Stand up Comedy for Socio-Political Activism in India

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Doctor of Philosophy in Communication and Media Studies

Title: Stand up Comedy for Socio-Political Activism in India

This dissertation examines the role of political stand-up comedy as a form of resistance against the growing authoritarianism and Hindu nationalist ideology (Hindutva) propagated by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India. In a sociopolitical landscape where dissent is increasingly criminalized and mainstream media fails to hold the government accountable, stand-up comedy has emerged as a radical space for critique and resistance. Grounded in the frameworks of *laughtivism* and *subaltern counterpublics*, this qualitative study investigates RQ1) how biographical experiences of comedians inform their performative strategies to resist Hindutva; RQ2) how their digital stand-up comedy challenges the ideological structures of Hindutva and RQ3) how does stand-up comedy uses social media as an extended space for subaltern counter publics.

Through case studies of Kunal Kamra, Varun Grover, Sanjay Rajoura and two anonymized Muslim comedians, my research employs in-depth interviews, textual analysis of their YouTube performances, and social media discourse analysis of online audience comments to examine how stand-up comedy functions as a subaltern counterpublic sphere in India's constrained media environment.

The findings establish that political standup comedy leads and resists against the revisionist, polarizing and divisive politics of Hindutva, and disrupts the legitimization and normalization of the nationalist ideology. YouTube facilitates it by circumventing the traditional gatekeeping, reaching a wider audience and promoting public engagement where both audiences

and comedians reclaim their agency in the context of escalating state repression.

My dissertation contributes to the emerging scholarship on activism, communication and social justice in the Global South by centering Indian voices and experiences. It provides an example to countries around the world where there is a resurgence of nationalist ideologies and crackdown on media freedom that humor can be a powerful tool of dissent and resistance against the authoritarian rule—one joke at a time!

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To my friends, your support kept me grounded and motivated. Your unwavering support, understanding, and well-timed distractions meant more than you know.

Finally, to my family—your belief in me, your love, and unrelenting support have been the foundation of this achievement.

This accomplishment is as much yours as it is mine.

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Chapter I

Introduction

On 25th March 2025, I see the headlines about an Indian comedian Kunal Kamra being investigated over an 'offensive' comedy skit splashed over both international as well as Indian news websites. Kunal, also a participant in this dissertation, performed a comedy skit where he called the Deputy Chief Minister of Maharashtra, Eknath Shinde a 'traitor', without directly naming him. It referred to Shinde's shift in political allegiance in 2022, which triggered a political crisis in the Indian state of Maharashtra, resulting in the resignation of then-Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray, and Shinde assuming the position (Godbole, 2025). In fact, Mr. Shinde has been called a 'traitor' often after he split the Shiv Sena party in 2022 and joined hands with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the current ruling party in government.

The Habitat Comedy Club in Mumbai, Maharashtra's capital, where Kunal performed, was vandalized with news visuals showing posters of Kunal Kamra being burnt by the Shiv Sena party workers. Though 11 people have been arrested at the time of writing this introduction, there might be more arrests in future. A police complaint has been filed against Kunal in Mumbai. In a statement, the Habitat Comedy Club said, "We are shocked, worried and extremely broken by the recent acts of vandalism targeting us." It further added that they will remain shut "till we figure out the best way to provide a platform for free expression without putting ourselves and our property in jeopardy" (AP, 2025).

In response, Kunal posted a picture of himself with the Indian constitution and wrote the caption, "the only way forward." While ending his show in the Habitat that stirred up vandalism and this controversy, he had shown a copy of the Indian Constitution to the audience and had

stated, “For all the people who will not like this show, I have something for you…this is the Constitution of India and this is what allows me to do what I do.” After this recent backlash, he refused to apologize, and emphasized the right to freedom of speech and expression saying, “Your inability to take a joke at the expense of a powerful public figure does not change the nature of my right…I don’t fear this mob and I will not be hiding under my bed, waiting for this to die down” (Godble, 2025).

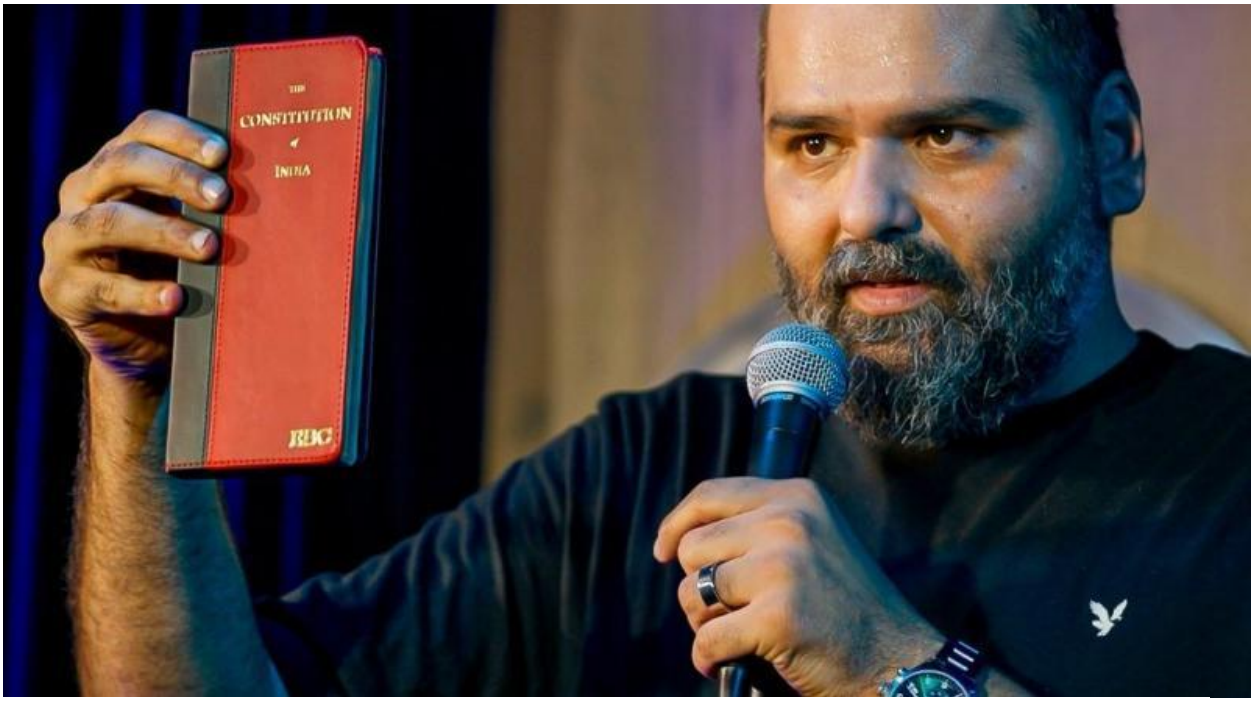


Figure 1. Kunal Kamra holding Indian Constitution (Source: @kunalkamra88)

India’s Political Landscape and the Media

In 2021, Sweden based Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute noted that India, often touted as the world’s largest democracy, has become an ‘electoral autocracy’. According to another US based non-profit Freedom House, India was downgraded to ‘partially free democracy’ from a ‘free democracy’. This deterioration started in 2014 when Modi and his Hindu nationalist party BJP came to power, noted Freedom House (BBC, 2021). With rampant

threatening and intimidation of journalists and activists, increased pressure on human rights groups and increased attacks on Muslims, the political and civil liberties are under threat in Modi's India. The V-Dem Institute noted that starting in 2014, the "diminishing of freedom of expression, the media, and civil society have gone the furthest." In regards with censorship, India has been "as autocratic as Pakistan and worse than its neighbors Bangladesh and Nepal" (BBC, 2021).

Yonatan L Morse, an associate professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Connecticut commented that though the state of democracy around the world is in peril, India stands out due to the size of its population and past record of being a multi-ethnic democracy. Describing the pattern of democratic breakdowns, he said, "Populist leaders first capture many of the gatekeepers in the state (for example, they politicize appointments to the civil service or remove oversight from appointments to the judiciary). They then often repress freedom of expression by censoring the media, limiting academic freedom, or curtailing civil society. Populist leaders often polarise society and delegitimize the political opposition, often presenting them as enemies of the state or people. What follows is often violation of electoral integrity itself and outright fraud" (Biswas, 2021).

As India became one of the most dangerous countries in the world for journalists, the World Press Freedom Index of India is now at 159th out of 180 countries (RSF, 2024). According to the report by Freedom House, the majority of the mainstream media is towing the ideological line of the government and is uncritical of Modi and his government (Biswas, 2021). Journalists critical of the government, especially women face vicious trolling that swiftly translates into in-person harassment. Delhi based independent journalist, Neha Dixit, who had someone attempt to

break into her apartment, had said that she was “stalked, openly threated with rape and murder and viciously trolled” (BBC, 2021).

How Does Comedy Come In?

With the arrival of the current ruling government in India in 2014 and its re-election in 2019 and 2024, the government has unabashedly propagated Hindutva—an ideology that has given birth to the radical right-wing Hindu nationalism in the country, rendering everyone who is critical of the government, its policies and mechanism as ‘anti national’ (Reporters Without borders, 2021). Systematically manufacturing the lack of source credibility for anyone who speaks against the Modi-led government directly affects journalists, political analysts, students, intellectuals and diminishes spaces for dissent. With this pattern catching up since 2014 now, the pent-up frustration and opinions of people are finding outlets through unregulated, creative spaces and platforms, with humor as an increasingly widespread tactic. The process of using humor in protesting against a government involves the public to laugh at abusive authority. As laughing reduces fear and inverts the power dynamic, suddenly the one laughing assumes power because they can see the flaws in the system (Popovic, 2020). In the context of India, comedy and humor are increasingly showing the mirror to the government and questioning its authoritarianism by laughing at them, especially during the present Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led regime. Comedians such as Kunal Kamra, Varun Grover, Sanjay Rajoura have been at the forefront of political comedy, questioning the ideological motives of the government, exposing the absurdity of the Hindu nationalistic agenda and broadly using comedy as a medium to challenge and resist the BJP’s ideological push.

With the spreading of extremist right ideologies and an increased number of nationalistic and authoritarian regimes around the world, thousands of resistance movements are sprouting worldwide. Though conventionally, we'd imagine that protests happen on the streets, through political boycott and civil disobedience, we seldom think of a comedy club as a site of political struggle. This is where my dissertation comes in to fulfill the gap. It seeks to examine the role of humor for political resistance and activism by examining political stand-up comedy in India. Using a qualitative approach, the study investigates the phenomenon and explores how stand-up comedy acts as a subaltern counter public sphere, a space that provides suitable conditions to talk about issues that will not find space in the mainstream media. Though nascent, this area of study has been gaining relevance, and warrants more investigation in the context of India where non-violent resistance has a long history.

The research questions that this dissertation seeks to answer are the following:

RQ1: How do the biographical experiences of Indian stand-up comedians inform their performative strategies for resisting the BJP's Hindutva project?

RQ2: How does stand-up comedy performances resist the Hindutva narrative of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India?

RQ3: How does stand-up comedy use social media as an extended space for subaltern counter publics?

