vaccine, forget the economy, forget the GDP, forget the pandemic. Bollywood is smoking *gaanja* [marijuana]. This is the issue that is plaguing our country right now" (Vir Das Comedy, 2020). Das's monologue points to the news media's extensive coverage of a drug-racket in the Hindi film industry while allowing more important issues go uncovered. The audience laughter is an indication of the shared feeling of frustration about not having the everyday realities of living amidst a pandemic highlighted on national media. The increasingly aggressive advances of the government portend dangerous trends of where the country is headed. Humorous political exchange remains one of the last few means of critical discourse. It acts as a momentary escape from the otherwise stifling culture of unlaughter, riddled with legal and material consequences.

Chapter 5: Methodology and methods

Research methodology can be broadly understood to be the means through which the researcher thinks about the study, makes decisions about the methods to employ. It determines how the researcher positions themselves within the study but more importantly, how the data is generated. In other words, methodology stems from the research questions themselves and is tied closely to the outcome desired by the researcher (Mills & Birks, 2014). My research asks how English political stand-up comedy in India critiques the idea of a nation through humour and satire, and if questions of caste find representation in this narrative. I further enquire if the comedians reflect on their identity — caste or otherwise — in their comic discourse. Evidently then, a qualitative research methodology is best suited for the purposes of this research and a range of qualitative research methods aid in the operationalization of the research questions and in the collection of appropriate data. A methodology that focuses on the language of humour, the precise choice of words that comedians use in their performances, will help arrive at a nuanced understanding of whether English political stand-up comedy in India contributes to the discursive practices of the Indian public sphere by engaging in topics considered politically volatile in an already repressed society. Alternatively, I consider if it too revels in a post-casteist assumption. For this reason, I believe that discourse analysis is the most appropriate methodology for this study.

Discourse analysis as a research methodology

Discourse analysis is focused on how individuals and groups use language in social settings. The talk is framed as occurring naturally without the influence of the researcher (Mills & Birks, 2014). It is concerned with how individuals accomplish personal, social, and political projects through language (Starks & Trinidad, 2008). The aim of this methodology is to render visible the different ways in which discourse helps in constituting settings and identities. It also pays attention to the various resources that are drawn on to build the narrative. The specifics of what is said and how it is said, including hesitations, pauses and lexical choices, are essential to this methodology. As such, the analysis depends on a close reading of the way in which the rhetoric is organized (Hardy & Bryman, 2004). Discourse analysts believe that meaning is created through the mutually agreed on use of language. And it is through this that individuals and groups enact their identities, create and maintain social norms and negotiate social interaction

(Starks & Trinidad, 2008). Additionally, discourse analysts argue that even gazes, poses carry significant meaning potential (Han, 2015).

Seemingly then, a discourse analysis methodology helps explain the different ways in which the comedians use phrases, words, and sometimes expletives, to frame their political content while drawing in laughter from the audience. A primary motive behind using discourse analysis as a methodology for this study was to identify the rhetoric that comedians use to critique the nation. Things such as background music, end credits and even voice modulations by the comedians were crucial to understanding how these associated components informed the critique. It also helped deconstruct the manner in which questions of caste are evoked in their monologues. I was particularly interested in exploring the language choices comedians make when talking about caste, how they set up the premise and how they negotiate the tricky boundaries of dealing with a controversial issue. Additionally, a discourse analysis methodology explicated the different ways in which the comedians weave their own identity into their jokes. I was keen on finding out how the comedians position themselves within their politically charged comic content and if it enhances the impact of their jokes on the audience in anyway.

YouTube as a field for digital ethnography

Launched in 2005 as a video-sharing website, YouTube has become an emblem of participatory culture. Its primary feature is the derivative videos, uploaded daily by millions all around the world. Yet, YouTube is not just a platform for broadcasting videos. It is an important site for the dissemination of information. It has also emerged as an important social networking site allowing individuals to engage in community building practices (Shifman, 2012). A principal idea behind this research was to gauge how social media in India expand the limits of the traditional public sphere by allowing a range of alternate opinions and viewpoints to thrive on it. More specifically, I wanted to understand how these platforms accommodate political opinions expressed through humour and satire. For this reason, I considered YouTube as an observable unit of social media practices in India. This opened up space for delineating how political humour contributes to the discursive practices of Indian popular culture.

I believe that YouTube presents itself as the ideal field to undertake a digital ethnography, which was yet another guiding research methodology in this study. This particular methodology calls for making use of digital data which in this case were video files that were

from performances in offline settings (Paay et al., 2013). The final communicative product available online is shaped by observable online context as well as offline context in which the performance has taken place. The comic clips online were treated not as separate phenomenon but were instead situated within the wider socio-political context (Varis, 2016). The content on YouTube is reflective of the structures and discourses that exist in the offline world. But at the same time, the content on it reproduces existing cultures and reinforces inequalities (Caliandro, 2017).

While a plethora of social media platforms do exist in India, stand-up comedy videos are primarily uploaded on YouTube and are then shared through other platforms. The multiple streaming platforms such as Amazon Prime Video and Netflix have begun to programme extensive comedy specials featuring some of the more popular comedians, but all of them require a paid subscription. Contrastingly, YouTube is free and thus relatively more accessible to a wider section of audience. Additionally, YouTube has some exclusive features such as subscription counts which indicate how many followers a particular comedian has, and viewership counts which go on to show how many times a particular clip has been viewed. These help in assessing the popularity and public reach of the comedian. However, the most interesting feature of YouTube is the comments section that allows people to engage with the comic text in their own way thereby facilitating discussion and debate not only around a particular comic routine but also a larger rhetoric.

Positionality within the research

The way that researchers perceive the world depends largely on their position within it and impacts how the research is interpreted. It allows for a more nuanced reading of the power relations inherent in any research study. A reflection on the researcher's positionality thus aids in critically engaging with what the researcher is bringing to the research. Understanding one's positionality within the research also furthers the capacity to do creative analysis and theorization (Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019). Before I move on to a detailed description of the methods used in the study and the process of data collection and analysis, I would like to briefly elaborate on my positionality within this research.

I acknowledge that my social identity, my position within society has had a significant impact on the way in which I conceptualize the problem of the cultural politics of caste discrimination in English political stand-up comedy in India. I realize that it is difficult, if not impossible, to

set aside my own caste identity in this research. As an upper-caste, middle class person, identifying as a woman, I understand that my reading of the comedy videos till now will have excluded some aspects of discrimination. My caste identity shapes much of what I see. The data, thus, required multiple, layered readings at different stages in the research process. At each step, I reflected on how my assumptions influenced my analysis and sought to correct it. At the same time, I also acknowledge that my training in Sociology, a significant part of which has been in the Sociology of caste, has equipped me to handle the issue with sensitivity and I have tried to be careful to not hurt the sentiments of any communities.

My intention in this research has never been to assume a top-down approach. I acknowledge that other, equally valid and real perspectives might also exist, and that my analysis cannot be considered exhaustive or the only truth, by any means. By exploring the connection between caste and comedy, that has hitherto been left unexamined, I have simply attempted to open up an avenue for new debates on the representation of caste in popular culture in India.

Qualitative research methods

In this research, I have utilized a range of qualitative methods that have assisted me in achieving a more rounded understanding of my research questions and have even enabled new ways of thinking about them. In what follows, I have tried to explain the detailed procedure by which I have sought to recruit political stand-up comedians for this study, collected and analysed the data.

Sampling method

I used a phased sampling method to select the comedians whose videos I wished to analyse. I took as my starting point the website indianstandups.com. This website has a near exhaustive list of all the comedians currently operating in the Indian stand-up scene. It has a comprehensive catalogue of all videos featuring a particular comedian available on YouTube. As I have mentioned before, not all stand-up comics delve in topics that can be considered political. Hence, I drew up a list of only those comedians who satirize the political. Initially, I had a rough idea about which comedians did jokes on politics and wanted to include them in the study. For instance, I had observed much of Kunal Kamra's content and knew that I had to include his stand-up performances in this study. But to proceed more methodically, I scoured

the indianstandups.com website and drew up a list of all comedians whose video titles mentioned any words that could be construed even remotely political. Some of the words that I was specifically looking out for included ‘government’, ‘politics’, ‘Modi’, ‘Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA)’, ‘demonetization’, ‘Covid-19’, ‘Pakistan’. The words were indicative of the fact that at least some bit of the performance, if not all, delved into the above-mentioned political issues. This produced a list of more than 40 comedians, and this list constituted my sampling frame of English political stand-up comedians.

Judgment sampling

All of the comedians shortlisted in the sampling frame have a minimum of six videos online. But owing to the limited scope of the study, it was not possible to survey all the videos by all of the comedians. This would bring the total number of videos to more than 250. I thus proceeded to the next stage of my sampling procedure where I used judgment sampling to finalize six comedians whose videos I would study in detail. Judgment sampling, also known as purposive sampling, is a non-probability sampling technique where the researcher selects the participants for the study based on the qualities they possess. The researcher determines what needs to be known and recruits people accordingly who they think will be able to provide them with maximum information. This means that the participants so identified should be well-engaged with the phenomenon of interest (Etikan et al., 2015).

The judgment sampling was influenced mainly by three factors. First, I decided to include only those comedians who delve in political topics continually. When a particularly important political development occurs in India, many comedians try to capture that in their gigs. Most of them, however, do not engage with politics routinely. Thus, the first criterion I had set up for screening the comedians was that their content would have to be consistently political. Next, I determined that audience reach was an important aspect of gauging the impact the comedians might have on the wider public. This would also help me in delineating how far English political stand-up comedy is effective in impacting the national public sphere. For this, I decided to only include comedians who could be considered mainstream. Operationalizing this concept meant that I looked at the comedians’ subscriber count on their respective YouTube pages. The numbers indicate popularity and therefore audience reach. I selected the six comedians who had the greatest number of subscribers. And finally, I wanted my sample to offer some breadth in terms of language. This would help delineate how language choices are

political acts in themselves. Thus, I was mindful of incorporating a near equal representation of comedians who did jokes in English, Hindi and well as Hinglish. It should be pointed out that the number of female comics in India remains abysmally low: there are only 18 in the 170-odd population of stand-up comedians. It was important for me to analyse if gender identity introduces nuances into the comic narrative and therefore, I included one female stand-up comic in my final sample who matched the criteria listed above.

Brief profile of the political stand-up comedians

It would perhaps be prudent to introduce the comedians selected for the study in order to give a better understanding of the kind of comedy they each practise as well as their preferred language of performative communication. The subscriber counts indicated below have been calculated as of May 14, 2021.

Kunal Kamra (1.94 million subscribers): Kamra is best known for his sharp critique of the government in his comedy. He has been in the news multiple times because of his content, has been banned from flying with several airline companies and also has been reprimanded by the Supreme Court in India (Mandhani, 2020). Yet, Kamra continues to take jibes at Modi, sometimes even at the prime minister's personal life. He has been known to support intellectuals and university students, similar victims of State repression. The comedian predominantly uses English in his jokes but often switches to Hindi while delivering the punchline. However, in his more recent videos, Kamra talks only in Hindi. Over time, there has been a noticeable shift in Kamra's style. His jokes have become more direct, more acerbic. Kamra has 46 videos on his YouTube channel, out of which seven can be considered as clips of stand-up comedy performances.