To answer these research questions, I use a case study approach by delving deep into the work of primarily three stand-up comedians who do political comedy—Kunal Kamra, Sanjay Rajoura and Varun Grover. To answer the first research question, I draw my analyses from semi

structured interviews and gauge their personal motivations and intentions of doing a specific kind of comedy. I also include two Muslim comedians, Zeeshan Iqbal and Noor Ahmed (pseudonyms) to get their perspectives of doing comedy in a political environment that is increasingly anti-Muslim. I change their names to protect them from identification and the potential backlash that could be damaging to them, their families and their stand-up careers. To answer my second research question, I textually analyze the YouTube comedy performances of Sanjay, Kunal and Varun to ascertain how the issues they talk about, resist and counter the Hindutva project and consistently supplement the analysis with news coverage in the mainstream media. I do not include Zeeshan and Noor in the subsequent chapters to refrain from giving any identifying information. To answer the third research question, I conduct social media discourse analysis and examine the comments of the viewers on the videos examined for the second research question.

Though the topic of research for this dissertation is stand-up comedy for socio-political activism in India, I want to acknowledge that comedy is only one of the many art forms being used to voice dissent against the current government in the country. India has had a long history of using newspapers, TV, films, theatre, puppetry, music and radio to question and critique the political structures at several moments throughout history. Though my dissertation is focusing only on stand-up comedy to challenge and scrutinize the government, future research opportunities should examine the unique roles and functions of different media in resisting the current regime in India.

My Positionality: Religion Was Never a Topic of Significance

A short story first!

I am in third grade, studying in a Christian missionary school in Noida, a city at the outskirts of Delhi. On this sunny day of summer, a new student with chubby pink cheeks, a ponytail tied with a red ribbon, carrying a backpack, and a water bottle hanging around her neck shows up in my class. Introduced by the teacher as a new student, Nooriya Khan, she finds an empty spot on one of the benches and sits next to a student. During the physical education period in the middle of the day, with sweltering sun and sweaty kids running around the school grounds, I see little Nooriya playing with her skirt, all by herself on a swing. The volleyball I am playing with lands close to her swing and it is my turn to fetch it. I run full speed towards it. I pick up the ball, wipe my sweat and look at Nooriya who suddenly asks, "will you be my friend?" I promptly respond, "I am already your friend!" She joins in the volleyball game. *Religion was never a topic of significance.*

It also happened that both of us lived close to each other in the same neighborhood, so we shared the same school bus. Eventually, the same tuition classes, same markets to hang out, and same parks. Going to each other's homes during weekends to play became a routine. In fifth grade, when we were in different sections, our moms had to come to school to request the school administration to put us in the same class so that our studies were not disturbed. To which teachers obliged but also complained that the 'girls were too talkative'. Nooriya coming to my home to celebrate Diwali[1] and I going to her home to celebrate Eid [2]was not only usual, but also

[1] The Hindu festival Diwali (or Deepavali) is India's prominent celebration of lights, typically lasting five days. It symbolizes light defeating darkness, good overcoming evil, and knowledge prevailing over ignorance.
[2] Eid, an Islamic Holiday, is celebrated twice every year that marks special prayers, family get-togethers and feasting. Eid-al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha are two separate occasions and are shortened for just 'Eid'.

expected, especially from our families. We ended up going to the same University for our undergraduate degree and only separated during our graduate school when I took admission for Communications at Jamia Millia Islamia University, an Islamic Institution and she took admission for sciences in a different University, but we still lived in the same neighborhood. Hangouts in the local markets continued. *Still religion was never a topic of significance.*

Growing up around all religious diversities, having parents with devout Hindu beliefs, going to a Christian missionary school, and attending an Islamic University for my MA made religion ubiquitous. So much so, that it never mattered. Partaking in *puja* rituals at home, celebrating Christmas from December 1st every year for all 18 years of school, having Eid with Nooriya's family and our Muslim neighbors, going for good food at *Gurudwaras* (Sikh temples) and attending weddings at Delhi Cathedrals of our family friends was nothing out of the usual. *Religion was never a topic of significance*. My mother, a music teacher for almost 30 years and a devout practicing Hindu, taught songs in appreciation of Jesus at the school she worked for. *Still religion was never a topic of significance.* It was almost *natural* to be embodying religious diversity, secularism and respectfully existing in that plurality with each other. For all those years, the common topics of our hangouts with Nooriya revolved around helpless scorn for our parents' strictness, how to sneak away to eat *samosas* and *golgappas* with upcoming exams, going to the mall, and how difficult a subject Chemistry was. *Religion was never a topic of significance.*

Fast forward to 2014, things started to gradually change. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) had just come to power and Modi was elected as the Prime Minister. The predecessor Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and his party, the Indian National Congress were mired in political and corruption scandals. BJP's Modi whose campaign of getting elected to power was

'development' seemed to be a much more viable alternative at the time. However, for the first time ever in our lives, we were seeing political narratives coming at us through news and social media that were centering our religious identities. *Religion started to have significance.* We were being told, very loudly and aggressively by the news media, and WhatsApp messages that India should be a Hindu-only country, where all other religious minorities, especially the Muslims, are contaminating that idea of a Hindu India. Politics was now a more frequent visitor in our conversations with Nooriya where both of us were equally bewildered and baffled. In 2015, a year after BJP was elected to power, I came to the United States for my MA and two years after that Nooriya got married. I was recently talking to her on the phone. Now a mother of 2 young daughters, she said, "I am afraid and have been seriously thinking of getting out of the country." *Religion started to have significance.*

In the interests of transparency and self-reflexivity, I recognize my own biases against the current BJP government in India. I believe that its ideological push of Hindutva, or right-wing Hindu nationalism, is a project to destroy the secular fabric of the country that I had the privilege of being a part of in my years of growing up. I have closely observed how the government's polarizing politics of hate has entered the living rooms, chai discussions and relationships with neighbors, in subtle and passive aggressive ways. Sometimes, it's not so subtle. When I was visiting India last summer, I entered the elevator of a residential building to visit relatives and saw an old friend and his father who have lived there for long. They are Muslims. Excited to see them after very long, I greeted the father with a *namaste* and was already in the middle of a brief catch up conversation when an older man who had entered the elevator with me, glared at them, said, "*Jai shri ram!*" and turned his back at them. Literally meaning 'Hail Lord Ram', which used to be a common greeting phase earlier, but has now turned into a 'cry of attack, meant to

intimidate and threaten those who worship differently' (Pandey, 2019). My friend, his father and I looked at each other in horror.

I do not fully align with any major political party in India, but I've become increasingly concerned about the shrinking spaces for meaningful political discussion, especially dissent. The current political climate under the BJP has made constructive critique increasingly difficult, with a troubling trend of labelling any criticism as 'anti-national' or an attack on the state. My dissertation explores an alternative, largely unregulated domain of expression, stand-up comedy. By anchoring my research in a critical cultural perspective, I focus on how these comedians articulate the complexities of the Hindutva project and its broader implications in a way that is accessible, comprehensible and compelling. This work is primarily about understanding how humor can be a transformative force for socio-political change, and especially to communicate critical perspectives that might otherwise be silenced or marginalized in an increasingly authoritarian state.

Organization of the Dissertation

In addition to the introduction, review of literature, methods and conclusion, my dissertation is divided into three main chapters. Every research question has a dedicated chapter that seeks to comprehensively answer the research question. Organizing it into three chapters—comedians, their performances, and the audience response—is helpful to answer the broader research question that this dissertation seeks to answer. *How stand-up comedy resists the Hindutva narrative of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India?*

In chapter 4, I investigate the intentions and purpose of stand-up comedians and draw from their own biographical background in gaining insights about their experiences and lived

realities that influenced their tendency of questioning the status quo, and how it bleeds into their work, including that of stand-up comedy. Focusing on the comedians, the chapter connects the ethos of their personal politics to the socially critical comedy they perform.

In chapter 5, I focus on the stand-up performances of comedians that have been uploaded on YouTube and study how the issues talked about in their performances challenge Hindutva narratives propagated by the government. Additionally, I examine how their stand-up sets lay out the framework of a fascist government and fit the puzzles for the audience, especially by using humor that makes the information more palatable.

In chapter 6, I focus on the impact of the comedians and their work by examining the comments on their YouTube performances and how the digital affordability of the digital platform extends the subaltern counterpublic sphere, amplifying the embodied protest of laughter. In the context of failure of the mainstream media in fostering government accountability and critique, I analyze how the social media comments of comedy viewers validate an online space of marginalized perspectives and foster community.

Significance of Research

Mahatma Gandhi, known for his pioneering tactics of nonviolent resistance against British rule, thought of a philosophy rooted in the moral tenets of truth and justice that would urge the oppressor to recognize the legitimacy of the oppressed, without any physical violence. Krishna Kriplani, an Indian freedom fighter had said that "Gandhi was the first in human history to extend the principle of nonviolence from the individual to the social and political plane" (Kriplani, 1990). His mass mobilization of Indians across caste, class and religion for movements against British colonial rule illustrate the significance and power of nonviolent resistance. Also

an inspiration for global leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Madela, his philosophy laid a foundation for future resistance movements. His insistence on nonviolence for political struggle cultivated the strength of self-discipline, resilience and perseverance that continues to influence modern protest movements in India, including the current resistance against the authoritarian tendencies of the BJP government.

This dissertation seeks to study a tactic of non-violent resistance through stand-up comedy for political struggle and social change in India. Gandhi's principles of nonviolent resistance acts as an important framework to understand the role of comedy as a peaceful form of dissent. Like how Gandhi mobilized mass movements without use of violence, political comedians such as Kunal Kamra, Sanjay Rajoura and Varun Grover use a nonviolent tool of humor to expose the absurdity of the government's Hindutva project. By ridiculing power, comedians are stripping the government off their seriousness and authority and reinforcing that something seemingly harmless like laughter is powerful tool against oppression. Seeing stand-up comedians as truth tellers very much aligns with Gandhi's idea of moral authority of the truth and demonstrates that it can be an instrument to awaken public consciousness and demand accountability from the leadership.

In the broader canon of Communication & Media Studies, I situate my study in the ambit of Activism, Communications and Social Justice. For my dissertation, I treat stand-up comedy as a form of media that is critical and resistant to the majoritarian tendencies of the BJP government in India. The government arresting comedians and accusing some of them as 'terrorists' is a testament to the potency of stand-up as an influential tool to disturb political power. Combined with the affordability of social media, especially YouTube in this case, the political critique is amplified when comedy is uploaded and shared on YouTube. Thus, my dissertation looks at how

digital media augments social justice efforts of stand-up—an intimate, in-person space—and creates dissent against the Hindu majoritarian government.

In the current political climate in India, and increasingly around the world, where dissent is criminalized, standup comedy is a crucial, nonviolent tactic of resistance that encourages people to question and introspect their socio-political realities, not with violence, but rather with words, wit and laughter. Where resistance happens not on the streets but in comedy clubs!