Munawar Faruqui (1.05 million subscribers): Faruqui is perhaps currently the most popular stand-up comedian in India with each of his videos garnering over a million views. Faruqui is particularly known to reflect on his Muslim identity in his jokes. The comedian primarily uses Hindi in his comic routine. Faruqui has 21 videos on his YouTube channel and nine of them are of his stand-up comedy performances.

Varun Grover (841K subscribers): A lyricist by profession, Grover is also a part of a group called 'Aisi Taisi Democracy' (Democracy be Damned) with two others. This group uses satirical songs and poems to criticize the government. There are six stand-up videos on

Grover's authorized YouTube channel and in almost all of them, the comedian uses a mix of Hindi and English as a means of communication. Grover's criticism is sharp and witty, and he rarely uses expletives to put forth his argument.

Vir Das (550K subscribers): Das is one of the first comedians to have entered the comedy scene in India and continues to be one of the more popular comics. He is among the few who have a global presence, often taking his comic material to audiences across the world. In a way, the current stand-up comedy scene in India owes its inception to Das who brought the Western style of performance to the Indian stage but also routinized the use of profanity in comedy. Das, like many others, has been adapting to the changes brought about by the pandemic by organizing Zoom shows. The comedian makes no pretence about his critique, sometimes serving up unpalatable truths. His comic routine, rants as he often calls it, has gradually become angrier and more direct. This has also landed him in frequent troubles with the government and its allies. Owing to his global appeal, Das performs exclusively in English only switching to Hindi when uttering cuss words. His channel has a total of 20 stand-up performance videos.

Daniel Fernandes (232K subscribers): Fernandes is known for evoking some important topics that have never been discussed in the mainstream public sphere. His most famous routine is on the issue of marital rape and the government's inaction. Fernandes primarily uses English to put his point across, although sometimes Hindi words do find their way in the punchline. The comedian has a total of 91 videos on his YouTube channel, amongst which 26 deal exclusively with stand-up comedy performances.

Neeti Palta (203K subscribers): The only female comic in the sample, Palta is one of the few who engage with mildly political issues. In the comedy circuit for a long time, Palta has been consistently performing in both English and Hindi. There is a total of nine stand-up videos on her channel, some of which are short clips of her hour-long Amazon Prime Video special.

Data collection and analysis process

The State repression of comedy is an important aspect of this research. Thus, I decided to only include videos that were performed or produced since or in 2014, the year that the Narendra Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party came to power for the first time. This was not so much a problem with comedians such as Faruqui and Kamra who have started relatively late, but some

of Das's and Palta's videos were, in fact, produced before 2014. These, unfortunately, had to be eliminated.

Another important classification was based on the nature of the videos. The pandemic has compelled the comedians to engage with a range of performance techniques. Some like Fernandes have been doing podcasts, while Kamra has been uploading short public awareness videos. For the purpose of this research, I decided to only study videos of stand-up performances in the true sense of the art form. This means that I analysed clips of performances in which the comedian stands on the stage equipped with a microphone and addresses an audience. However, Das has been conducting Zoom shows online, where the format remains similar. He talks to the audience directly with the only exception that there is no stage to speak of. Since this mode of performance was a close approximation to the stand-up performance set-up, I decided to include all such videos in my analysis.

In total, I analysed 77 videos cumulatively over a period of one month. I decided to undertake the data collection and data analysis stages concurrently, and to do this efficiently, I adopted a thematic analysis approach. Thematic analysis is a method for systematically identifying and organizing themes across a data set. It is a way of identifying the common way a topic features across that data set (Braun & Clarke, 2012). One of the benefits of thematic analysis is its flexibility as a research tool that provides a rich and detailed account of the data. This method of analysis is dependent on codes which are considered the building blocks for the themes (Clarke & Braun, 2016). The codes can either emerge from the theory or literature review, a process known as deductive coding or it can emerge from the data itself, also known as inductive coding (Braun & Clarke, 2012). To proceed with the data collection, I first began by designing a codebook.

The codebook and its definitions

I devised a codebook that I consulted, and kept coming back to, at each step in my data collection and analysis process. This codebook corresponded to specific research questions in the study. Thus, in a way, I followed a deductive coding procedure whereby the codes emerged from the theory and literature review. My emphasis was on how the codes relate to the theoretical understanding of the issue at hand (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I designed the codebook as a questionnaire for myself that I kept filling out throughout the data collection process. For each video that I analysed, I was simultaneously looking for answers to the following questions:

a. What are the issues that a comedian is talking about?

This question stemmed from my interest in learning about how comedians construct the idea of India through humour. By focusing on the specific issues that were being raised, I aimed to arrive at an understanding of how the idea of India is being critiqued by the comedians. I listed each of the issues that a comedian evoked, paying special attention to how the comedian is constructing the narrative. Thus, instead of reporting that the comedian has mentioned Modi, I tried to capture how exactly they talk about the prime minister and what exactly they say.

b. Are they talking about caste?

I observed if at any point, the comedians were talking about caste in the videos. In order to do this, I had a pre-determined list of codes. This included caste-based reservation, names of caste groupings, mention of caste-related violence, last names and caste professions.

c. How are they talking about caste?

I made notes about the exact terms that were used when talking about caste and recorded the joke in detail. I especially included the premise so as to not lose sight of the context of the utterance. This enabled me to understand how exactly questions of caste find representation in comic discourse in India.

d. Are they reflecting on their own identity?

This question spoke directly to my research objective of finding out how comedians include their own identity in their routines. I noted down all the ways in which the self-identity of the comedian was reflected in their discourse.

e. Are they talking about their caste identity?

The comedian’s reflection on their own caste identity was important to my analysis. I was therefore particularly on the lookout for any mentions of their own caste identity and also how they are introducing it in their sets.

f. Are the comedians using cuss words?

The strategic use of language conveys a lot about how the comedians choose to put forth their opinions. Thus, I made a note each time a comedian used expletives and recorded them along with the premise.

The coding process and the subsequent thematic arrangement were extremely cultural-context specific. I could easily understand the comic references because I had some knowledge about the domestic issues that were being spoken about. I realized that to some extent, I take the humorous context for granted. The coding process was thus an endeavour in etching out the comic premise for a non-specialist audience, those who might not be aware of the specificities of minor political developments in India.

Data recording

I maintained a spreadsheet that had columns devoted to each of these six questions. Additionally, it had columns for the name of the video, the date of its publication, the language it was in and its duration. As I progressed through the videos, I kept recording my observations in it. For some questions such as 'are they talking about caste?', it was usually a simple yes or no entry. But for some others such as 'what are the issues that a comedian is talking about?', the spreadsheet entries were more detailed and contextual. For the jokes that were needed to be recorded in detail, I created a separate word document. The sentences in Hindi were translated, and the transcription was an ongoing process. I included the timestamp along with the jokes for ease of reference.

Apart from these, I maintained another word document that I used as a memo to note down my observations during the data collection process. In here, I drew possible connections between the data and the theoretical concepts. These notes, scribbles and, at times, rants revealed some latent themes within the data and prompted me to think about the research questions in new ways. I decided to pay attention to not just what was being said but also the actions, poses of the comics. I thus made elaborate notes about the comedians' use of pauses, voice modulation, gaze. Also, I tried to determine how the background music, stage backdrop could possibly play into the construction of the broader narrative. The audience generated laughter was important to understanding how the audience is engaging with the jokes. I thus made notes about the audience reception as well. I recorded all of these details in the memo word document. True to a thematic analysis approach, the findings were subsequently arranged into broad themes which then informed my arguments in the discussion section of this research.

Chapter 6: Resistance through humour in English political stand-up comedy in India

The idea of the nation and its critique in the comedians' discourse

The idea of India features prominently in the discourse of all the six comedians. However, each of them has their own way of envisioning the nation and thereby of critiquing it through humour. For instance, Kunal Kamra usually introduces a host of political topics over the course of any video clip. Each of these issues then act as tools that help him grasp the idea of India. In the video, 'Patriotism & the Government' (2017), Kamra proclaims that he loves India because it provides him with readymade comic content, without having to write it. "In this country, for comedy, you don't have to go to the club". The many instances of political capering make his job as a comedian easier. In another video, Kamra jokes that Western imports such as Uber, McDonald's and KFC are too good for India. The country has a unique way of disrupting these supposedly nice things. He is alluding to the infrastructural problems that do not allow these Western establishments to function to their capacity in the country.

The idea of patriotism and the overemphasis on nationalist sentiments that has emerged in the last few years, is a recurrent theme in many of Kamra's videos. In one of his clips, he begins by capturing the animosity that Indians are forced to feel towards China and Pakistan. The comedian, then, understands the nation through its opposition with its neighbouring countries. Old men or 'uncles' as he chooses to call them, make routine appearances in many of Kamra's sets. These men with staunch political views are the pallbearers of the patriotism that the nation peddles to its citizens. Through these men, Kamra presents the dominant ideology which he then critiques through humour. He assumes the role of the old men but swiftly transitions back to his comic self to provide the oppositional view. Through voice modulations and gestures, Kamra makes sure to convey that he defies the ideology the fictive old men stand for. The comedian argues that the patriotic fervour of the current government is nothing but a ploy to evade culpability. "This is just propaganda", he says, in 'Patriotism & the Government', an excuse to turn attention away from the more important things and even to disguise the government's incompetence. The unquestioning acceptance of everything that the government tells them has made this rhetoric of patriotism so popular among the Indian populace.

The clips produced over the years display a gradual transformation in Kamra's style of comic delivery. The recent clips are much more pointed in their attack. Most of the humour and the criticism in these clips are directed at the prime minister. Apart from Narendra Modi's policies,

his marital life and educational qualifications also feature regularly in Kamra's comedy. In some videos such as 'Kunal Kamra Standup comedy 2020 part 1', Kamra constructs the idea of the nation as that which revolves entirely around the image of Modi.

Religion, particularly the communal strife between Hindus and Muslims, is yet another important way in which Kamra understands India. The fictive uncles are inherently anti-Muslim. When Kamra has an imaginary conversation with an old man he is seated next to on a plane, in the video, 'Kunal Kamra | Stand-up Comedy Part 1 2018', the comedian initiates small talk by referencing the weather and saying, "The heat has increased, hasn't it?" To which the old man replies by saying, "Yes, so have the Muslims". This one sentence captures the strong anti-Muslim sentiment that pervades much of the public discourse in India currently. Issues like interfaith conversion and the obvious difficulty of having to rationalize with people who think critiquing Modi means critiquing religion are some of the other important themes in Kamra's comedy.

Religion, in fact, constitutes a principal theme in Vir Das's humorous political commentary. In the video, 'Vir Das on Hindusim, Christianity, Islam and the Avengers' (2019), Das says, "The world will be a better place when all the religions learn to chill out and calm the fuck out." The emphasis is not one particular religion alone, but all prominent world religions. He advises that Christianity and Islam combine to create a new place for worship, the "chosque". This new religion could also celebrate Halaloween where Muslims and Christians could get together to scare the people who scare them. He points to himself and says, "you know, Hindus". His jokes are interspersed with repeated references to the Vatican, the Kumbh Mela (the Hindu festival celebrating the holy dip in the Ganges). Even in videos such as 'Weird Animals- Pt. 2' that are decidedly non-political, Das manages to bring in at least some reference to religion by mentioning how the presence of a dove signals the presence of Jesus. The abundant use of expletives illustrate that the comedian is never shy in his approach while talking about religion. In one video, he says, '"Don't eat beef' is our *Despacito*, we always come back to that shit in a circle".