Chapter II

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

India, a nation state- that gained independence in 1947, and now the most populous democracy of the world, was founded on the tenets of accommodating and celebrating differences. Be it multifarious cultures, languages, religions, traditions and festivals, the country embraced its diversity. Article 19 (1)(a) of the Indian Constitution promises every citizen of the country with freedom of speech and expression, with some reasonable restrictions; however, this fundamental right is under serious threat with dissenting opinions being met with dire consequences (Gettleman, Schultz, Raj & Kumar, 2019).

With the arrival of a right-wing government of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 2014 and its re-election in 2019 and 2024, the scenario has been rapidly changing with the emphasis being on forceful imposition of a Hindu, majoritarian point of view on its electorate; systematic discrimination towards minority religions, and strong resistance towards dissent (Poonam, 2019). Hindutva is a Hindu nationalist ideology that seeks to have a Hindu-nation state with a Hindu social order. It is being imposed by redirecting the mainstream narrative to suit the ideological framework of the BJP, altering history, demeaning scientific progress, and taking alternative epistemological narratives to the forefront (Subramaniam, 2020). It should be kept in mind that Hinduism which is an ancient religion on the Indian subcontinent is different from Hindutva, which is the Hindu 'right' ideology, represented by the BJP (Subramaniam, 2020).

There have been increased incidents of mob violence targeting minorities that are often spurred by members of the BJP, especially towards Muslims. According to a Human Rights Watch Report, 44 people were killed in such attacks between May 2015 and December 2018, out

of which 36 were Muslims (Human Rights Watch, 2019). The Social Hostilities Index (SHI) that measures communal hostilities around religion has ranked India as the worst performing country with highest number of hostilities recorded (Pew Research Center, 2020).

India has been ranked 159th in 2024 World Press Freedom Index. With some reported deaths of journalists for their work, the country has been ranked as one of the most dangerous countries for journalists to work in (Reporters without Border, 2021). The report also mentions that with the re-election of the Modi government in 2019, there has been an increased pressure on the media to align itself to the Hindu nationalist agenda of the Modi led Bharatiya Janata Party. More often, participants espousing Hindutva in public debates remove anything that is critical of the government and its policies by terming it as 'anti-national'. There are systematically coordinated efforts to ramp up hate campaigns against journalists who expose and offend the brigade of Hindutva followers, sometimes also calling for murders of journalists involved. These campaigns take a vicious and more worrying turn if the journalists involved are women. Journalists who are critical of the authorities are gagged by invoking criminal prosecutions and by invoking section 124a of the Indian penal code—sedition—which is punishable with life imprisonment.

Ensuring that the media is not working as the watchdog of the government anymore, there is an increasing body of data that indicates that the BJP uses its power to threaten its opposition and critics alike (Ganguly, 2020). Amidst the COVID pandemic that clearly brought forward the failure of governmental mechanisms, resulting in massive number of deaths of people due to lack of access to healthcare (Ranjan, 2020), there is real danger that the pandemic was used to cover the erosion of democratic values that is presently underway in India (Ganguly, 2020). Since this government has assumed office, political leaders have repeatedly passed anti-

Muslim and Hindu nationalist comments in their speeches that has riled up crowds, and provoked violent attacks by political supporters who think that they have political validation and impunity (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Muslim men have been beaten for dating Hindu women, there have been laws passed for interfaith marriages or against 'love-jihad'—ideology accusing Muslim men of converting Hindu women through marriage—and the organized abuse of judicial and police institutions to advance political vested interests, have become commonplace (Biswas, 2020 & Human Rights Watch, 2020).

There is growing evidence that the government seeks to suppress political dissent through deploying draconian anti-terrorist laws, the most popular being the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) that permits the government to label people as 'terrorists' on apparently ambiguous grounds (Sibal, 2020 & Ganguly, 2020). This law has been notoriously invoked against people who have spoken up for the oppressed, have advocated for civil rights and especially those who have critiqued the government and its schemes (Sibal, 2020). As people are taking up to the streets to protest the tyrannical decisions and schemes of the government, fanatic Hindu mobs, several of them associated with the ruling BJP, are set loose in these movements to physically attack the protesters (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Often this is used as a garb to attack the vulnerable Muslim population in the country (Ganguly, 2020).

Global Protests and Humor

Humor is a way of communication that is neither good nor bad, by itself (Sorenson, 2013). It can be used as a powerful tool in protests and social movements ('t Hart, 2007). It can assume several forms and entail something ridiculous, absurd, witty, ironic, sarcastic, satire or be just funny (Hiller, 1983). The need to understand humor as a process that communicates

information about the structural characteristics has been repeatedly emphasized by scholars (Martineau, 1972).

There has been historical evidence of humor being used for creating and bolstering intimacy and solidarity across different cultures and racial subcultures (Middleton & Moland, 1959). The aggression of the Nazis in Czechoslovakia led to the creation of gallows humor among Czechs who used ironic humor as a key symbol of resistance (Obrdlik, 1942). In authoritarian and repressive regime, humor acted as a psychological tool to escape from the 'unalterable' (Obrdlik, 1942). Such humor is usually self-deprecating and consolidates fellowship among the minority and oppressed groups (Davies, 1990). However, these jokes stop being humorous if the ruling group uses them to emphasize the minority position of the oppressed.

Though significant and integral to question the regime and hold the powerful to accountability, humor is highly context-bound ('t Hart, 2007). The variation in class, caste, and other social groups adds to the complexity of humor and its capability to travel across place and space (Kuipers, 2006). Especially in a polarized setting, humor tends to be one of the first casualties because seriousness and a focus on righteousness of claims usually inhibits laughter. Moreover, usually social protests are propelled by anger and frustration which leave limited space for light-hearted and frivolous thoughts.

In the case of the Arab Spring, Moalla (2013) showed that humor helped the demonstrators to cope with confusion, fear and uncertainty caused by the toppling of Ben Ali's regime. By laughing at Ali, Tunisians built solidarity, expressed critique, and simultaneously gained a sense of relief from decades of oppression. Similarly, the Egyptian protests in 2011

deployed humor to cope with stress along with critiquing Mubarak's government in a powerful yet calm mechanism (Helmy & Frerichs, 2013). Camps-Febrer (2012) aptly noted, "political humor can open up the space for critics by bringing down the first layer of fear" (p.46).

Laughtivism

The popular opinion is that resistance to oppression is a serious business. There is now evidence that laughtivism proves to be a helpful component of successful nonviolent resistance (Popovic, 2020). Laughtivism can be referred to the strategic use of humor by nonviolent social movements to challenge the authority of the government, status quo, and dismantle fear and apathy in people (Popovic, 2014). There have been cases around the world that have indicated the effectiveness of laughtivism to address racism, hate-mongering and xenophobic authoritarianism (Popovic, 2020). In the Serbian case of Otpor (meaning resistance) movement, humorous actions and laughtivism played crucial roles in the strategy of bringing down the regime of Milošević, back in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Jul Sorensen, 2008).

Popovic (2020) notes that the process of laughtivism presents the opponent with a dilemma. The government can either respond to those who are ridiculing it by detaining them, confiscating property, or sentencing practitioners—thus making themselves look more ridiculous. The other option is to oversee and ignore the tactics of laughtivism and subsequently opening the floodgates of more ridicule and in the process amplifying the ridicule and replicas of the original stunt. As authoritarian power has no sense of humor, they also lack choices. If the government ignores the prank, they would be perceived as weak and if they act up on it, the government will end up looking more bizarre and stupid. Humor breaks fear and builds confidence, incorporates the 'cool factor', attracts, mobilizes new members, and poses a dilemma

for the opponent that runs the risk of leading to clumsy reactions. He states, “Laughtivists are in a unique position to use critical irony to expose these flaws, unmask the farce, and show that the emperor, in fact, has no clothes” (Popovic, 2020).

Jul Sorensen (2008) sees three main functions of humor in nonviolent resistance—a) Enabling outreach and mobilization of people beyond the movement, especially attracting younger members and students to bring more energy to the movement; b) Cultivating a culture of resistance both internally and externally and building solidarity for participation in resistance, especially by sharing humor and having shared knowledge of laughing at something common, and c) “Turning oppression upside down” referring to changing the power relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed.

The third function of humor is most crucial, especially in oppressive regimes. By turning oppression upside down, three things happen. Firstly, the humor is confrontational in nature and is used to mock, ridicule, or humiliate, thus escalating the pressure on the oppressor. Secondly, though the increased pressure escalates the chance of retaliation, it reduces the amount of fear within the movement. Thirdly, the usage of humor reduces the options of the oppressor to react in a way that he can later justify. The Otpor movement in Serbia had a core leadership whose strategy was to provoke Milošević by using humor and reducing his fear among people (Jul Sorensen, 2008)). This also referred to the conceptual fluidity of power in the context of resistance and domination. Power is not something that can be constant with its absolute absence or presence, but it is a relational concept with dynamic interplay between opposing forces.

Since centuries, humor has been used as a powerful tool by the oppressed to question and satirize the state authorities holding power. Although it has been largely effective in social

movements around the world, the "locality in humor is an important marker of distinction between social movements, ranging from Occupy Wall Street to Egyptian and Greek protests" (Kaptan, 2006). Studying the deployment of local humor in Gezi Park protests in Turkey, Kaptan (2006) studied the graffiti on social media and found that the humor originating from local and traditional folk stories were not only creative forms of opposition to the conservative government but also formed a local response to global capitalism.

The Historical and Cultural Specificity of Indian Humor

In India's tradition of theatre, there are early discussions about humor present in sage Bharat's *Natyashastra,* an ancient treatise on the theory of drama (Vatsyayan, 1996). Authored by sage Bharat, *Natyashastra* is dated between 200 BC and 200 AD. It covers various topics around theatre and classifies humor as one of the eight *rasas* (mood effects) that can be produced through drama. This work lists numerous devices through which laughter can be recreated with 'juxtaposition' and 'mimicry' being one of them. Kumar (2012) notes, "the presence of humor as a theatrical troupe in ancient India provided a foundation for it to flourish in subsequent years and legitimized its presence in public and distinctly political spaces" (p. 82).

Especially in modern India, political comedy has existed at least since the consolidation of British colonial rule. Since the origins of the Indian press are traced back to the resistance against the British, political leaders and freedom fighters often wrote in newspapers to mobilize support and public opinion (Parameswaran, 2009). Political satire occupied important forms of political commentary in those newspapers. Simply put, political comedy in India has strong roots in the freedom struggle of the country. In postcolonial India, this tradition has evolved forms but has sustained, nevertheless. The flourishing of satire during colonial rule reflects its tendency to

thrive during increased censorship, as direct political criticism is easier to regulate rather than the nebulous area of comedy (Baym, 2005). Additionally, during the infamous suspension of the democratic process by then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, and the imposition of emergency[3] from 1975-1977, newspapers were censored for any commentary on the politically powerful (Freedman, 2009). This brief historical trajectory establishes the long-standing combination of comedy and politics in India.

The usage of humor in movements, especially political protests, has been a significant phenomenon and has been widely used in transnational movements (Varol, 2014). Though social movements are transnationally comparable and share commonalities in different areas, they do identify as unique and peculiar at the local level (Sotirakopoulos & Rootes, 2014). Humor is an important technique used in social movements often as the 'weapon of the weak' (Hart, 2007). As a result, despite the transnational comparisons of global social movements, humor has remained local and derived its life and blood from the local cultural forms.