The audience in Das's live comedy shows usually comprises a mix of Indian and global audience. His political takes thus are not limited to India alone. He makes a lot of references to world politics, especially American politics. Racism in the United States, Hitler jokes, the royal family make routine appearances in his sets. Even in the videos produced in the middle of the pandemic where a live global audience was hard to achieve, Das often turned to the camera

and explained the premise of any jokes that were culturally specific to India, to the people watching from outside the country. In many ways, the idea of the nation in Das's comic discourse is envisioned in opposition to the West. The negative aspects of the country are often highlighted to sarcastically assert how India fares better than Western nations. In the clip, 'Who has Freedom of Speech? #TenonTen' (2021), Das jokes, "In the West, intermittent fasting is a choice, in India it's just life. It is just poverty with an app".

Indian politics and current affairs, however, do feature routinely in Das's comic sets. Similar to Kamra, Das also feels that the government uses various tactics to divert attention from its incapacities. The Bollywood drug racket, last year, where various celebrities were accused of doing drugs, took up all of the screen time across several news media channels for days. Das says this was a ploy to turn people's attention away from the economy, to distract them from the burdens of living an overburdened life in the midst of a pandemic. The government gets away with all its misdoings because it has coerced its people into submission, Das argues. He talks pointedly about government complicity in the Covid-19 crisis sweeping across India. This is one thing of note in Das's style of comedy. He is very direct in his criticism. He uses names and not euphemism to talk about prominent political figures. Das usually ends his videos with a strong message that prompts the audience to think. His jokes are not always funny, the more recent ones especially are morbid. They are designed to make people uncomfortable, to question the dominant narrative so often told to them. The construction of the idea of India in Das's comedy is thus a participatory process. He critiques the dominant ideology but also invites his audience to critique it along with him.

Munawar Faruqui has a different approach in his political stand-up comedy. His commentary is not aggressive, it is not direct. His video clips do not deal with political issues consistently, but he puts in a political comment in places where one least expects it. In the video, 'Nawab, Nehru and Gujarat 2002' (2020), he begins by talking about Junagadh, his home state in Gujarat, and the idiosyncrasies of the people there but smoothly segues into the issue of Kashmir and *azaadi* (freedom). Like the other comedians, he too focuses on the many discrepancies in the narrative pushed by the government. In the video, 'Politics in India, Instagram and Sign boards' (2020), he says, "Newspapers are wrapped around sanitary napkins in India because that is what newspapers do. They hide reality". Faruqui makes repeated references to the fact that the government has coerced most of the democratic institutions in the country into submission. He alludes to the fact that the media in India peddles lies because the news channels have sold themselves to the government's agenda. Even the electoral process

is ingenuine because the vote will go to the Bharatiya Janata Party, irrespective of which button one presses. He goes on to say that the current government is "*bikao*" [sold] to the big corporations.

The primary means through which Faruqui envisions India, however, is through his own religious identity as a Muslim. This is a recurrent theme in almost all of his performances available for viewing on YouTube. References to triple *talaq*, overpopulation in Muslim families, polygamy within the religion are some of the issues he often jokes about. Faruqui also talks extensively about Hindu religious symbols and draws from Hindu cultural references. Talking about the Gujarat riots in 2002 and the curfew that ensued, he says that people were only allowed to leave their houses in the morning to get milk and bread. He jokes, "See the irony, Muslim people surviving on cow's milk". The idea he often conveys through his jokes is that the Hindu-Muslim divisiveness is a political ploy by the government to keep the populace divided. Talking from experience, he says that the two religious communities live in relative harmony except the fact that they both fear the police, the Establishment. Faruqui's political commentary is very personal, very local. The criticism he levels against the dominant ideology stems from his personal experiences in navigating a socio-political atmosphere rife with religious hostility. The idea of the nation he constructs in his comic discourse is, therefore, both personal and political.

In Neeti Palta's comic routine, politics is often blended with issues pertaining to identifying as a woman in India. Palta, then, sees the nation through her gender identity. In the video titled, '#Ladiesfirst shaadi.com' (2017), she jokes, "In my country, a woman making the first move on a guy is like Donald Trump speaking a complete sentence that makes sense". In another video, 'Buying condoms for brother' (2019), Palta jokes, "In this country, a woman going and asking for a condom is like an RSS [Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh] dude asking for a beef burger". Both times, she indicates the improbability of the occurrences. She points to the uneven societal standards of identifying as a woman in India. She quips, "Why does a woman need to have a child in order to be complete, whereas all a man has to do is wear Raymond's?" referring to the clothing brand's tagline that says a man is complete when wearing Raymond's. The comic says that Indian men do not know how to treat a woman with respect. She draws attention to catcalling on the streets which is a pervasive problem throughout the country. She recalls that owing to the fact that she had short hair for much of her growing up years, she was not catcalled on the streets. But in an effort to provide a light-hearted take on such a serious issue, she ends up trivializing it, and even normalizing it. She portrays the issue of men

harassing women in public places as something to be yearned, to be desired. This is a deeply problematic take in itself.

References to American politics, to the Indian prime minister's many policies feature prominently in Palta's comedy. Talking about the picture in the newspapers that showed Modi touching his mother's feet as a sign of respect after his first electoral victory in 2014, Palta says, "It was *pyaar* [love] but also PR". She also alludes to his Make in India campaign. But her overall approach is quite guarded. Religion, superstitions make appearances in some of her jokes but only fleetingly. She rarely uses humour to arrive at a political commentary. Politics is used mostly as a premise to set up the jokes. For instance, in the video, 'Handas on Holidays' (2019), she says that once when she saw kids running about everywhere in an airport, she was reminded of Sanjay Gandhi's forced sterilization policy. During the Emergency, in the period between 1975-77, Sanjay Gandhi, the son of the then prime minister, Indira Gandhi, had forcefully sterilized a large section of the population, especially Muslims, in a bid to control the population. Palta stops at that without going into any more details or without developing the political premise any further. The rhetoric that Palta weaves is thus partly personal but mainly safe. She treats political issues as a means to deliver a seemingly innocuous punchline and not as an end in themselves.

Daniel Fernandes's comic routine, on the other hand, realizes the potential of comedy to deliver a strong message. In his videos, Fernandes touches on a host of political issues ranging from water shortage in India, through terrorism, student suicides and even the recent farmers' protest. A commonality throughout it all is that Fernandes's videos end with impactful messages. He realizes that the comedy scene in India has evolved from one that relied only on geographical attributes of the audience to evoke laughter to a sphere that makes difficult conversations like that on mental health possible. Fernandes usually chooses a recent political or social development and constructs his set around that particular topic. The punchlines are sometimes funny, sometimes macabre but almost always uncomfortable. In a video titled, 'Her husband made her a prostitute' (2014), about the evils of driving under influence, he ends by saying, "Let cancer kill you. Not drunk driving".

The nation, in Fernandes's comedy, is primarily imagined in terms of its negative attributes. Talking about the Clean India campaign or the Swachh Bharat Mission, Fernandes says, "In case you didn't know, we live in a very dirty country". He refers to the false promise of good days or *achchhe din* that the prime minister made. In the video titled, 'Rape threats' (2017),

Fernandes says, “One man can sell a completely ridiculous idea to this country. Only one man can make the impossible possible” as an indirect reference to Modi’s false promise. But Fernandes’s criticism is not limited to Modi or the government alone. His commentary also routinely attacks the idea of masculinity in India that includes topics like sexual aggressiveness, male privilege, male preference at birth and even dowry. He often reflects on his own identity as a male to etch out his jokes. Additionally, Fernandes’s jokes on religion bring his identity as a Christian to the fore.

In many of Fernandes’s performances, an imaginary friend called Pravin Tambe makes an appearance. Similar to Kamra’s old uncles, Tambe epitomizes the irrational, fanatic, pro-government citizen. Through an imaginary conversation with this friend, replete with voice modulations, Fernandes situates his progressive agenda in sharp contrast to the dominant beliefs of Tambe. Much of Fernandes’s comedy relies on world politics. He talks about politics in the US, racism and gun violence in the country, the terrorist attack in France over the Charlie Hebdo controversy and even the Boko Haram in Africa. In fact, most of the laughter is dependent on a proper understanding of world politics. By fusing domestic politics with a global one, Fernandes positions his idea of India in dialogue with global political references. The jokes that stem then are a comparison of a situation in India with developments in any other part of the world. In the video, ‘US Presidential election’ (2016), Fernandes says, “Narendra Modi is just Donald Trump with work experience”. He further goes on to say, “America is just a country filled with racists, bigots and homophobes. Just like India. Now you are one of us.” His critique of the dominant understanding of the nation thus intersects considerably with issues in world politics.

Modi, however, is a central means by which Varun Grover understands India. A lot of his criticism is directed right at the prime minister. Modi’s failed promise to provide 15 lakh rupees to people once elected, his unique ability to speak nonsense at international forums are some of the ways in which Grover criticizes him. In the video, ‘2AB ki Gajab Kahaani [The Strange Tale of 2AB]’ (2019), he says, “I don’t want to say just anything. I am not the PM yet.” At the same time, the comedian also points to the lack of infrastructural development in India. In the same video he says, “Since the time Yogi Adityanath has assumed the role of chief minister in Uttar Pradesh, there has either been encounter killing or oxygen killing in UP”. Adityanath is infamous for conducting routine extra-judicial encounter killings in his state. Grover couples that with the incident where in the same state, there was shortage of oxygen supply in a children’s hospital that killed many, including new-born babies.

The outrage regarding banal things is an important motif in much of Grover's comedy. The video, 'How Indians Outrage' (2018), opens with the sentence that the Indian human body is made up of six elements: the sixth one being outrage. A reason behind this he attributes to the fact that since an early age, Indians are taught to practise conformism, that is to not question things. Grover's humorous political commentary is very domestic in its approach. He reflects on Indian politics entirely in his sets without alluding to global cultural references. This is leveraged by his use of Hindi as a communicative medium.

Humour and resistance in the comedians' discourse

The aspect of resistance emerges strongly in the comic discourse of all six comedians. By drawing focus to a multiplicity of issues, the comedians use humour to provide a counternarrative. This oppositional narrative is at times uncomfortable but nevertheless, it makes possible new ways of thinking about the dominant ideas in the public discourse. This, in turn, expands the limits of the public sphere in India by incorporating divergent opinions and dissenting views. Ever since the Modi government came to power in 2014, the public sphere in India is crowded with images and rhetoric that convey Modi's virtuousness. His image as a *fakir* (A religious ascetic who lives solely on alms) is highlighted to assert that he is happy living with the bare minimum. Reports however suggest that the prime minister spends considerably on his attire and lifestyle choices (Sikander, 2019). It is precisely in this discrepancy between the official narrative and the reality that some of the comedians situate their comic discourse. For Kamra, resisting the popular image of Modi entails bringing into focus the fact that he possibly lied about his educational credentials. Kamra's attacks are very personal. He draws attention to the fact that the prime minister reportedly left his wife. He says that Hindu men are angry at Muslim men because they get to divorce their wives just by uttering the word *talaq* thrice. Kamra says that is something that Hindu men cannot afford; they need to become the prime minister in order to pull off such a stunt. By drawing attention to the conflicts in Modi's personal life, Kamra resists the idea of the prime minister as a demi-god.

Modi's public speaking skills were one of the primary ways in which he positioned himself in contrast to the former prime minister, Manmohan Singh. By reiterating that Singh was largely silent, Modi carefully arranged his election rhetoric to convey that he would be an efficient orator. In fact, much of Modi's popularity stems from his public speaking skills. Das and Grover resist this popularity by making Modi's public speaking skills a topic of humour. Das

says that the prime minister does not do press conferences because he has no indoor voice. He mimics Modi to underscore how his speeches rely heavily on theatrics. Grover, on the other hand, draws attention to the fact that Modi does not always speak coherently in his speeches. By critiquing Modi directly, the comedians defy the popular beliefs associated with him that are so frequently marketed to the people.

The patriotic fervour of the current dispensation is yet another means through which the comedians resist the dominant narrative. They are able to see through the fact that patriotism is one way to keep people's attention diverted from the real issues plaguing their everyday lives. The video, 'Patriotism & the Government', by Kamra, ends with the following sentences appearing on a black screen: "Ever wondered why you're patriotic? Because that's what they want". The resistance is not to the idea of patriotism *per se*, but to the fact that the government is actively using that as a shield to hide its incapacities. The comedians point to the fact that there is no other way of being in the country. This is a critical commentary on the state of affairs in India whereby people not willing to conform to the idea of patriotism propagated by the State are automatically considered anti-national. During episodes of lynching, Muslims are forced to chant "*Jai Shri Ram* [Hail Lord Ram]", a decidedly Hindu religious-cultural symbol (Trivedi, 2020). The comedians realize that the media in India regurgitate the dominant ideas unquestioningly. Fernandes, in the video, 'Sushant Singh Rajput' (2020), says that the Indian news channels are pretending to be stupid because they believe that their audience is stupid. In the absence of a free press, the comedians' discourse provides the much-needed resistance to the aggressive advances of the State. It presents alternative ways of being and thinking, options that are seldom available to the public otherwise.

The comedians question the very idea of India as a perfect nation. Fake news and propaganda initiated by the government have created an idea of India that is perfect in every sense but especially in contrast to Pakistan. This is repeatedly asserted by political leaders. The comedians resist this idea by pointing out the various problems that are still a part of Indian social life. Fernandes highlights the many negative attributes of the country in his comic text, alluding specifically to infrastructural problems still plaguing the country. Das, in the video, 'Jokes for the dead' (2021), talks about how the Indian government has been denying Covid-19 deaths outright in a bid to protect its image. In the comedians' sets, the illusion of the perfect nation is therefore just that: an illusion that needs to be dismantled. Their imagination of India sees the country for what it is, including its many flaws and shortcomings but also its positives.

The comedians convey their resistance to patriarchy by critiquing the idea of Indian masculinity. For Palta, that is a central theme in her comedy, but some of the male comics such as Fernandes also reflect on the privilege that their gender identity awards them in order to point out some of the broader practices of discrimination that are existent in the country. Grover, in 'Padmaavat & the Parrot' (2018), says that typical Indian men "do not know how to differentiate between love and oppression". Similarly, one of the chief ways in which comedians critique the dominant narrative of national solidarity is through their many jokes on religion. All six comedians refer to religion at some point in their sets. For some such as Das and Faruqui, it is an important motif, a tool through which they conceive India, whereas for others such as Fernandes and Palta, issues pertaining to religion form the premise for some of their jokes. But most of them stress on the fact that religion has largely been weaponized by the current government. In 'Syria Part 1' (2015), Fernandes says, "Congress may come back to power, which sucks, but at least one won't die for having consumed beef". It is in punchlines such as this that the comedians' role in speaking truth to power becomes all the more apparent. A conversation on religion will seldom be permitted in the popular public discourse, let alone one that openly calls out Hindu religious fanatics for killing people on the suspicion of having consumed beef. Religion, in fact, is a very sensitive topic in India. But the fact that comedians have been critiquing religious cultural symbols with such aplomb goes to prove that humour plays an essential role in resisting the dominant cultural values.

The comedians' rhetoric is also frequently informed by certain associated theatrics. For instance, Kamra, Faruqui and Grover's videos often make use of background music in the beginning or towards the end, the lyrics of which speak directly to the issue being discussed in that particular comic set. In the video, 'Kunal Kamra | Stand-up comedy 2019', Kamra appears on the stage wearing a t-shirt that reads, "*Wah* Modi*ji Wah*", (Wow Modi*ji* Wow — a sarcastic attack at Modi). This choice of attire makes obvious his critique of the prime minister. The same video ends with the message: "Yes, this video is one-sided. But have you ever watched the 9pm news?" making a direct reference to the biased coverage of primetime news debates. The clip 'Religion vs. Comedy #TenonTen' (2021) by Das, begins with a statement by the Delhi High Court displayed across the screen that says that stand-up comedy uses satire to bring attention to the ills of society. It's essential to the principles of democracy. Talking about religion in the same video, Das says, "Do you know how sad it is that we have to hide in a forest to have this conversation"? The opening message amplifies the obvious difficulty of having a discussion on religion in public in India even though satire is necessary. Fernandes's

video clip, ‘Why I hate Fawad Khan’ (2016), begins with the words “Please stand up for the…. Just kidding, sit down” written on the screen. This is a discernible reference to the obsession with the national anthem, a crucial aspect of the jingoistic fervour in India. These accessories are not available, however, to the live audience. These theatrics are exclusively designed for the YouTube audience. Thus, the streaming network’s role as a facilitator for resisting the dominant narrative becomes all the more apparent when one considers how it makes possible the use of text and music to inform and reinforce the critique of dominant beliefs.

Notably, the resistance in the comic discourse is dependent considerably on its reception. In other words, the comedians are only successful in delivering alternate opinions because the jokes are met with laughter from the audience. This laughter signifies that the idea has been received positively. The laughter in itself thus is an act of transgression, an act of agreement. In many ways then, resistance through humour is a dialogic process where the comedians are resisting the dominant values through speech and theatrics and their audience is resisting it non-verbally, just by the innocuous act of laughter.

The language of resistance

As a communicative strategy, the precise choice of language plays a crucial role in deciding how the message is delivered to the audience. Language, here, includes the finer nuances of how the comedian is arranging their rhetoric but also the way in which they are performing it. In some of his older videos, Kamra practised a considerable amount of linguistic code-switching between English and Hindi. He would set up the joke using English but would typically change to Hindi when delivering the punchline. In these videos, Kamra appears to be more guarded in his approach. However, in his most recent videos there is a discernible shift in Kamra’s language choices. With his content becoming more of a direct attack on Modi, the videos show Kamra talking mostly in Hindi. Now, Hindi words, cultural references and even expletives have become the primary means through which Kamra critiques the prime minister. This language choice also portrays a change in Kamra’s political stance. His commentary is now more crude, more brazen. Interestingly, when mimicking the old uncle, Kamra introduces an inflection to his language that is complemented by a modulation of his voice. The uncle’s slower speaking skills are positioned in contradistinction to Kamra’s own speech that is at once fast and coherent. Similarly, whenever he is emoting Pravin Tambe, Fernandes speaks mostly in Marathi, a regional language. This goes on to illustrate that Tambe perhaps has not received

formal education in English. Resultantly, he has not been able to inculcate a liberal mindset. In contrast, Fernandes speaks only in English and thus stands for the progressive outlook that is so often associated with English education. Fernandes's language choices then reiterate the arbitrary values so often attached to English education.

Linguistic code-switching is also apparent in Palta and Faruqui's content. Palta consistently uses English in her jokes, switching to Hindi only sporadically. But in Faruqui's videos, there is predominant use of Hindi, even though he uses some English words. After his rise to popularity recently, owing to the controversy, there are comments below his YouTube videos with requests for subtitles from the non-Hindi speaking population within India and also international audience, to better understand his comic references. The use of Hindi can thus be seen to be restricting his viewership. Grover's comedy is similarly reliant on Hindi as a tool for communication, even though he uses English words occasionally. Additionally, Grover's jokes are punctuated with regional inflections that bring out the earthy appeal of his comedy. In many ways, these comedians are critiquing ideas that are domestic in nature. They are talking about issues that are culturally and contextually specific to the Hindi-speaking population in India. The use of Hindi, then, is an act of boundary maintenance that is in accordance with the composition of the audience who choose to attend their shows or watch them on YouTube. They realize that Hindi will be the most effective communicative strategy in this situation. The sudden use of sentences such as "*sasur, kaa karenge*?" by Grover in punchlines is a deliberate choice that he knows will resonate immediately with his audience and also garner significant positive response.

Das's commentary, on the other hand, makes use of English as the only linguistic device. His content is consumed by people from all over the globe. Even in terms of content, Das's comedy has a very international approach in which a lot of comic references are drawn from world politics and American popular cultural references. For Das, then, the use of English is an act of boundary levelling where the language serves as the common ground for expressing angst, conveying resistance for a wide section of people from all around the world. The only exception to this is when the comedian uses expletives in his content. The cuss words, abuses that are sometimes in Hindi are usually met with a lot of laughter from the audience, especially when the comedian makes sexual references in Hindi. Das also emotes the prime minister quite a bit and when doing it, usually takes on a deliberately poor accent to signify Modi's poor English-speaking skills. This could just be an act to achieve authenticity, but it can also be construed as

a mockery of the fact that the prime minister cannot speak English well, thereby once more emphasizing the cultural value so often attached to communication in English.

Most of the comedians exercise an audacious use of language when conveying resistance in their comic sets. Some such as Das even use profanity to talk about topics as sensitive as religion. This free mode of expression, where everything is fair game, is unprecedented in the Indian public discourse. To a great extent then, it is the platform of YouTube with its fairly relaxed censorship rules that has facilitated this form of unbridled speech. These radical ideas would have been limited to the comedy clubs if YouTube had not brought them out into the open to be consumed by a wider section of the populace. The streaming website thus functions as a stimulant to the idea of resistance that so often finds expression in the comedic discourse. This is leveraged by the fact that no traditional media platform would be willing to accommodate these ideas and rhetoric. By accommodating oppositional standpoints, YouTube has also been impacting the traditional public sphere, functioning to make it more inclusive and tolerant of divergent thoughts.

Negotiating the culture of unlaughter

A common theme that emerged in the final sample of the comedians was that most of them have had some sort of run-ins with the government and the police because of the volatile nature of their comedy. Consequently, the culture of offence-taking and the resultant act of trolling in online spaces collectively form an important motif in the comic text of all six comedians. Most of them have multiple video clips devoted to this issue where they can be witnessed negotiating the broader culture of unlaughter through humour. Some such as Kamra merely mention the fact that people are largely intolerant of any narrative that criticizes the government, but some others such as Grover completely flip the serious issue to evoke laughter. Two of Grover's videos, 'Padmaavat & the Parrot' and 'How Indians Outrage' illustrate his stance on the issue. The first video elaborates on the outrage that ensued in 2018 around the release of the movie *Padmaavat* (the movie was based on a fictive novel of the same name that showed the tension between a female Hindu Rajput queen, Padmaavati, and a despotic Muslim ruler, Alauddin Khilji). In the second video, Grover goes into the details of how online trolls threatened him for the first video and the flak he received. Trolls apparently had told him to send his sister to Khilji, the antagonist in the movie. An obviously gendered attack, Grover responds by pointing out the impossibility of this suggestion because first, he does not have a sister and second,

sending his sister to Khilji would entail time travelling because Khilji is a historical character from at least 700 years ago. He turns the threats he received, albeit a serious issue, into a source of mirth. Grover further goes on to point to the seeming absurdity of this phenomenon by making fun of the fact that comedians such as Kamra are the online troll army's favourite target. The comedian also makes interesting use of background score when dealing with issues of outrage. 'How Indians Outrage' ends with an unintentionally funny audio news clip about a protestor who climbed a water tank in order to condemn the release of *Padmaavat*.