Revolutionary humor can assume a plethora of forms such as photos, cartoons, comics, videos, hand-made signs on the protest sites, text messages, Facebook posts, Instagram stories, Tweets, jokes, and satire directed at the government leaders. In the simplest sense, stand-up comedy refers to "a comedian who tells funny stories through comedic performances by speaking directly to a live audience in an attempt to get the audience laughing" (Christing, 2021).

[3] Stretching from 1975-77, the Emergency is a highly controversial political period when the erstwhile Prime Minister from the Indian National Congress, Indira Gandhi, declared a state of emergency in the country citing internal and external threats. During this period, more than 100,000 Gandhi's political opponents that included politicians, journalists and dissenters were imprisoned. Media was heavily censored and elections were cancelled.

Stand-up Comedy as Political Dissenters in India

Through my study, I situate political stand-up comedy and political comedians as significant actors in the larger ambit of a social movement towards political change in India. For the dissertation project, I focus on the singular platform of stand-up comedy as an important tool of political protest. The extant literature has limited studies on humor and political change in developing countries and my study aims to fill that gap by providing an Indian dimension.

Stand-up comedy in India is set to have formally begun in 2003 when comedian Vir Das came to New Delhi to perform. At that time, he had just returned to India from studying in the US where he worked as a comedian at open mics in Chicago (Nuske, 2018). The success of his shows started a new enthusiasm for this new genre of comedy and inspired many to pursue this as a career. His shows were inspired by a more rough and vulgar American stand-up humor, and he eventually evolved his content to barely fit the Indian sensibilities. With the emergence of YouTube as a video sharing platform in 2005, the foundations of the spread of stand-up comedy were laid. Moreover, the video clips of comedians from the Indian diaspora such as the Indo-Canadian stand-up comic Russell Peters garnered attention and increased the demand for Anglophone Western comedy in India (Nuske, 2018). During 2008's recession, numerous Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) moved back to India from the West, where the genre of stand-up comedy was already popular. With their western ideas combined with the local cultural and economic capital, stand-up comedy started to be seen as a formal, profitable industry in India (Paul, 2017).

Even today, Vir Das continues to be a stand-up comedian who is extremely vocal in voicing his critical opinions of the government through his shows. He is facing an onslaught of

police complaints over a comedy monologue that he performed on his US tour in 2021, that described India's contradiction on religious extremism, COVID, women's safety and politics. During his performance, he said, "I come from an India where we worship women during the day and gang rape them at night". After the video went viral, a spokesperson of the ruling BJP said, "The derogatory statements against women and India are inflammatory. They were made in the US and malign the image of our country internationally. I want police to conduct an investigation" (Ellis, Peterson, 2021).

Another Muslim comedian Munawar Faruqui was arrested in early 2021 in Indore, a central Indian city, shortly after his show ended. He was accused of 'insulting' Hindu religious sentiments in the jokes he had prepared but not performed in that show (BBC, 2021). Though his bail was denied, police noted that they had no evidence of him insulting Hindu gods and the allegations were based on the complainant overhearing 'some jokes' during the show's preparation. This incident triggered repeated heckling of Faruqui who had to cancel almost 12 shows in 2021 over repeated threats from the Hindutva groups (BBC, 2021). These cases are just a few examples of how satire is perceived as a threat to the ideology of the current government.

Radical Media as Counter Public Sphere

Analyzing radical media in the Gramscian framework of culture and power, radical media employs the notion of counter hegemony to challenge and question the dominant ideological frameworks, and to replace them with a radical alternative vision (Downing, 2001). Radical media can provide alternative options in public discourses as well as a focal point of oppositional power to dominant entity. "Moreover, not only do radical media constitute counter-information institutions, which try to 'disrupt the silence', to 'counter the lies', to 'provide the

truth', they also constitute conveyors of social change". The mission of the radical media is not only to provide facts that have been denied to the public but also explore fresh perspectives of questioning the hegemonic ideologies and processes, and eventually increasing the public confidence to foment progressive change (Downing 2001). It is crucial to have contributions from several interested parties so that multiple realities of economic situations, political cultures and oppression emerge (Downing, 1984). Emphasizing alternative and counter public spheres, radical media enables dialogic forums, especially in lateral communication (Downing, 2001). Since radical alternative media are treated as agents of change and power, especially in terms of 'popular oppositional culture', it is specifically concerned with the formation of political consciousness.

In context of my dissertation, I look at stand-up comedy as a radical media that acts as a counter-public sphere in disrupting silence on the brazen propagation of Hindutva, questioning the atrocities on minorities, especially Muslims and countering the fabricated and eventually normalized lies spread by the state sponsored agents. With the rising popularity of stand-up comedy as a genre in India, I investigate how it fits into the 'popular oppositional culture' that might be potentially contributing to spreading political awareness and eventually planting the seeds of change.

Stand-up Comedy as Subaltern Counter publics

Nancy Fraser combined the terms 'subaltern' (Spivak, 1988) and 'counterpublic' (Felski, 1989), and talked about subaltern counterpublics, spaces in parallel to the official public spheres "where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (Fraser, 1992). In

her essay, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy”, Fraser critiques the conception of public sphere by Habermas. He had conceptualized the bourgeois public sphere as a theater of political participation that would lead to the discussion of a public consensus about common good (Habermas, 1984). However, Nancy Fraser noted that the constitution of the public sphere is founded on significant exclusions, especially women. Therefore, she argued that the excluded groups formed counterpublics that mainly included woman-only associations, working class groups, peasant groups, etc. She indicated that the public sphere never comprised of a singular public but was always composed of conflictual and competing counterpublics. In fact, the public sphere was only an instrument towards conceptualizing hegemony and political domination by encouraging the proliferation of discourses naturalizing the existing order. Thus, counterpublics widen the realm of conversation, bring issues to the fore that might have been ignored or overlooked in the public sphere or suppressed by the dominant publics (Fraser, 1992).

In context of my dissertation, the notion of subaltern subjectivity is a dynamic and fluid concept. It’s not static, fixed or a monolithic definition that could only be extended to stand-up comedians. Often, with the emergence of stand-up comedy as a popular genre in India, just its very existence does not automatically qualify it as a parallel space that is inventing and circulating counter discourses and oppositional interpretations of identity, interests and needs of marginalized population. It’s not always the case with stand-up comedy or any other art form. With the phenomenon I investigated for this research study, when the comedians articulate a political critique of BJP, a perspective that will not find space in the mainstream media in India, they align with the subaltern subjectivity. When a comedian from a lower caste speaks about the caste atrocities, and the social mechanism of manufacturing Hindu supremacy as well as

victimhood, the comedian embodies subaltern subjectivity. When a comedy club comprising of people who agree with the socially critical stance of the comedians come together to listen and laugh, the comedy club inhabits a subaltern orientation, especially when the mainstream imagination actively opposes and penalizes dissent. Simply put, I define subaltern counterpublics as a sensibility that is dynamic, shape shifting and indicates resistance and dissent to the hegemonic narrative at various levels, and in different spaces.

While the mainstream media has been unsuccessful in being a watchdog of the political establishment, there has been an emergence of alternative spaces and media forms for communicating different and often dissenting opinions, with stand-up comedy being one of them. As both comedy and social justice issues have a common underlying spirit of questioning the status quo and prompting the people to view issues from different perspectives (Chattoo, 2019), stand-up comedy in India has the potential to facilitate conversations about political issues that are not generally deemed 'safe' to discuss in the mainstream. The emergence of several stand-up comedians on digital platforms has opened-up avenues to talk about political issues, thus widening the boundaries of issues and conversations that might be deliberately ignored in the public sphere of mainstream media or suppressed by the government or government owned media houses.

On a concluding note, this chapter maps the review of literature on global protests, humor and stand-up comedy in India. Using the theoretical frameworks of laughtivism and subaltern counterpublics, my dissertation examines an undertheorized non-violent political tool of stand-up comedy as a form of non-violent resistance. My dissertation focusses on the function of comedy as a creative medium of subversion and protest when conventional dissent is penalized by postcolonial, authoritarian regimes. It seeks to understand how comedians, comedy and its

audiences re-imagine accountability from the government and produce spaces that are critical of the government, especially in the absence of independent mainstream media. The global scholarship on political comedy is often centered in North America and is replete with studies around late-night shows, Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert and Trevor Noah. My research fulfils this gap and centers Indian comedians like Kunal Kamra, Sanjay Rajoura and Varun Grover, their very important work, and contributes an Indian perspective to the rich culture of humor for social activism in the Global South. Instead of treating comedy as catharsis and entertainment, my dissertation articulates how laughter can disrupt state power, spur political awareness and act as a radical media that challenges the supposed 'harmless' framing of humor in an authoritarian regime.

Chapter III

Methodology

Since the rise to power of the current ruling government in India in 2014, and its subsequent re-election in 2019 and 2024, there has been an unapologetic promotion of Hindutva—an ideology that has fueled radical right-wing Hindu nationalism. This ideological shift has increasingly labeled critics of the government, its policies, and institutions as "anti-national" (Reporters Without Borders, 2021). Hindutva, distinct from the ancient religion of Hinduism, envisions a Hindu nation-state governed by a Hindu social hierarchy. It also represents the political ideology aligned with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) (Subramaniam, 2020).

Globally, humor has emerged as a powerful tool of resistance against authoritarian governance, allowing citizens to ridicule and challenge oppressive power structures. According to Popovic (2020), humor disarms fear and flips power relations—those who laugh at authority momentarily reclaim agency by exposing its absurdities and contradictions. In contemporary India, comedians have increasingly used satire to highlight and critique the authoritarian tendencies of the BJP-led regime. However, this defiance has not been without consequence. Numerous comedians have faced legal actions, with some even being arrested for their performances (see Fernando & Johri, 2021).

Their crime has been that they joked about the ruling government and their policies. While some people deemed it as casual jokes, some felt that it’s a threat to national security and sovereignty. My dissertation answers the following research questions that have been segmented in terms of comedians, their content and audiences of stand-up comedy:

RQ1: How do the biographical experiences of Indian stand-up comedians inform their performative strategies for resisting the BJP's Hindutva project?

RQ2: How does stand-up comedy performances resist the Hindutva narrative of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India?

RQ3: How does stand-up comedy use social media as an extended space for subaltern counter publics?

This is qualitative research based on three case studies covering three different comedians—Sanjay Rajoura, Varun Grover and Kunal Kamra whose stand-up work is anchored in political comedy in India. Using case studies as the methodology enabled me to examine different kinds of data to answer my research questions and gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of using stand-up comedy for political activism in the country. Rooted in critical cultural studies, my dissertation draws from the frameworks of laughtivism and subaltern counterpublic sphere.