For Faruqui, the State-sponsored culture of repression has had consequences significantly greater than just death threats. But Faruqui continues to mock the practices of the government even after his release from prison. He casually wonders, "Is there someone from BJP here?" once, resulting in extensive laughter from the audience. He also chooses to end a video with the following message: "If you find this funny, these were just jokes. If you find it offensive, it is the truth". In spite of his brave front, traces of self-censorship can be witnessed in his videos published after February 2021. For instance, in the video, 'Ghost story' (2021), the name of the school he is talking about is censored out. The incident with Faruqui has also impacted how other comedians negotiate unlaughter in their comedy. Palta readily agrees to give up talking about anything that might be considered even remotely political in the video appropriately titled, 'Intolerance' (2021). She says, "As a new year resolution I am giving up sugar and giving an opinion. I mean if you eat sugar, you will still be alive". Palta at once points to the difficulty of freely expressing one's opinion in the country and satirizes it. This problem is only complicated by the fact that she identifies as a female comic, a comparatively easy target for trolls and hatemongers because in her words, "Indian men cannot handle women with confidence". She says that from now on, she will only be doing jokes about her own family. If they put her in jail, they are only the ones who would have to bail her out. Palta's set points to the fact that right-wing extremism and their disproportionate sense of what constitutes hurt are ruining the sphere of stand-up comedy in the country. By saying that she will not dabble in political topics any further, she ends up commenting on the cancel culture that is inherently a political issue.

Fernandes, like Palta, expresses his frustration with the culture of repression by saying, "It's hard being a liberal in this country". He, in fact, devises a new name for what he calls a disease spreading across the country: offensivitis. But Fernandes's mechanism of coping with offensivitis is by taking direct potshots at the trolls themselves. In various videos, he is seen directly addressing people who take offence easily. In 'US Presidential Election', after

comparing Trump to Modi, he says, “BJP fans, calm down. That was a compliment”. The very fact that he has to explain his jokes to avoid being misunderstood by a section of the population, indicates that he is trying to negotiate the culture of unlaughter. In another video, ‘Je Ne Suis Pas Charlie Hebdo’ (2015), he says, “Some of the bad people have access to guns, some of the bad people have access to the Internet” referring to the phenomenon of online trolling on the Internet. In his comic sets, he mentions that comedians are an easy target. “If comedians held guns instead of microphones, no one will get offended”, he says in ‘Freedom to Offend’ (2015).

Directly attacking trolls is a means adopted by Das as well. In ‘Who has Freedom of speech? #tenonten’, he begins by saying, “I apologize, I know it’s going to make some people angry, it’s going to make fans of the prime minister angry because most of them cannot spell GDP”. But Das goes a step further. He calls out the problematic culture of trolling and offence-taking in sharp, acerbic prose. In ‘#TenonTen Extra questions- Freedom of speech’ (2021), what looks like the tail end of a stand-up show, Das fields questions from the audience. To a question about hurting sentiments, Das replies, “Fuck your sentiments, your sentiments are yours to deal with”. Hurt sentiments, he is of the opinion, is again a tactic employed by the government to keep the population busy. It cannot fix any of the real problems and thus resorts to “fixing” comedians, thereby communicating that comedians are an easy target. Instead of trying to put a funny spin on the issue, Das elaborates in detail on the various dimensions of online threats. The video, “How to Threaten a Comedian’ (2020), deals exclusively with this issue. In it, Das discusses in explicit detail the sexual nature of the threats usually made to comedians. He evokes body imagery that the trolls often make use of. Interestingly, these attacks are mostly directed at the comedians’ close relatives — female ones specifically. This once again brings out the gendered aspect of online intimidation.

In spite of the acute nature of the problem afflicting political stand-up comedy in India, most of the comedians still take to the stage to offer critique to the State-engineered cultural values. Some of these comedians have multiple police complaints against them, religious fanatic groups are flooding them with hate messages; their immediate families are being verbally attacked. Yet they appear undeterred in their resolve to offer resistance through humour. However, the more frequent use of disclaimers at the beginning of the videos saying that the content is not to be taken seriously, comedians apologizing before or after commenting on a political issue, go on to show that the repressive tactics of the State have been able to make some impact, however minimal, in checking absolute free speech in this performative genre. Nevertheless, the comedians are constantly testing the limits of free speech, setting new

boundaries in the process, and constantly resisting the political clout of the State through humour. Furthermore, the prospect of laughter is a potent means of counteracting the culture of unlaughter. Collective laughter at a particular comic moment signifies the tacit agreement that everyone taking part in it agrees with the ideas offered. The target of the government then is not the comedians but the many people who agree with them. "They are coming for your throats", Das says in a clip. The collective expression of mirth thus opposes unlaughter, both in terms of audible laughter and also in the form of comments below the videos on YouTube that convey agreement and praise for the comedian.

Relief through the comic discourse

The collective laughter that ensues after a joke also has a social aspect, that of relief. The comic moment, in many ways, serves as an avenue for venting. This process could be personal wherein comedy can provide the space for a viewer to address a personal issue through laughter or it could also be collective venting where people find a common ground to release their pent-up energy through shared laughter. In a country where the authorities hardly encourage questions from the people, political comedy inadvertently becomes the channel which addresses grievances and creates a safe space to talk about them. The laughter of agreement functions then as a form of relief of the suppressed emotions, it serves as a brief moment of escape from the stifling atmosphere of the dominant norms. The aspect of relief is especially prominent in Das's comic discourse. His recent video, 'Jokes for the Dead', he dedicates to the families of those who lost someone in the Covid-19 pandemic. He talks about government complicity in the huge number of deaths and points to the irreconcilability of having lost a loved one. He says, "People have died and we must acknowledge their deaths because our government will not". This sentence alone creates a moment of solidarity among all those watching the show. The government has been denying death outright, blocking communication channels through which people have been asking for help. At a time when the country has entered a phase of mass grieving and the government has proved completely incapable of offering solace to its people, Das appears to be creating a space for collectively venting emotions and frustrations that will not be addressed otherwise. The comic set thus provides relief, however nominal, from the morbidity of death that has become a dominant aspect of Indian social life in the pandemic. Relief is expressed through other channels as well. Das's style of comedy has been evolving into angrier rants with each passing video. His pointed

speech demonstrates that Das arranges his rhetoric in order to provide himself with a space that allows him to vent out his frustrations. Relief, then, is foremost the comedian's prerogative.

The aspect of relief can also be witnessed in Fernandes's political comedy. In 'Living with Anxiety Disorder' (2019), Fernandes evokes the important issue of addressing mental health concerns. He talks about how it is important to talk about this as one would talk about any other physical problem. He reflects on his own struggles with mental health quite a bit while drawing out his commentary. In India, the emphasis on seeking help for mental health issues still remains low. In spite of increased awareness, people continue to be shamed for acknowledging that they need help. In such a situation, Fernandes's set comes as a source of relief that conveys to people that it is okay to ask for help regarding mental health. The relief does not have to do with the laughter so much but instead with the fact that Fernandes has made such a difficult discussion possible.

The ability of political stand-up comedy to turn a sordid issue into a matter of jest amply demonstrates its function as a form of relief. In Faruqui's sets, the repeated reference to his Muslim identity, only to arrive at a self-deprecatory punchline, creates a discernibly nervous laughter. To the audience still grappling with the appropriateness of laughing at religion, Faruqui creates a space which conveys that it is momentarily okay to treat religion lightly. His text draws attention to the frivolity of religion. This option, unfortunately, is not available to his viewers otherwise. The relief from having to always comply with religious norms is thus fleeting. For that matter, even the sets of comedians such as Grover and Palta, in which they make fun of the culture of repression, serves as a source of relief. It is not only comedians who receive death threats, ordinary citizens, too, with anything remotely political to say on social platforms are routinely targeted by the online troll army. In the video, 'Intolerance', the laughter that follows when Palta says, "We are living in slightly intolerant times, just slightly. It's as subtle at Corona", is thus an expression of the collective relief from always combatting strangers armed with expletives on the Internet. The relief that political comedy affords then, however fleeting, is essential. It provides a feeling of solidarity and enables the participants, both the viewers and the comedians, to better grasp their lived reality.

Chapter 7: The representation of caste in English political stand-up comedy

Caste in the comedians' discourse

As highlighted before, the six comedians employ a range of humorous techniques in their comic sets to address and counteract a wide variety of issues. However, questions of caste are rarely part of the comedians' discourse. This includes any mention of caste, including references to surnames, incidents of caste-based violence and even caste-based reservation policies wherein a proportion of the governmental jobs and seats in educational institutions are reserved for people belonging to the lower-caste categories. Given the fact that current affairs do feature prominently in most of the comedian's commentary, this relative absence of discussions based on recent developments around caste is especially surprising. Palta's comedy stands out for its lack of mention of caste, or anything remotely related to it. Some of the other comedians do mention caste in their monologues, but only in passing. For instance, in 'Kunal Kamra | Stand-up Comedy Part 1', when Kamra is talking to the uncle seated next to him on the plane, he tells him that in foreign movies, after an aeroplane crash-lands on the water, every person deboards the plane in an orderly fashion. But in India, he says, "people will most likely evacuate the aircraft in the order of their caste. And if there's a cow on board then that will get the first preference." This is a reference to caste-based reservation in India whereby all official allocations are executed according to caste status. He briefly points to Hindu religious obsession, cow worship being an important aspect of it. Even though he references caste, and this one sentence brings out the issue of reservations, this is just a passing reference, and the joke immediately veers towards cow reverence. Kamra does not delve any deeper into the issue. Incidentally, this is the only mention of caste in all of Kamra's videos cumulatively.

A similar cursory mention of reservation policies can also be witnessed in Fernandes's video, 'The Death Penalty' (2015). Talking about how different groups of violence creators are treated differently, Fernandes jokes, "Can we start executing some rioters as well? Let's get them hanged, drawn and quartered. 25 per cent here, 25 per cent there. That's the kind of reservation that makes sense". This, again, is the sole reference to caste in all his 26 videos. This sentence, however, captures Fernandes's opinion that reservation in its current form does not make sense. He does not elaborate on this any further and swiftly moves on to other topics. In a similar manner, Das's political comedy also makes a reference to caste. In 'Indians are Homophobic' (2017), Das says towards the beginning, "I believe that India has no right to call itself a

progressive country until anybody in India can love who they want irrespective of race, caste, creed or sexual orientation." The comedian mentions caste but only as a segue into the issue of homosexuality. It is mentioned along with a few other things. He does make a reference to minorities in another video. In 'Vir Das |?|', he addresses celebrities and says, "you do know that your fanbase is going to hold you accountable for more than just your work in movies, right? You do know that your movies are also being watched by like students, farmers and minorities?" But then again, the term 'minority' can be broadly conceived to include religious, sexual and caste groups alike.

The question of caste features slightly more prominently in one of Faruqui's videos titled, 'Shayar, Minder & Chappal [The Poet, Minder & Slipper]' (2020). When talking about how different communities can create dating applications to suit their needs, the comedian mentions, "Brahmin Hindus will make Hinder. That means they are stopping you, don't do that". This is not just a passing reference to caste, Faruqui explicates through this one sentence how Hindu Brahmins discourage the use of dating applications, thus conveying a message through this joke. The question of caste here is not used as a premise to set up a joke but actually treated as a means to draw out a pointed remark. Notably though, most of his, and the others', videos begin with a standard disclaimer that warns viewers that the comic material is not intended to hurt the sentiments of any groups, caste being one of them.