Qualitative Research

For most social sciences, the paradigm of positivism drives the pursuit of scientific knowledge. Positivism propounds that reality is an organized, material world which is independent of the researcher; it can be known through rational inquiry and measurement, and that mathematical form will provide an insight into the nature of objective reality (McGrath & Johnson, 2003). It also implies that the researchers are detached from their research (and the researched) to have a clearer and better understanding of the phenomena, sometimes better than the ‘researched’ themselves. It indicates an inherent power hierarchy between the researcher and

the participants of the study. Most of the contemporary scholarship calling for use of qualitative methods is embedded in a critique of positivist paradigm (McGrath & Johnson, 2003). The critique has come from several lenses of constructionism, feminism, Marxism, and other interpretive perspectives (Denzin & Lincoln 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The critics also argue about the claims of 'objectivity' that emphasize the micro-level, often linear causal relationships between abstract variables rather than context-situated processes. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) perfectly captures the essence of positivism, "Understanding is viewed as being akin to measuring" (p.44). Due to these distortions, this paradigm provides a limited and obfuscated perspective of reality, especially involving human behavior. Apart from the ontological concerns about the existence of a rigid, monolithic, and knowable version of reality, there are also epistemological questions including if one can ever objectively recognize this reality (Rosaldo, 1989).

Generically speaking, "Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; p.4). It constitutes a set of interpretive and constructivist approaches that recognize and visibilize the world through representations, field notes, interviews, conversations, and visuals. Most of the time, qualitative researchers make sense of things in their natural settings and interpret the phenomena in context of the meaning people attach to them. This methodological shift acknowledges that it is not possible to observe and find people's experiences with absolute accuracy and rebuffs the positivistic value constructs of reliability and validity (Williams & Elliott, 2010).

Establishing my work in qualitative methodology, I used case studies to explore the role of stand-up comedy for political resistance in India. Since my dissertation topic probed the role

of humor, especially stand-up comedy as a potential space for political resistance and activism, a constructivist approach that is based on qualitative methodology fit aptly to my study. Combined with my own epistemology, I believe that opting for a case study was immensely helpful in providing sufficient flexibility and freedom to investigate the phenomenon in depth.

Case Study

Case studies are used in research that attempts to delve in an in-depth, exploratory area of work (Zainal, 2007). I believe that it's a robust methodology for my research because the study will constitute a holistic investigation of the phenomenon which might present factors that were not thought of before. A case study can be defined as an "empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used" (Yin, 1984, p.23).

This research project treated comedians as case studies and closely examined the phenomenon of using stand-up comedy for political resistance. I primarily used interviews, textual analysis and social media discourse analysis for my research and describe more in-depth about the methods in the subsequent sections.

Interviews

In both qualitative and quantitative research methods, interviews constitute a fundamental research method. The function of an interview is to investigate experiences, motivations, perspectives and understandings of the participants (Berkovic, 2024). Interviews are techniques or procedures used to collect data (della Porta, 2014). Qualitative interviews have been oriented

towards ‘rich descriptions of people and interactions as they exist and unfold in their native habitats’ (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997; pg.6). Especially in social movement studies, there has been a relative scarcity of systematic curation of documents or databases, giving in-depth interviews more importance. della Porta (2014) notes that an approach of in-depth interviews comprising of life histories enables the reconstruction of the dynamics of political participation where interviewees are used to understand dimensions of a movement—ranging from mobilization strategies and re-imagining alternative visions. Such interviews are of crucial significance for the study of motives and beliefs as well as the identities and emotions of the movement and activists (Blee, 2013). Interviews are suitable for situations where the research is seeking to understand the sense actors have of their own environment (della Porta, 2014). It helps when the researchers wish to analyze the meaning individuals attribute to the external world, their participation in it, the construction of their identity, emotions and attitudes.

It has been established that interviews help in detecting human agency that gives a glimpse into the daily lives of the interviewees. Blee and Taylor (2002) note that they “generate representations that embody the subject’s voice, minimizing, at least as much as possible, the voice of the researcher” (p.96). The assumption is that interviewees possess the cultural and analytical toolkit that they draw from when responding to a question. For a successful interview, it is imperative that the interviewer is not interviewed vaguely about their opinion but is considered as an individual having precious knowledge that the interviewer does not have (Kaufmann, 2009). So, it becomes important to pay attention to how a researcher presents themselves in an interview dynamic to create, and maintain trust, and to see the world from the perspective of the interviewee. Rather than collecting data, an interview must be treated as a space where cultural knowledge is created and deployed (della Porta, 2014). In situations, the

interviewers may suggest orientations and linkages to diverse aspects of the respondents' experiences and can also invite interpretations that draw from specific cultural toolkits, connections or outlooks. An interview can also explore incompletely articulated aspects of experience and encourage development of topics that are relevant to the interviewee's daily lives and their topic of interest (Gubrium and Holstein, 1997).

Textual Analysis

Texts include books, newspapers, films, magazines, websites, television programs, videos, video games, podcasts and advertisements, that qualitative researchers interpret to understand the relationships and interactions between the media, culture and society (Brennan, 2013). Stuart Hall defines text as "literary and visual constructs, employing symbolic means, shaped by rules, conventions and traditions intrinsic to the use of language in its wildest sense" (Hall, 1975). Texts provide the mechanisms of socially constructed realities that can be understood by considering ideas, words, concepts, themes and issues that exist in those texts, as they are studied within a specific cultural context (Atkinson and Coffey, 2011).

Through conducting textual analysis, a qualitative researcher evaluates and interprets meanings found in a text to investigate how they create, perpetuate, sustain or resist our social realities. Instead of focusing on evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of the text, a qualitative researcher examines social practices, assumptions, embedded ideology, representations and stories about society and our lives. The texts are examined not to predict or control individual responses to them but to understand how people use texts to make meaning and sense of their lives (Brennan, 2013).

While analyzing the texts, the researchers consider the author's intentions as well as their rationale for creating a specific kind of text. Since it is important to consider the context of the interpretation process, it is crucial to seek insights into the historical, cultural and economic relationships between the text and a specific social setting at a particular place in time.

Though Hall (1980) explained that when a text is created, its author embeds meaning into each text and hopes for that dominant meaning to be understood by the people who decode its meaning. Brennan (2013) notes, "Some people will decode a text as the author intended, understanding the dominant code reproduced by the author. Others will take a negotiated position, understanding the intended meaning but also considering their own experiences and decoding the text while taking both views into consideration. Still others will take an oppositional view, rejecting the intended meaning and constructing a completely different interpretation of the message" (pg. 211). Kracauer (1952-53) also mentioned that some texts represented dominant ideological positions within a culture that come across as common sense—beliefs and attitudes that are used to create and maintain a particular worldview that was culturally specific.

My dissertation identifies how standup comedy resists the ideological construction of 'common sense' that favors a state-sponsored Hindu social order in India and marginalizes other religious minorities. By analyzing stand-up comedy performances on YouTube, I analyze how they help to construct an opposition to the hegemonic ideology of Hindutva in India and work to disrupt the 'common sense' by talking about the political, economic, social and cultural contexts of a particular time. By examining texts as sources of power, I examine what issues that comedians perform on and how they frame their resistance to the authoritarian government's ideology.

Social Media Discourse Analysis

With the rise of social media, there has been an erosion of centralized, dominant form of institutionalized knowledge that synthesized a sense of shared identity and set of beliefs (Zizek, 1997). Jodi Dean notes that the collapse of the 'symbolic' has been accompanied by the overlapping patterns of connectivity by social media that include bundles of entertainment and localized interests (Dean, 5). Facebook, X, YouTube have replaced the former top-down 'collective culture' that provided an authoritative kind of knowledge (Bouview and Machin, 2018).

Critical methodologies dissect the 'archeology of knowledge' and identify how human discourse is linked to social constructions, narratives and ideologies (Foucalt, 1972). Social media discourse analysis studies how language is used in online communication to make meaning of the underlying social dynamics and power relations. Going beyond just looking at the content of posts or comments, it examines how language constructs meaning and how it shapes social interactions and ideologies (Tamassy, 2021).

When combing through the themes of the comments on YouTube, Owen's (1984) criteria of recurrence, repetition and forcefulness identified shared experiences in the corpus of the comments. Owen differentiated between recurrence and repetition by explaining that the former's salience is significant when the meaning is repeated, not necessarily by using the same words. Repetition referred to more specific reappearance of key words or phrases. Owen's third coding tool of forcefulness marked the importance that participants assigned to their words, especially via tone, volume and inflection.

In my dissertation, I examined the YouTube comments on the stand-up performances and examined how they were decoded by the audience. The thematic analysis of the themes in YouTube comments connected the patterned results to larger social ideologies, that tied recurrence of beliefs and audience's feelings to the hegemonic structures and ideologies (Lawless & Chen, 2018).

Research Process

To address RQ1 on *how the biographical experiences of Indian stand-up comedians inform their performative strategies for resisting the BJP's Hindutva project,* I interviewed comedians who have produced stand-up comedy about electoral politics in India. Considering the time restraints and logistical issues, I interviewed 5 stand-up comedians—Sanjay Rajoura, Varun Grover, Kunal Kamra, Zeeshan Iqbal (name changed) and Noor Ahmed (name changed). I changed the names of the two Muslim comedians to protect their identities. Being Muslim puts them in an added danger and their participation in my dissertation could potentially make them a target of potential backlash that might affect them, their families and careers. Though Zeeshan, during my interview with him, mentioned that I could use his real name if the research will not be published in India, but in today's intensely digitally connected world, it is difficult to control the flow of information across geographical borders. Hence, I decided not to use the real names for both Muslim comedians. Since all of them are popular and well-established names, my initial attempts at reaching out to them were hugely unsuccessful. I got to know that a close friend, who works in advertising in India, knew Varun Grover personally. She was generous enough to connect me with him who then opened the gates of connecting with other comedians. I interviewed Varun Grover on zoom for an hour. Though he did not allow any recording of the conversation, I was able to take extensive notes. The conversation proved to be extremely helpful

to start getting insights into the work that goes into curating political stand-up. Through snowball sampling, Varun connected me with Sanjay Rajoura who in turn connected me with Kunal Kamra. I also interviewed Sanjay on zoom for about 2 hours where he was extremely generous and insightful with his time. For Kunal, he was travelling and could not speak with me on an online call. We decided on an arrangement where I sent him my questions and he responded to each question through detailed WhatsApp voice notes. My conversation with Kunal was asynchronous. I got contacts of Zeeshan Iqbal and Noor Ahmed through Varun Grover and Vasu Primlani respectively. Vasu is a US based, Indian origin comedian who I was speaking to, for my preliminary research on how comedy works.

Through the semi structured interviews with them, I learnt about their motives, processes and intended objectives of producing stand-up comedy. Understanding their biographical background of upbringing, schooling, work and familial lives was helpful in giving insights about the comedians, their multiple realities (Fraser, 1990), socio-cultural backgrounds and perhaps layers of oppression that led them to find other creative, alternative media to voice their opinion. Our conversations revolved around how they chose the content, among many other questions. Is it based on their personal experiences and/or frustrations? Did they see themselves as artists, comedians, activists and/or all three of them? Are they looking for a specific action from their audiences? How do they decide the topic and curate content? The full questionnaire is attached in the appendix.

To answer this question more comprehensively, the semi-structured interview was supplemented with the examination of their social media presence. It was not just restricted to their social media profiles, but also their non-comedy work that is circulating on social media,

such as talk shows, interviews, films and podcasts. It was helpful to corroborate insights into their motivations, passions, and interests.