It is however Grover, who has made multiple references to caste in his comic political discourse. In 'How Indians Outrage', he talks about the negative criticism he received for 'Padmaavat & the Parrot' and goes onto explain the nature of the threats. He says, "At one point, I decided to not read any comments from anybody with the surname Singh". Singh is a popular Rajput last name. This upper caste was directly responsible for the outrage around the movie because they felt it showed Queen Padmaavati, also from the same caste, in a negative light. By mentioning the surname, Grover singles out the caste group responsible for the mayhem, much to the delight of the audience present in the show. Apart from this, Grover also mentions minorities in '2AB ki Gajab Kahaani'. Talking about the fact that Yogi Adityanath only sleeps for four hours in a day, he says, "at least he sleeps for that long, because since his rise to power, minorities have stopped sleeping altogether". This allusion to minorities could be understood to mean caste minorities although that is not clearly evident in Grover's comic text. However, it is in the video, 'Indian elections' (2019), that Grover talks at length about caste. The clip seems to be a performance by the band Aisi Taisi Democracy and focuses only

on Grover's stand-up bit in the entire show. The clip, though oddly edited, begins with Grover saying,

> "There is one more practical application of caste that I did not tell him [a third person, unclear who] that we are living through right at this moment. We are right in the middle of it. Indian elections. Take caste out of the election and people will be harried about who to vote for. Do we actually have to vote based on who did the work? How come? [loud applause]. We are right in the middle of it and at this time…"

The video again abruptly moves on to cover the next topic. Nonetheless, this is the most elaborate mention of caste witnessed in the comic content of all the comedians. Grover's joke highlights the predominance of caste in Indian elections whereby candidates are voted for on the basis of their caste identity and not whether they have actually done any work. Politicians exacerbate the caste fault-lines to strengthen their vote banks (Sharma, 2019). Political parties use caste as a tool to mobilize voters during elections. The common conception is that people 'vote their caste instead of casting their vote' (Verma, 2012, p. 272) This, in turn, underscores the continuing importance of caste in the public sphere. This monologue is a criticism of the way politics functions in the country and also brings into focus the misplaced priorities in the electoral democracy. Grover's reference to caste is thus adequately woven into a narrative and is not simply a chance mentioning.

As is evident, with the possible exception of Grover, questions of caste are largely missing from the narrative of the comedians. In conceiving the nation through its many flaws and positive aspects, caste, surprisingly, is given a miss. Neither does it inform the comedians' critique, nor is it a means through which most of them resist the dominant beliefs. Questions of caste then are relegated to the periphery, drawn from if need be. But the need seldom arises. It therefore becomes important to analyse how the comedians' treatment of caste-related issues, or the lack of it thereof, informs a broader politics of representation in the public sphere.

The politics of representation in the comic monologues

Kamra's one sentence about people evacuating the aircraft on the basis of caste highlights the important issue of caste-based reservations in India. But without going into any more details, the comedian immediately transitions to cow worship and the fact that cows in India are placed above humans. This, too, is an important observation about religious cultural symbols. Kamra's

comedy stands out for his ability to arrive at a political analysis through clear, sharp prose. The hesitant mention of caste seems rather odd then. Subtextually of course, the sentence could be understood to be conveying Kamra's displeasure with caste-based reservations. Fusing reservation with a supposedly life-threatening situation such as an airplane evacuation, Kamra seems to be pointing to the banality of reservation as a phenomenon where certain castes get preference over others. He also brings in a reference to the West by indirectly saying that caste-based evacuations would not have happened there. The comedian does not make his stance apparent, of course. It appears more like a covert criticism of caste-based reservations masqueraded as humour. The joke, however, seemed to resonate considerably with the live audience inducing a considerably loud laughter. A similar agreement in the form of laughter was also noticeable in Fernandes's bit about "that's the kind of reservation that makes sense". It was this punchline in the entire video that evoked the loudest applause from the audience. But unlike Kamra, Fernandes's joke makes his political stance on reservation quite evident. The comedian, through that one remark, conveyed his opinion that the reservation policies, in its current form, do not make sense. Caste, in Kamra and Fernandes's comedy, is thus represented through the comedians' disavowal of reservation policies.

The antagonism towards caste-based reservations pervades much of the public discourse in India, spearheaded mainly by the upper castes, who see reservation policies as a form of denial of opportunities to them. The issue has been dividing the populace along the lines of caste since the policies' inception in the 1980s. Kamra and Fernandes's covert and overt disapproval of the issue, then, capture the dominant sentiment of futility. It further serves to reinforce the belief that reservations do not make sense. The political ramifications of this message are extensive. In the echo chambers of the comedy clubs, the audience seemed to agree with the message that the comedians wished to deliver. This is primarily because of the fact that the audience composition at the comedy venues is largely uniform, with most of them hailing from upper caste, upper class backgrounds who also condemn the reservation policies. The opinions that the comedians seem to be delivering thus fit well with the audience's perception of the issue. This is indicated by the collective laughter.

It can be argued that stand-up comedy in India promotes a laughter of inclusion whereby the jokes stem from an unspoken understanding that the participants in the laughter share the same ideology. This could be witnessed in two clips of Faruqui and Fernandes's performances in which, during an interaction with the live audience, the comedians were visibly surprised to find out that someone who supported the BJP was in attendance. However, the platform of

YouTube adds a certain level of complexity to this dynamic. The comic moment exists not in the performer-audience interaction alone but is reproduced many times over and appropriated according to different cultural readings. With each share of that particular video, it is available to anyone willing to engage with it. With the clips reaching a greater section of the population, the comedian is rendered incapable of determining the outcomes and effects their ideas could have. To the lower castes, for whom the reservation policies have been a means to mitigate the opportunities denied to them for centuries, the ideas propagated by the two comedians are harmful, to say the least. The videos, once published on YouTube, involve considerably heightened stakes of accountability.

In Das's comedy, caste also appears as a passing mention only. The comedian does not use it to arrive at a critical commentary. In fact, the emphasis swiftly shifts to homosexuality. In that brief mention, however, Das does highlight the need to love and accept someone despite their caste background. This, in itself, is an important message. It underscores the fact that even in contemporary India, caste is an important factor that determines who one can love or marry, often leading to portentous consequences and even death. But Das does not spend time to reflect on this. The hurried mention seemed to drown the narrative of caste amidst the mention of other equally important things. Homophobia in India is particularly troubling issue, and despite the decriminalization of homosexuality in 2018, there is still a lot of stigma attached to it. In a similar manner, in spite of fierce resistance and mobilization around caste, the stigma of caste remains omnipresent. But while Das uses humour to extensively talk about homophobia, caste is used as merely a tool to arrive at the central argument. A comedic script is essentially informed by the norms of social interaction that exist in the real world, outside the comic interaction. In the public sphere, with the exception of politics and academia, discussions on caste are limited at best. It is referred to sporadically but the effort to keep the conversation alive is rare. This is reflected in the way Das glosses over the question of caste. In his discourse, caste, therefore, is represented in its absent presence. It is definitely mentioned but does not form a part of the narrative, neither is there an effort by the comedian to expound on it.

Faruqui uses humour to point to the fact that Hindu Brahmins discourage the use of dating applications. This remark is directed at the upper castes and calls into question their dogmatic practices. The indication is towards the fact that dating applications promote intermingling across castes which the Hindu Brahmins are opposed to. This sentence, seemingly a harmless attack, is an example of punching up in humour. In other words, by mocking a dominant caste, Faruqui is resisting the choices so often exercised by this upper caste. The humour, though, is

quite perfunctory. In the video, after the punchline, Faruqui pauses for a while before saying, “very less educated people”. It is unclear if he is referring to the Hindu Brahmins or if — given the perceptible absence of laughter — this comment was meant to mock the audience for failing to understand the joke. Faruqui does not offer any help in this regard since he transitions into the next topic almost instantaneously. The relative absence of laughter could easily mean that people did not grasp the joke — Faruqui indeed progresses through his material quite fast — or it could also signify the tacit disapproval of the point that the comic intended to put across. Nevertheless, the comedian does constitute a powerful message through his humorous denunciation of Brahminical practices. A related motif can also be observed in Grover’s remark about not reading any comments from people named Singh. By mocking the upper caste directly responsible for organizing the many incidents of outrage, Grover resists their understanding of what constitutes hurt sentiments. This is also an example of humour that punches up. Grover’s humorous take communicates his annoyance with the caste-group’s behaviour. For a change, Grover unmasks the essential identity of the upper caste groups, pinpointing to their caste surnames, a treatment hitherto reserved only for lower-caste victims of violence. In these two videos, caste finds representation through a resistance to upper caste values and practices.

Grover’s elaborate explanation of the role caste plays in politics is an important rhetoric. It highlights how caste is routinely weaponized for electoral gains. Caste, here, is not mentioned in passing but forms an important theme in the narrative. It is not mentioned as an accessory to arrive at a different political comment but forms the crux of the argument. Caste becomes the tool through which Grover critiques the idea of the nation, the biased nature of the electoral process. Grover’s speech is powerful because it serves to educate the audience about the persistent significance of caste in the public domain, many of whom believe caste to be a thing of the past. The representation of caste in Grover’s comedy takes the form of an unbiased discussion on the relevance of caste in politics.

The politics of representation is intrinsically tied to the politics of recognition. Effectively, cultural recognition is made possible to a large extent through mediated representation. In instances where there is just a passing reference to caste, or worse, no mention at all, discrimination gains new life. For example, Palta’s comic routine makes no reference to caste at all. To the mass consuming her comedy, caste is just not existent. This normalized exclusion of caste is detrimental to the process of Dalit self-assertion. This results in a reduced sense of

self for the several lower-caste groups, who find that their concerns and realities are not addressed anywhere on the comic platform.

The comedians are in a position of power, standing on the stage with a microphone, they have the ability to influence perceptions, consolidate beliefs. But as Kamra's and Fernandes's videos exhibit, they do not always do that positively. Fernandes makes evident his own dissatisfaction with reservation policies thus influencing his viewers to perhaps think of it in the same manner. Kamra is not so obvious in his stance but a closer reading of his comic text makes his viewpoint apparent. This monologue takes some credibility away from the fact that reservation quotas have been an important tool through which Dalits have availed themselves of some of the job and educational opportunities historically denied to them. These affirmative action policies have enabled Dalits to lead a more equitable life. In such a situation, Kamra and Fernandes's videos take the fight for a dignified life for Dalits, a few steps back.

The tendency to treat caste as less important when discussing a host of issues, as is evident in Das's content, amply demonstrates the trend to invisibilize caste concerns, to use it as a conduit to address supposedly graver problems. This inability to recognize caste as a legitimate problem that needs address hints to the broader scourge of misrecognition in the public domain whereby caste is considered subordinate to other 'more pressing' issues. Faruqui and Grover, but the latter especially, position caste as an important theme in their comedy. The representation of caste in their text reveals the misplaced priorities of the upper caste groups, in political and cultural domains. It makes possible a conversation on caste, something that is constantly brushed aside in popular discourse. This has the potential to further the agenda of lower caste groups fighting for their right to self-determination. By making caste a part of regular comic discourse, Grover particularly facilitates a space for more discussions on this topic to flourish.