For the second research question, *how does stand-up comedy performances resist the Hindutva narrative of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India,* the stand-up routines of Varun, Sanjay and Kunal, on YouTube, were textually analyzed. The performances included only one video of each comedian that met the two conditions: 1) The performance should be about electoral politics; 2) The video should have been performed from 2014 onwards. If there were more than 1 video of their stand-up comedy online, the video with the maximum number of views was chosen. Noor and Zeeshan were not included in the analysis for RQ2 to protect their identities. The analysis examined stand-up comedy on YouTube as a site of activism for political resistance by examining political issues espoused, usage of language, metaphors, choice of government issues, and coverage by the mainstream news of those issues. The traditional linguistic analysis was situated in relation to their involvement in reproducing or resisting the systems of ideology and social power (Richardson, 2007).

For the third research question on *how stand-up comedy uses social media as an extended space for subaltern counter publics*, I analyzed the comments on YouTube videos examined for RQ2, to understand the reception of comedy by audience and the affordability of digital media in extending that subaltern counter public sphere. For the research, I conducted a critical thematic analysis of the first 50 comments on each video and came up with themes that are described with specific examples. The analysis illustrated that comedy, and YouTube do not always extend the public sphere and can, in instances, be also co-opted by the dominant narratives of the public sphere.



Figure 2. Kunal Kamra



Figure 3. Varun Grover



Figure 4. Sanjay Rajoura

My Ontology & Self-Reflexivity

Corbin and Strauss (2008) succinctly note, "Qualitative researchers have a natural curiosity that leads them to study worlds that interest them and that they otherwise might not have access to…[they] enjoy thinking in terms of complex relationships" (p. 13). As they point towards qualitative researchers being a certain type, I admit having a humanistic bent in my research methodology that comes almost naturally, probably attributing to my upbringing in a community-oriented culture. While growing up with extremely hospitable parents, there were relatives and family friends coming over almost every day and introversion was not just an option. Talking to them, listening to their day-to-day happenings, joyous moments, dilemmas, issues of family politics, grief among other things developed a sense of curiosity in me towards human experiences. Sometimes this was either firsthand or through my parents.

I believe that there is no one reality out there waiting to be discovered (Geertz, 1973). I would align my interpretive lens with the constructivist viewpoint that broadly postulates that concepts and theories are constructed by researchers out of stories that are constructed by research participants, who are trying to make sense of their experiences for both themselves and the researcher (see Corbin & Strauss, 2008). I also bring components of transformative frameworks, pragmatism, and critical theory to my work.

In terms of paradigms, I see my research being situated in a culture-centered, participatory approach. Aligning this research further with the participatory action paradigm, I believe that true science should not just produce theories and conceptual contributions, it should also be dedicated to coming up with effective ways of service and action for justice and equity. In the context of my dissertation, the stand-up comics construct their own motivations and

meaning of producing political comedy and how they see their work in the realm of socio-political change in the country. The methodology of the research incorporates a praxis involving comedians and people who view their performance in constructing empowered knowledge (Fals-Borda, 2006).

Looking at political comedy as an alternative space where marginalized opinions are finding a voice in India, the task of the research is to visibilize that knowledge, defend the interests of comedians, people who do not agree with the government's ideology, and document the powerful counter narrative. Melkote & Steeves (2015) aptly note, "The PAR approach, then, by resuscitating and elevating popular knowledge and establishing a counter discourse, disrupts the position of development as articulated by the dominant discourse, causing a crisis in authority and creating a space for marginalized groups to influence social change" (p. 420) (also see Gramsci, 1971). Specifically, through this dissertation topic, I would like to emphasize the power of humor in talking about social issues that would not have a solid impact when talked about seriously.

Chapter IV

From Personal to Political: How Lived Experiences Shape Comedic Resistance

RQ1: How do the biographical experiences of Indian stand-up comedians inform their performative strategies for resisting the BJP's Hindutva project?

As I enter the dimly lit performance hall in McDonald Theatre in Eugene, Oregon, it is pleasantly surprising to hear a playlist of spunky Hindi rap playing in the background. Hearing your language in a foreign land is a surreal feeling, let alone its music playing at a public place. People, mostly brown looking, are gently swarming to find their seats and a fluorescent blue light illuminates a standing mike on the stage. Next to it is a textured, light-brown colored stool that has a glass of water. A typical stand-up comedy set up.

On an unusually warm September evening of 2022, Vir Das was about to perform in the laid-back university town of Eugene, Oregon. He is a popular Indian stand-up comedian, who is often credited with bringing stand-up comedy to India from the US when he was studying in Chicago in the early 2000s. As the hall gradually fills up and gets almost packed, Vir Das makes a spirited entry on a customized audio montage of his punchlines and the coverage of his shows by the Indian media, including snippets of the backlash from the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Deafening claps and cheers ensue. Having a wheatish complexion with a stubble, and dressed in blue sweatpants, black T-shirt, brown casual jacket with a purple headband, he seems to be at ease and used to such massive attention. The applause is not fading. As Vir grabs the mic and starts to talk, it becomes a cue for us to stop clapping and take our seats. The excitement is palpable in the hall and some of the audience members came to Eugene from Olympia, Seattle, and Portland, all between 2-8 hours' drive, just to be able to watch his show.

Vir Das is vocal in voicing critique of the government through his comedy shows. He is facing an onslaught of police complaints over a comedy monologue that he performed on his US tour in November 2021 that described India's contradiction on religious extremism, COVID, women's safety, and politics. During his performance then, he had said, "I come from an India where we worship women during the day and gang rape them at night". After the video went viral, a spokesperson of the ruling BJP said, "The derogatory statements against women and India are inflammatory. They were made in the US and malign the image of our country internationally. I want police to conduct an investigation" (Ellis, Peterson, 2021). While performing in Eugene, he also included comedic bits and pieces on several police complaints and cases that he is facing in India for his earlier US tour. Weaving his narrative with a mix of amusement, storytelling, and moments of seriousness, he spoke about the implications of doing political comedy on his mental health, his family, finances, and his love for the country.

Back in the day, his shows were inspired by a more rough and vulgar American stand-up humor, and he eventually evolved his content to fit the Indian sensibilities. With the emergence of YouTube as a video sharing platform in 2005, the foundations of the spread of stand-up comedy were laid. Moreover, the video clips of comedians from the Indian diaspora such as the Indo-Canadian stand-up comedian Russell Peters garnered attention and increased the demand for Anglophone Western comedy (Nuske, 2018)). During 2008's recession, numerous Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) moved back to India from the West, where the genre of stand-up comedy was already popular. With their adopted Western ideas combined with the local cultural and economic capital, stand-up comedy started to be seen as a formal, profitable industry in India (Paul, 2017).

At the end of the show, I approached Vir Das and asked him what makes comedy more than just comedy today, especially in the political realm of India, and he said, “When it comes to stand-up comedy, India is not an intolerant market but it’s a young market. People are still figuring out the protocol and as long as you [audience] laugh loudly, it does not matter if 10 people like me come and go…you must be loud!” When I complimented him on how his comedy provides a space for critique for the government that several mainstream media outlets have failed to do, he says, “Thanks but please send the bail money.”



Figure 5. Vir Das

Studying Comedians

To learn more about how comedians, like Vir Das, are challenging the status quo of BJP in India I conducted interviews with five comedy professionals and examined their motivations, experiences and creative processes that go into shaping and curating their comedy. This chapter draws its observations from in depth interviews with Indian standup comedians– Varun Grover, Sanjay Rajoura, Kunal Kamra, Zeeshan Iqbal and Noor Ahmed, and identifies the shared practices, norms, objectives, and ethos that influences their socially critical comedy in the current socio-political context in India. Understanding their biographical background was helpful in gaining insights about their multiple realities (Fraser, 1990) and socio-cultural backgrounds that shaped their motivations to question the status quo, mock power and find other creative and alternative media to voice opinions. How do they choose the content? Is it based on their personal experiences and/or frustrations? Do they see themselves as artists, comedians, activists and/or all three of them? Are they looking for a specific action from their audiences? How do they decide the topic and curate content?

Answering the research question of *how the biographical experiences of Indian stand-up comedians inform their performative strategies for resisting the BJP's Hindutva project*, this chapter articulates how comedians conceptualize their role in the wider ambit of political activism, and if they view themselves as agents of social change and cultural production especially when social justice efforts have been augmented by digital activism. While the interviewed comedians are doing extremely crucial work, I do not want to claim that they are representing the entirety of comedy landscape in India. Some comedians are doing some excellent work but due to the limited time, access, and resources, I could not interview more of them. Furthermore, there are some comedians who have not made it to the world of YouTube

and viral reels, thus limiting their discoverability. The participants of this dissertation include some established names as well as up and coming artists who have niche audiences and have mass followings on social media handles. Varun Grover, Sanjay Rajoura and Kunal Kamra are veterans in the field of Indian political comedy and the other two comedians, Zeeshan Iqbal (name changed) and Noor Ahmed (name changed) are swiftly amassing a huge fan following and are frequent openers for already established comedy names.

The critical thematic analysis of the interviews birthed some key themes around which I organized this chapter. Firstly, comedians despise power and derive its meaning from past experiences and personal trauma and challenge the notions of 'political'. Secondly, they have a strong sense of their identities which is reflected in their other non-comedy work of writing films, acting, and hosting talk shows. Thirdly, they view themselves, first and foremost, as comics who want to make their audiences laugh and not as activists for sociopolitical purposes. Lastly, they emphasize the importance of several cultural products in the Indian civic imagination such as films, TV shows, and news that has been used to prime the Indian audience towards a religious and superstitious orientation, furthering the Hindutva narrative. When these themes are examined in the context of mediated comedy in the contemporary digital era where it's shared, sliced and reshared with peers, the networked social justice efforts offer several more opportunities for public engagement through stand-up comedy in India.

Stand-up comedy in India on YouTube: Coming of Age

Though humor has a rich presence in Indian history, till 1980s, the standup comedy performances were often seen as secondary or supporting acts to relatively more mainstream performances of theatrical and musical plays (Ahmed, Alam & Kaur, 2022). However, that

changed. In 1983, an Indian actor and one of the earliest known comics of Hindi cinema, Johnny Lever released an audio cassette called *Hansee Ke Hungame* (Uproars of Laughter). The success of standup comedy as a genre was further solidified when he performed a standup routine for a charity show Hope 86 in 1986 (Ahmed, Alam & Kaur, 2022). Subsequently in early 2000s shows like the Great Indian Laughter Challenge, Comedy Circus followed by the Great Indian Tamasha further opened new avenues for laughter among Indian audiences. Primarily customized for Hindi speaking audiences, these shows enjoyed tremendous popularity and viewership on television, however, there were market constraints that dictated the content. For example, the comics had to refrain from directly commenting on political movements or matters around international relations and had to follow the format of lighthearted entertainment that included issues from Bollywood, celebrity gossip and commonplace every day experiences (Ahmed, Alam & Kaur, 2022). Comedians like Papa CJ and Vir Das spearheaded English language stand-up comedy who infused their US and UK styles and created a space for English speaking comedy among Indian audiences in the local comedy clubs in Delhi and Mumbai around 2008-09.

When Facebook was launched in 2004, along with YouTube in 2005 and Twitter in 2006, social media proved to be a transformative game changer as people consumed, produced, and shared information on an unprecedented scale and speed. The paradigm shift to the digital age of 21st century saw rapid developments that included the proliferation of Internet, the usage of digital devices such as smartphones, an upsurge in the affordance of connectivity, and a drastic transformation in entertainment delivery (Chattoo & Feldman, 2020). Combined with the developing maturity of Indian audiences in the consumption of entertainment, along with the evolution of stand-up comedy as a genre, digital media transformed the comedy landscape. Soon

afterwards, groups like All India Bakchod (AIB), The Viral Fever and the East India Comedy appeared and started to earn profits by making sketch comedies on YouTube. Soon streaming services like Netflix and Amazon Prime Video entered the Indian market in 2016 and altered the sensibilities of the Indian audiences, further augmenting the widespread popularity of stand-up comedy (Ahmed, Alam & Kaur, 2022). However, it is important to note that the choice of language of stand-up comics plays a significant role in deciding the target audience. While the English satirical stand-up comedians perform for an audience mostly belonging to the urban upper-class minority, the Hindi satirical comedians cater to both urban and rural middle class majority. Nuske (2018) has argued that comedy in English and Hindi has led to 'differing humor literacies.' Beyond the language binaries, while standup comedy was finding fertile ground and eager audiences, there was a parallel political development taking place.

Modi government's arrival to power in 2014 terminated the tradition of the Prime Minister's press conferences with the media. Using Hindi for language politics in India and for the propagation of Hindutva, Nuske (2018) noted, "the conflict between Hindi and English that derive from both sides claiming to be threatened by cultural imperialism, have been further fueled by Hindu nationalist movements and the rise of the BJP, as they have been putting particular effort into the promotion of the use of Hindi in recent years." Suddenly a theme started to take shape that included people, entities and media houses who were critical of the government and its policies labelled as the 'enemy of the state'. The state began to be often conflated with PM Modi and vice versa, thus systematically diminishing any space for disagreement, opposition, or dissent. Hindu nationalism or Hindutva became mainstream and systematic discrimination towards minorities, especially Muslims became enshrined in legislatures (Saxena, 2023). While the mainstream media outlets and legacy media channels

found themselves harshly censored or bribed by the government ads, any critical voice was met with arrests, trolling, terrorism charges, and assassinations. Against this backdrop of stifling dissent and decreasing autonomy of the fourth pillar, stand-up comedians became the unlikely, yet admired truth tellers and opinion leaders who were not the elected as officials (Chattoo & Feldman, 2020).

Personal Stories, Political Comedy

"Can everyone hear me?" Noor pauses and intently scans the audience. "I am just checking because I am a Muslim." The hall roars with gasps.

Noor Ahmed, a Delhi based female comedian, started her journey in her late twenties. Being a Muslim woman in India, she thinks that her feelings and politics are reflected in her performances. Originally from Delhi and hailing from a middle-class family that also 'saw financial crunch' growing up, she said, "I decide content from the current observations in my own life and what I see around…I feel I am an emotional person…which shows in my work as well." She was studying to become a doctor, but her father passed away when she was preparing for her medical entrance exams. She soon dropped the idea of becoming a doctor. Though she did not find the creative atmosphere to perform at home, her manager at work found her funny and encouraged her to do 'something on stage'. There were auditions happening for the comedy show the Great India Laugher Challenge where Noor wanted to go to try her hand at comedy, but her mother said that 'they need to visit her uncle.' Noor says laughing, "visiting my uncle was more important at that time!" Noor battled a severe illness that damaged her vital organs and impacted her pulmonary functions. She cannot stand and talk for long as it affects her stamina and performance. Her illness has also provided substantive fuel for her comedy. Chattoo and

Feldman (2020) noted in their book, *A Comedian, and an activist walk into a bar,* that the comics believe that their funniest and best comedy comes from personal storytelling that uses their own life experiences and reflects on the issues they care about. Talking about their personal life stories helps in creating connections and building empathy and a rapport with the audiences.

Varun Grover, the 43 years old Mumbai based lyricist, director, actor, screenwriter, and a stand-up comedian, recalled his bullying as a child and how he started to use humor to confront the bullies. As those boys were getting frustrated about why Varun wasn't scared anymore, he realized that this new tactic was working, and he eventually started to crack jokes about his bullying more often than before. These events developed a general tendency to question and laugh at *power.* Similarly*,* Sanjay Rajoura, a 50-year-old comic who returned to India from the United States after working in the software industry for 10 years, turned to writing and stand-up comedy. Growing up in a patriarchal family in Uttar Pradesh, where the father was the head, proved to be an instrumental factor in developing a dislike for all powerful and authoritative figures.

Referencing the nature of their work and comedy, I asked what is political? Varun promptly answered, "Anything that pisses people in power is political." He further elaborates, "Political can include moral policing, family structures, society and does not necessarily have to be restricted to electoral politics." Connecting political to power, he articulates a unifying thread—not questioning the status quo—that runs across social and cultural entities, including the reluctance of questioning of political leaders. Attributing it to socio-cultural institutions and norms that are rooted in conformism and patriarchy also perpetuate political power. Emphasizing the significance of humor in questioning the *political,* Paletz (1990) aptly noted, "Does not humor sometimes enable people to confront authority, to diminish it, reduce its distance and

majesty, thereby revealing authority-holders as imperfect mortals, error-prone humans, ordinary people unworthy of special respect, deference, or perpetuation in office?" (pg. 484).

Both Varun and Sanjay, along with the musician Raghu Ram, are parts of a comedy triad *Aisi Taisi Democracy* (ATD), which roughly translates to “to hell with democracy”. Their X (formerly Twitter) description says, ‘stand-up comedy, satire, jokes- basically daily news from our country’. When the group was formed in 2014, its purpose was to take pot shots at things that they find bizarre in their everyday lives. Varun said, “Though it was designed to be a political show, it was not restricted to only electoral politics...we wanted to talk about the ideas of family structures, men behaving in public spaces, urban design in India…”

Observing and articulating the functions of politics and power in everyday lives helps in making issues more personal, relatable, and funnier for the audience. Suddenly the power structures that we are so deeply immersed in, yet oblivious to their presence, become clear and prominent. As Foucault notes, power is embedded in everyday structures and manifests in different forms. While questioning the status quo and thinking critically about social institutions and structures, comedy can inspire thought and incite curiosity to provoke questions (Warner, 2004). To delineate these effects, Anderson and Kincaid (2012) have also coined the term "democomedicratic," a combination of democratic and comedic, referring to the counter-propagandistic and democracy-promoting traits of mass-mediated satire. Varun notes, *“Comedy is helpful to visibilize or articulate power structures in everyday life.”* The medium plays a key role in fostering awareness of one’s position within the power structure, both as oppressed and an oppressor.

Zeeshan, a Muslim comedian born and raised in Kolkata started stand-up in college. Hailing from the middle class, he grew up in a politically aware family especially because they were in Kolkata, a city known for its rich culture, intellect and heritage. He said, "Especially as Muslims, it's not a hobby but a necessity to be politically aware…if you are born in a Muslim family, you at least know that BJP is bad!" When asked about performing jokes in the current political milieu, Zeeshan commented, "We can't say our thoughts everywhere…even after saying something, I'll have to be careful where my exit is…Will I be able to escape…survival will take precedence over politics!"

For Noor, the comedy scene in Delhi was welcoming. Though there were very few female comedians when she started, she got opening acts for big names very soon, such as Varun Grover, Pratyush Chaubey and Abhishek Upmanyu. Citing Varun as an instrumental influence on her work, she notes, "…to make my audience laugh and think something at the same time…I am liking this a lot nowadays." Emphasizing that being a Muslim and a comedian is a scary combination in the contemporary socio-political milieu of India, she says, "I have to be careful while giving my opinion in comedy…I worry about my family and do not want to be in trouble." Noor's experience provides a glimpse of how female comedians, especially Muslims can have compounded layers of fear and threat. It speaks to the larger pattern of social media campaigns against journalists, especially female journalists who are critical of the ruling establishment and are met with terrifying repercussions that quickly goes from online bullying to physical harassment. One of the most notable dehumanizing incidents that happened in 2022 included the surfacing of an app that pretended to auction famous Muslim women, including journalists. 'Bullibai', the name of the app, translates to 'penis' and a 'female servant' in north India and has now become an insult pervasively used by online trolls supporting the Hindu nationalists

(Reporters without Borders, 2022). Reporters Without Borders issued a statement, "After talking to many Muslim women journalists, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) calls on the Indian authorities to intervene to put a stop to this form of harassment, which is both revolting and potentially dangerous for its targets."

Sanjay thinks, "Everything is political! If you do not choose your politics, politics will choose you." In the context of electoral politics, he suggests that it is crucial to practice individual agency to make an informed decision about one's political leanings. Otherwise, considering the aggressive political propaganda, primarily through the scale and speed of social media, it will be only a matter of time before one gets persuaded and co-opted by a political agenda. Resonating with this view, Kunal Kamra, a 34-year-old stand-up comic who was raised in Mumbai, also notes, "Everything is political and its everywhere." Elaborating further, he adds, "If there are three people in a room and one bathroom…who gets to use that bathroom first will be a political decision." Endorsing to choose one's own politics like Sanjay, Kunal points out, "Politics operates in a power ecosystem."

Highlighting the fault lines in the social schema of values, norms, and attitudes, comedy's potential to challenge BJP's pro-Hindutva derives from the comedian's desire to use their personal experiences and stories to intervene in the cultural production and consumption and provide audiences with new framing and understanding of issues (Chattoo & Feldman, 2020).

How do Comedians Perceive Themselves?

In addition to stand-up comedy, Varun, Kunal, Noor, Zeeshan and Sanjay dabble in multiple spaces of lyrics and scriptwriting, film direction, production of talk shows and journalism. Through my interviews, I did not find a concise articulation of comedians' objective

of their stand-up comedy, especially in terms of prompting an attitude or a behavior change. Sanjay notes, *"No artist should harbor this idea that their art can alone topple a government."* Rather, stand-up operates at various intersectional levels of building empathy, to explain, to mock, illustrate, to educate, to personify, to affirm marginalized identities and to prompt a conversation (Chattoo & Feldman, 2020).

According to Richard Schechner's theory of performance, the continuum of performance includes the entertainment and efficacy at the polar ends of the spectrum (1988), where entertainment refers to 'fun' and efficacy refers to 'results'. Schechner notes that both the elements are present in all performances but usually one of them is dominant. The comedians' work and their objectives vary on this spectrum of entertainment-efficacy dyad, usually dominant on the entertainment part but also incorporating efficacy component to some degree. The comedians interviewed for this dissertation see themselves on the entertainment end of the spectrum who essentially view themselves as storytellers who share their perspectives of what is happening in the country and the world. Varun said, "I consciously do not want to be an activist. Its binding me to certain roles and expectations that I do not want." Echoing a similar sentiment, Zeeshan Iqbal said, "I do not have an agenda for political comedy." He further added, "I do not have self-importance that I am doing something important, or I am doing something revolutionary."