The post-caste assumption in the comic speech

The fact that only six videos among the 77 analysed for this study mention caste directly or indirectly prompts an analysis of whether the performative genre of stand-up comedy revels in a post-caste assumption. It seems as if the political comic discourse in stand-up comedy exhibits a form of social denial of caste whereby the performative genre appears to be largely casteless. With only passing mentions of caste in some instances, and no mention at all in others, the desire to write off caste altogether as an important aspect of Indian public life seems

supreme. It appears strange that the comedians tap into so many recent socio-political events and provide nuanced critiques of them, yet any caste-related news do not feature in their comic text. This absence of caste-related discussions helps propagate the false proposition that 'caste is dead' or that it simply does not matter any longer. This, unsurprisingly, captures the most dominant sentiment around caste in the public sphere. In fact, the condemnation of reservation policies conveys the desire of the comedians to appear casteless. It illustrates that the comedians and their implied audience are couched at a level where they do not benefit from reservations and hence can express their disapproval for the policies. It would be safe to conclude, therefore, that the genre of English political stand-up comedy in India manifests some degree of castelessness characterized by the lack of any substantial discussion on caste. Thus, what gets encoded as Indian political humour is that which sits well with the cultural perceptions of the caste elites. This post-caste assumption nonetheless is mitigated to some extent by comedians like Grover who elaborate on issues of caste in their sets and bring it back into public consciousness. But the fact that they do so rarely goes on to prove that the comic sphere largely functions by asserting an aspiration to appear casteless. True to post-colonial Indian politics, the performative genre of political stand-up comedy is also characterized by the desire to keep caste out of its purview.

In many ways, parallels can be drawn between the infrequent and often hesitant mention of caste in the comic speech and the treatment accorded to the issue by the mainstream media in India. In spite of the relatively relaxed censorship rules, the comedy sphere is hardly different from the mainstream media in its treatment of caste. Here, too, the issue is seldom represented adequately. There is rarely an effort by the comedians to weave caste into the political narrative. Fewer still are the mentions to the social and political functions of caste. Comedians perpetuate dominant perceptions about caste-based reservations. Das's passing reference to caste among other things hints to the existence of social discrimination but beyond that, nothing much is explicated. The genre of comedy, then, does not aid caste groups to interpret their reality. Questions of caste present a threat to the idea of progressiveness that political stand-up comedy in India celebrates. The performative art counters this problem by largely excluding the question of caste.

The spectre of political correctness

A possible reason for this impression of castelessness could be attributed to the issue of political correctness. When using humour to refer to a political minority group, the question of offense is never too far behind. Protecting the sentiments and feelings of the group then are a foremost concern. Similarly, punching up *versus* punching down in humour is always a logical concern. Humour and satire, when they induce laughter by ridiculing a dominant majority, are considered as a form of resistance, a form of punching up at powers positioned above the one making fun. The humour about Brahmin Hindus in Faruqui's monologue about caste was understood to be a means of resistance. The same forces of humour and satire can easily become means of oppression when used to ridicule a minority group. The humour would then be considered as punching down. When joking or even talking about caste, the comedians have to be especially careful so as to not be punching down. This could offer one explanation as to why some comedians still talk about caste-related issues but never about particular lower-caste identities.

The phenomenon of caste comes layered with legal protections and material consequences for not following them. The SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act is an important example. This Act specifies punishment and legal charges for those afflicting harm or injury to members of lower caste categories. The tricky boundaries of what can be spoken about, what is deemed acceptable in terms of humour for a particular caste community while adhering to legal proscriptions thus becomes difficult to navigate. This is not to mention the inherent complexities within the political category of Dalits. A range of divergent and intersecting values and cultural norms in the many facets within the particular category make it even more difficult to find a common thread along which to develop the humour. When talking about caste, the stakes are simply too high and so is the accountability. Jokes about caste require careful, deliberate thought and consideration of all parties involved. Political correctness serves other functions too. The Indian State routinely employs this tactic to coerce artists and performers into toeing the official line. Political correctness with regards to questions of caste, where the spectre of offending a caste group looms large, is a particularly potent tool for reining in free thoughts. One could, however, easily argue that religion is as contentious a topic in contemporary India as caste, yet there are abundant references to religion in all six comedians' writing. What then restricts comedians from at least engaging with caste issues, let alone joking about them? Ideas for jokes usually arise from the personal experiences of the comedians, which are then exaggerated for the sake of art. Analysing how comedians reflect on their social

identities and personal experiences in their comic sets will help explore why caste is scarcely a part of the comedians' rhetoric.

Chapter 8: The politics of performing an identity

Comedians' reflection on their identity in the comic discourse

A lot of the comic material is derived from the comedians' personal identities. All of them, in fact, situate their critique by drawing from their personal experiences in navigating everyday life. References to family members, friends abound in their speech. One particular way in which most performers bring forward their personal experiences in their comedy is by evoking their class identity. Kamra, for instance, reflects quite a bit on his middle-class status. He makes repeated references to taking flights that make apparent his position as a middle-class person who can afford to commute via flights. He also conveys his comfort with navigating Whatsapp, thereby positioning himself on the privileged side of the digital divide. Das, in the video, 'Vir Das |?|', calls out his privilege by saying,

> "That's right, I'll call myself out right now. I'm one of you [intellectuals in India]. I am a privileged, left-wing, grammatical masturbation, excited with his own opinion, liberal, smug, full of shit but at least I'm also a comedian who has the common decency to hate himself."

Through a critique of his relative position of privilege, Das makes his comic standpoint clear to his audience. A middle-class identity is also apparent in Palta's comic references. She draws from her experiences of growing up in a strict middle-class household which provides the basis of many of her jokes.

Gender identity is yet another frequently occurring theme in Palta's comedy. In elaborating on the many incidents where she has to manoeuvre uneven societal standards, Palta often takes recourse to the fact that she identifies as a woman in India. In the video, '#LadiesFirst Shaadi.com', Palta says that her father raised her like a boy and that has made her unaware of how a girl is supposed to behave in India. "I used to pick my own nose", she says, "I didn't know that this would revoke my license of being a woman". Palta's comic routines are particularly illustrative of how the intersectionality of gender, caste and class impacts the precise choice of topics one talks about. Reflections on gender and sexual identity feature prominently in the other comedians' words as well. Kamra makes clear his identity as a male on more occasions than one. Das, in 'Indians are Homophobic', talks about identifying as a straight man who has been with women who have liked other men instead of him. This paves

the way for him, in the set, to do a joke about mansplaining. Gender politics and the everyday experiences of negotiating a gender identity in India are recurrent themes in Fernandes's jokes. He touches on this issue quite a bit and also reflects on his personal identity as a male while drawing on these jokes. At one point in the video, 'Marital Rape' (2015), Fernandes reflects on the entitlement his gender identity awards him. "We live in a patriarchal, sexist society, it's good for us", he says sarcastically. As a matter of fact, Fernandes's gender identity is not limited to his punchlines alone but also dictates how he goes about conducting his performance. In the first half of 'Feminism in India' (2016), Fernandes begins by mocking feminism in general but particularly what he understands as "feminazis", a common term, considered derogatory in popular parlance, used to describe individuals who are particularly invested in the cause. His male standpoint is quite evident in this set. Perhaps his experience as a man in the country affords him a relative degree of insulation from the everyday challenges experienced by women in India. This is reflected in his rather ignorant comments on feminism. Fernandes, in this set then, is performing a very masculine identity.

The comedians often reflect on their religious identity while drawing out jokes. In 'Vir Das on Hindusim, Christianity, Islam and the Avengers', Das says, "As Hindus we are stuck between the awkward fight between Islam and Christianity". He also says the Hindus created the Avengers in the name of religion, referring to the pantheon of deities that the Hindus worship. Suffice it to say, this comment is only possible because Das himself identifies as a Hindu. This joke would have been inconceivable if a comedian who is not a Hindu would have cracked it. The same reasoning can also be applied to Faruqui's repeated references to Islam in his sets. The comedian often highlights the negative aspects of being a Muslim but in a light-hearted manner. In one video, he says that he is under training to make a bomb because that is what the common public perception automatically associates Muslims with: terrorism. In 'Nawab, Nehru and Gujarat 2002', Faruqui refers to himself as an "educated Muslim" and then quickly follows it up with a "no, we are not". Fernandes, too, makes quite a few jokes that place his Catholic identity firmly into focus. The jokes on religion can largely be considered to be examples of self-deprecatory humour. The comedians are making fun of their religious identity and encouraging the audience to participate in it as well. This kind of humour is only made possible because of the fact that the comedians have clearly placed their religious status at the fore. This provides them with the scope to take it lightly.

Self-deprecatory humour is not always limited to religion, however. Faruqui makes fun of the particular place he hails from and its people. Das satirizes his celebrity status by saying, "I have

a minuscule level of fame. My fame is very chilled, like my fame is, I am like a double decker bus. That's it. If you saw me on the street, you'll be like oh! I know what that is. I don't give a fuck, but I know". Fernandes encourages his audience to laugh at him with the words, "What do I know about parenting? Look at how I turned out, sexy, smart sophisticated." This particular form of humour makes possible a criticism of the comedians themselves, bridging the gap between them and their audience.

At times, the comedians seemed to be reflecting on personal incidents, things that have happened to their close ones in order to communicate a particular strain of thought. In 'Jokes for the Dead', Das says that he too is grieving because he has lost a close person in the fight against Covid-19. His monologue thereby exhibits some amount of emotional engagement with the topic. Again, when talking about the 26/11 terror attacks in Mumbai in 2008 in the video, 'The 26/11 Story' (2020), Das weaves a poignant tale of loss by setting himself in the centre of his story. He recounts that he lost a friend in the tragedy who he respected and loved and was a mother figure to him. The tragedy thus has a personal resonance with him. In 'How to Threaten a Comedian', Das turns to his immediate family and narrates in explicit detail the gory nature of the threats his loved ones have received from the online hate brigade. Faruqui, too, brings up the issue of 2002 Gujarat riots by sharing his experiences of living through the communal riots as a young boy. But perhaps no other set has been able to reflect on a comedians' personal identity as much as Fernandes's set on mental health awareness, 'Living with Anxiety Disorder'. The comedian essentially picks apart his old mental illness issue and upends the stigma attached to the issue by joking about it.

Parrhesia in the political comic discourse

Interlacing the political with the personal, the comedians make their content relatable to the audience. At the same time, these personally evocative pieces give off the sense that the comedians are the right persons to talk about these issues because they have lived through them. In this sense, the English political stand-up comedians in India can be considered to be parrhesiates to some extent. By locating their personal identity within their comedy, they convey the sense that they are speaking their experiential truths to power. They believe what they say to be true and also use various rhetorical devices such as gestures, pauses and voice modulation to convince the audience about it. Just like parrhesiates in the literal sense, the comedians also exercise the agency to subvert hierarchies and dismantle the stigma attached to

issues as important as mental health. Political stand-up comedy in India, therefore, presents a space where the comedians and their audience can negotiate broader societal structures through personal reflections leveraged through humour.

This reasoning is however not without its fair share of problems. As is the case usually with instances where the comedians seem to be speaking from experience, the question of authenticity looms large. It cannot be said whether the comedians are, in fact, speaking from experience or if their discourse is simply pandering to the popular cultural sentiments. Stand-up comedy, as is commonly known, does include some amount of exaggeration. There is no reliable method to ascertain the veracity of the comedians' claims either. Thus, the stand-up comedians' experiential truths have to be necessarily taken at face value and believed for the message they intend to convey. Perhaps an example will help clarify this argument. In January 2020, Kamra was banned by several airline companies from flying with them because the comedian had reportedly heckled Arnab Goswami, a journalist, who was also on the same flight with him (Sharma, 2020). Goswami is possibly the most (un)popular journalist in India currently, known for peddling the government's agenda through his news channel by shouting at his audience and not allowing his panellists to speak. Kamra went up to Goswami and started provoking him for answers about the government's culpability in, among other things, Rohith Vemula's institutional murder. The video, which was later uploaded on Twitter by Kamra himself, was captioned: "I did this for my hero… I did it for Rohit (sic)" (Kamra, 2020). This was rather surprising given Kamra's unwillingness to broach any caste-related topics in his comedy or even the subtextual aversion to reservations noticed in his comedy. This episode onboard the flight nonetheless helped the comedian curry favour with a large section of the population and consolidated his image in public memory as a 'brave' comedian who spoke the truth to power and had the courage to take on Goswami.

Reflections on the comedians' caste identity

Amidst all the multiple references of religious, class and gender identity, however, references to the comedians' own caste identities are completely missing. None of the comedians, not even once, make any mention of their caste identities, let alone reflect on it. Caste is not a part of the multiple, intersecting ways in which the comedians envision themselves. The comedians appear to be largely casteless. The post-caste assumption is, therefore, not only present in the comedians' content but also shines through in their understanding of themselves. A level of

detachment from one's caste identity can only be possible when caste is not a part of their everyday life, is not the principal means through which they understand the world. The ability to remain removed from caste ascriptions is a privilege that only the upper castes can afford. And as is illustrated by the six comedians selected for this study, all of them, with the exception of Fernandes and Faruqui — who clearly belong to different religions — hail from the upper castes. Not only this, but also the website initially consulted to draw the sample of comedians, indianstandups.com, lists approximately 170 performers, an overwhelming majority of whom are upper-caste males, the rest are upper-caste females. It comes as no surprise then that in the comedians' political discourse, caste is given a miss. They have the privilege of envisioning their identity based solely on cultural values.

This seems to offer one explanation as to why jokes about religion are abundant but jokes about caste are not, even though both are considered sensitive topics. The comedians all seem to identify with a particular religious ascription, evoking it repeatedly, making it the basis for their jokes, self-deprecatory or otherwise. This encourages the audience to suspend their notions about the same briefly because the comedian is reflecting on their own identity. The same cannot be said about caste ascriptions which are plainly non-existent in the comedians' discourse. This makes any humour on caste difficult, if not impossible. Therefore, for comedians not aware of the intricacies inherent in caste ascriptions, the fine line between what constitutes affront and what is acceptable is practically impossible to manoeuvre. Just like the traditional media in India, the comedy sphere in the country also exhibits a stark absence of representation of individuals from the lower castes. Reasonably then, considerations of caste, recent political developments around the issue and even reflections of the comedians' own caste identities are avoided. English political stand-up comedy thus, by and large, symbolizes a progressive but casteless India.

Conclusion

English political stand-up comedy in India has been able to push further than most other performative genres in the country in speaking truth to power and highlighting the problems rife in the contemporary socio-political regime. At a time when democratic institutions in the country such as the mainstream media, judiciary and the police have capitulated to the increasingly aggressive advances of the State, political stand-up comedy has emerged as a voice of reason, one that has enabled a discussion on decidedly difficult topics, sometimes in a light-hearted manner and sometimes in direct, acerbic prose. Through sharp, critical commentary, the comic performers emphasize the need to relax the arbitrary moral values so often attached to social identities, encouraging their audiences to do the same. The critique in stand-up comedy is, thus, designed to be a participatory process. Through the use of a range of linguistic choices, the comedians attempt to bridge the two halves of a linguistically divided nation while trying to ensure that more people can participate in the comic exchange.

The nature of the humour in English political stand-up comedy can be therefore be understood to be a means of resistance. The comedians imagine the nation not through the fabricated rhetoric of national solidarity that the State would have its citizens believe but through an engagement with the many disparities and cleavages inherent in the Indian public experience. The criticism is not always levelled at the State machinery, but instead the comics evoke a wide variety of issues, employ a range of performative tools to present a view of the nation that is fundamentally different from the State-sponsored dominant cultural values. The comedians even take on the many repressive tactics employed by the government in their sets. Alternating between jokes and angry rants, these sets attempt to deal with the culture of unlaughter, but sometimes also reveal how the comedians give in to the culture of repression. By often positioning their content in dialogue with global political references, the comedians convey their disavowal of the many initiatives taken by the government in recent history. Sometimes they bring in their personal histories into the picture, engaging with their social identities to better underscore their experiences in navigating the socio-political milieu and thereby conveying the fact that they are the right persons to talk about that particular issue. In doing this, they consolidate their role as parrhesiates who speak experiential truths to power. English political stand-up comedy's transgressive role also becomes apparent in its function as a collective mode of expression of relief. For the participants for whom other means of

addressing problems or grief are not available, the comic moment in the performances provides a rare, albeit fleeting, relief from the dominant ideology. The very fact that multiple individuals take part in it at the same time creates a sense of solidarity among the participants.

In its role as a force of resistance, performative humour also engages discursively with the national public sphere. The politics of humour inherent in stand-up comedy has consistently tried to broaden the scope of the public sphere by facilitating dissenting opinions, making possible alternate ways of thinking and being. This genre thus reimagines the public sphere by evoking and normalizing issues that capture the material and ideological diversity inherent in the idea of an Indian identity. It is important to reflect on the role that social media, but more specifically YouTube, plays in this. With its array of text display options and background scores in the video clips, YouTube informs the resistance that the comedians are trying to convey. But YouTube's role as a facilitator of dissent becomes all the more evident when one takes into consideration the fact that the video streaming platform makes the comedy clips available to a large section of the populace thereby encouraging people from different cultural backgrounds to assess the comic texts in their own way. While this undoubtedly opens up possibilities for trolling and online haranguing, it nonetheless negotiates the limits of an increasingly stifled national public sphere by allowing wide swathes of population to engage with divergent views.

However, just as the nature of humour in English political stand-up comedy in India can be thought to be anti-ritualistic, it can also simultaneously be conceived to be hegemonic, a means of discrimination. This is particularly the case when one considers the representation of caste in this domain. As this study demonstrates, the sphere of comedy makes little or no mention of caste. In all the 77 videos surveyed, only six contain a mention of caste. Comedians make hurried references to caste-based reservations, passing mentions of the importance of accepting someone irrespective of their caste background. With the exception of two instances in which the comedians succinctly etch out the topic of caste in their jokes, the question of caste appears to be drowned in a comic narrative that explicates other supposedly more important issues. Closer reading of the text reveals, in some cases, the prejudice that the comedians harbour for caste-based reservation policies. On a platform as culturally relevant and popular as stand-up comedy, this absence of caste-based discussion invisibilizes caste concerns and takes the fight for self-determination for Dalit groups a step back. These groups do not find themselves represented in this genre of performance, not even as performers. This absence of caste is a political act in itself. Comedians reflect on their socio-cultural identities quite a bit, but their

caste identities are never a part of their discourse. The liberal, modernizing discourse so often adopted by comedians emphasizes achievement and individualism which fits the socio-political location of the comedians and their audience. This desire to appear casteless gives off the impression that English political stand-up comedy revels in a post-caste assumption characterized by a social denial of the legitimacy of caste in the contemporary public discourse. This, in turn, could be understood as the invisiblization of the caste privilege that so many of those who engage with the comic moment enjoy.

The normalized exclusion of questions of caste is an important motif in modern Indian public life that finds expression in this performative genre of humour. This has resulted in the institution of political stand-up comedy as an effectively upper-caste domain that rests solely on the cultural values of dominant caste groups. The alternative imagination of the nation that finds expression in the comic discourse thus relies on upper-caste cultural sentiments and middle-class values. The collective laughter, in most cases, depends on a proper understanding of world politics and/or American popular culture references that impedes participation by lower-caste groups, most of whom do not have the cultural capital necessary to grasp these comic references. In this sense, it promotes a laughter of inclusion. The discrimination inherent in this art form is thus never direct, instead it finds expression in these subtle acts of exclusion. Thus, what gets encoded as comic cultural references is what the upper caste, upper class audience see as relatable.

It would be worthwhile to consider if this absence of caste-related discussions then actually aids stand-up comedy as a performative genre to extend the scope of the public sphere. If it makes entry difficult for the disenfranchised and celebrates only upper-caste cultural symbols, then it can be effectively asserted that political stand-up comedy negotiates and restructures the limits of what the dominant caste groups conceive as the national public sphere. It does not accommodate the lower-caste groups' perception of the same, neither does it make allowance for them to participate in it more fully. In the comedy space, dominance of upper-caste elites remains paramount. This group disproportionately controls the resources which makes entry of Dalits relatively difficult. Thus, in spite of its democratizing potential, English political stand-up comedy reflects the caste biases and prejudices inherent in the broader public discourse.

Limitations of this study

This study could have benefitted from an exploration of the multiple counter-public spheres of Dalit comedy on the Internet. It could have discussed how the lower caste groups critically respond to mainstream understanding of caste in comedy. But these spaces of Dalit comedy are quite hard to locate in the online space. In most cases, they are not available for viewing on YouTube. Even when they are, Dalit comedy is mostly performed in vernacular languages that makes any pan-Indian appeal difficult to achieve. A continuation of this study in the future could take up this issue of tracing Dalit comedy counter-public spheres on the Internet. Similarly, this study discussed how the comedians reflect on their identity in their sets based on their performance alone, while fully aware that there are many aspects of their socio-political identities that cannot be captured in their comedy. Thus, interactions with the comedians could be one way of determining how their social locations inform their political commentary. This task, though an important one, fell outside the scope of the present study but can be undoubtedly taken up later. Further, there are many channels of artistic expression which the comedians use to vocalize their dissent that cannot really be understood as stand-up comedy in the true sense of the term. For instance, comedians routinely use Twitter to post funny takes on any recent political development, satirical songs are also an important means to communicate messages. The pandemic has severely impacted this art form. Many of the comedians have sought to reformulate their craft by adapting to different kinds of performative techniques. Some comedians featured in this study have taken up podcasting, still others talk directly to a camera. These modes of expression, even though crucial, could not be accommodated within this study since they fall outside the scope of stand-up comedy as a distinct performative art. And lastly, this study, conducted with a sample of six comedians in the already limited domain of 'political' stand-up comedy, cannot be understood to be representative of the discussions and viewpoints conveyed in the genre of English stand-up comedy as a whole, although efforts have been made to achieve the closest approximation possible.

The study, in effect, is an attempt to recognize the role that the politics of humour plays in shaping the national public sphere in India. By looking at how humour reinforces resistance but also aids caste discrimination, it seeks to acknowledge humour as a definitive political act. It attempts to underscore how in these contrasting capacities this genre of performative art contributes to the practices of shaping public opinion and envisions new ways of thinking about the nation and its many discontents. In doing this, it aims to contribute to the extensive literature

on caste and its importance as a social attribute in Indian public life but also to present political comedy and, by extension, political satire as a legitimate entry point into understanding the various facets of the Indian public life.

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