The interviewed comedians explicitly maintained their identities as comedians and artists and refused to bleed into the definitional ambit of traditional activism, even if their comedy included components of socio-political activism. Chattoo & Feldman (2020) aptly note,

> "Deflecting responsibility for social change is also a way to account for the uncertainty inherent in audience reactions to their art. Comedians understand that comedy only will

> have social influence when it engages audiences to learn and feel and share—and sometimes to take some kind of action; and for this, for comedians, is unpredictable—that is, they don't know if and how their comedy will resonate."

Charged humor (Krefting, 2014) is the kind of humor that emanates from a socio-political consciousness with aims of addressing social justice issues. Its premise is intentionality, or the comedians performing their work with a specific outcome in mind. It could include a change in attitude, beliefs, knowledge, or an action taken to address social inequality. Charged humor is the common underlying thread of the comedians' work in the dissertation. For example, Kunal Kamra hosts a YouTube talk show with politicians, academicians and journalists, titled, "Shut up Ya, Kunal" that talks about socio-political and cultural issues in the discussions in his own unique satirical way. The tone of the show is candid, light-hearted and informative. Some of the topics that have talked about in the show include rationality, freedom of speech in India, defamation, caste and fundamentalism. Just before the recent elections in India in May 2024, Kunal also started a series on YouTube called Report Card 2024: 10 Years of Modi Government that talked about the status of significant indicators such as health care, unemployment rate, education, migrant crisis, women's safety and the farmers crisis. These short 10-15 minutes videos focused on the government's approach towards these issues and comprised of thorough research about the government schemes, statistics and a commentary about the pitfalls. He also uploaded critically acclaimed documentary films that did not have a mainstream platform. For example, one of the uploaded films Vivek (Reason) is a 218-minute documentary directed by Anand Patwardhan that examines the interplay of caste, religion and power in normalizing the far right and the subsequent dismantling of democracy. This film was not officially released in the country but premiered in private spaces and online.

Similarly, Sanjay Rajoura also had a YouTube show called “Bharat, Ek Mauj” which is more of a social commentary about current politics smeared with his humorous tone. Most of the work of the interviewed comedians intervened as alternative cultural narratives, especially in the realm of dominant Hindutva ideologies, and gave audiences new issues, different framings and more dialogue. Chatto & Feldman’s (2020) work found that the crucial component of comedy for civic engagement was based on the intentionality of comedians, their voice and perspectives, and the issues highlighted rather than an intention to produce socio-political change. Though none of them specifically identified as an activist, all their non-standup work aligns with the activist functions such as questioning power, attracting attention to inequities, and calling out injustices.

Media Creating the Public Sphere of Hindutva Imagination

Several factors, including overlapping power structures, have discouraged people from questioning systemic institutions and values. Focusing on popular culture, especially films and TV shows made by the likes of popular directors and producers, Karan Johar, Aditya Chopra and Ekta Kapoor, that primarily emphasized Hindu culture as the overarching Indian culture comprised of puzzle pieces that laid foundation for the contemporary BJP ideology. For instance, in the iconic 1998 film *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (Some things happen) that featured a love triangle included a scene where a young girl returns to India from London after studying at Oxford. In her initial days at the new college in India, she is ragged by a couple of boys who raise questions about her skills on Hindi and expressed scorn at her ‘*modern values*’. To prove that she is still very much aligned with her *Indian* ethos, she sings a Hindu devotional song and wins everyone’s approval, and most importantly the hero’s heart. Equating Hinduism with being Indian has been one of the most important goals of the BJP led government. It opposes the pluralistic, and secular

ways of how *Indianness* could look like. Speaking of this phenomenon, Sanjay notes that some films have been responsible to propagate 'soft fascism'. He notes, "Lot of their films are regressive films that have talked about Hindu fanaticism in a way that is digestible by the audience."

Talking about the building of a nationalist Hindu narrative and the role of journalism as a watchdog of the government, Noor noted, " I do not see it as journalism today…it's more of entertainment…except a handful of journalists, most of them are busy setting a narrative and that is coming from a specific context….earlier you could watch two channels, figure out the different opinions, make your own conclusion…Today everyone is speaking the same story…same narrative! And we are seeing what independent journalists are facing today in this country." Noor surmises the larger context of the press freedom in India. Despite being the most populous democracy in the world, it has also been declared as one of the most dangerous countries for journalists to work in with a World Press Freedom Index ranking of 159th. Noor has already crafted a joke about it, "I have a friend, and he has a strange illness. He knows how to speak but doesn't speak. The doctor said "he is having stage 2 apolitical syndrome. In stage 1, the spine degenerates, in stage 2 the speaking abilities diminish, in stage 3 the eyes and ears stop working and in stage 4, the patient's family members die…" We asked the doctor how he will survive, and he said, "Make him a journalist and no one will know he has an illness."

Traditionally, media has played a crucial role in forming dominant civic imaginations—the visions for change emanate from popular culture—by providing formal spaces for the articulation of hegemonic narratives (Becerrill in Ray and Banerjee-Dube, 2020). Television

shows seeped in superstition and mythology such as very popular *Brahmarakshas*[4] and *Naagin*[5], supernatural thrillers that have stories founded around mythological figures in Hinduism and their resurrection in current day India have found tremendous success. The recent media landscape has been a crucial factor among several others in contributing towards the formation of the narrative of a 'Hindu-India' that discourages critical thought and reasoning. The routine use of Hindu traditional rituals in affairs of the state politics has made Hindu symbols so commonplace that Hinduism has assumed the status of a national de-facto religion, despite India being constitutionally bound to not have a religion (Nanda, 2009; Kazmi & Kumar, 2011). Media and films articulate the national imagination of a country that legitimizes the majoritarian logic by representing minority characters as the 'other' in the socio-cultural and historical understanding of the nation.

In India, the proliferation of YouTube comedy channels has coincided with the government's intensified censorship of TV news media. Digital platforms are less regulated spaces that are more conducive for humorous, and 'playful politics' - commentary that may be harder to express through heavily monitored traditional news outlets and mainstream media. This shift has enabled a style of political discourse that is more playful, satirical and less constrained compared to the coverage found on heavily regulated television news (Paul 2018).

Sanjay Rajoura articulates this phenomenon as "dumbing down of the collective intellect." It is "hastening the speed of Indian audience falling in the depths of conformism,

[4] *Brahmarakshas* is a Hindi-language supernatural thriller television series which aired on Zee TV, produced by Ekta Kapoor. The show spans two seasons, combining elements of horror, fantasy, and drama. It revolves around Brahmarakshas—a demon who becomes enraged at the sight of brides adorned with traditional jewelry and vermilion, reminiscent of his betrayal.

[5] Spanning multiple seasons, *Naagin* is a Hindi-language supernatural drama series also produced by Ekta Kapoor. The series centers around **Ichchadhari Naagins**, mythical shape-shifting serpent women from Indian folklore. These Naagins possess the ability to transform into human form and often seek vengeance for past wrongs.

obedience, and lack of a scientific temperament." While the mainstream media is occupied with creating a nationalistic identity that equates India with Hinduness, Sanjay adds, "More the intolerance increases, stand-up comedy needs to become more sophisticated." In the context of current socio-political milieu of India, the comics are not seeing themselves as artists without an objective. Rather they view their art as a thoughtful medium that can challenge mainstream media's construction of nationalist identity by providing new framings and perspectives to their audiences. Comedy proves to be a starting point and not an end point for change (Chattoo & Feldman, 2020).

The language of stand-up comedy is also another political tool. For example, Sanjay, Varun, Zeeshan and Noor perform their comedy in Hindi. Asking about the process of selection of language, Varun notes, "The poison of divisive hatred is spread by Hindi language media, so it's important to counter it with Hindi language comedy." According to the 2011 census, around 44% of the country's population speak Hindi and doing comedy in this language ensures accessibility of ideas that do not align with the hegemonic narrative.

Conclusion

Just like how the Daily Show in the US fostered comedy as an *alternative mode of public reasoning* that made up for its lack in national news networks (Lippert, 2021), stand-up comedy as a platform has also provided scope and practice to critically interrogate ideologies and cultivate the behavior of questioning in India. Comedy routines by the likes of Varun, Sanjay, Kunal, Noor and Zeeshan enable the seed of reasoning and critical thought by using the hook of laughter. The themes discussed in this chapter establish stand-up comedy as a counter public sphere.

Firstly, while majority of mainstream media tows the ideological line of the government's Hindutva agenda, there is a proven dearth of media critical of the government. Stand-up comedy on YouTube is relatively still unregulated due to the nature of this digital platform. In fact, comedy on YouTube facilitated slicing and re-slicing of videos to spread ideas and contribute to networked social justice efforts. Compared to live shows that demand audiences to be physically present in a comedy club after paying an entrance fee and, in most cases, also guaranteed purchase of food and beverages, the internet has enabled the digital movement of ideas more efficiently and at basically no cost. Comedians can talk about crony capitalism, corruption in the government, the hyperbolic equating of Modi with India and vice versa, communal tension, the aggressive ideological drive for Hindutva and the treatment of Muslims as the Other. It acts as an alternative discourse platform where marginalized views that are not aired on the mainstream media and journalism have been finding space. Amidst the dominant media landscape of a Hindu India, the comedians are directly challenging power structures and are working as the fourth pillar of a democracy, of whatever it is left. Varun notes, "It is a great success of comedy as a medium and comedians that they are seen as a threat [by the regime] and not just as jokers who are saying nonsense on stage."

Secondly, the comedians represent organic intellectual leaders of the community. Noor said, "Comedy is a tool and can be used to help break the narrative and make people think. However, it is a time- consuming process…" Though the comedians interviewed for the dissertation actively denied being labelled as activists or change makers, most of the audiences in their shows see their performances because they broadly align with their political views and are interested in their commentaries. Zeeshan noted, "Stand-up comedy can give like-minded people space…. a realization that more people are thinking like you." Echoing a similar sentiment,

Sanjay mentioned, “When audiences think about something and hear the comedians say the same thing, they feel that they are not the only one who is disturbed by what’s happening around.” Both comments indicate the emotional aspect of cultivating community and solidarity by collectively sharing laughter in a moment. Not seeing oneself or one’s ideas represented in the mainstream cultural discourse fosters a sense of alienation. The comedians convey a larger value system through their comedy that imagines a kind of world which is in direct contradiction to the state’s idea. Resonating with that ethos and hearing those ideas voiced by comedians nurtures a group consciousness, provides temporary relief and builds hope and resilience. Though the comedians do not explicitly fit into the traditional activist prototype, they are using their comedy to expose the normalization of socio-political hypocrisies, oppression, speak directly to experiences of specific communities, critique the mainstream mediascape and analyze everyday embedded power structures that facilitate an atmosphere of unconditional obedience. The comedians engage in alternative ways of thinking, imagining, speaking and behaving.

Thirdly, the comedians are also conscious of the shortcomings of their own art form in India, especially in terms of caste and gender. Noor mentioned that though the fellow comedians have been welcoming to women comedians but that cannot be said for the audiences. Pointing toward the prevalence of misogynist comments on social media, Noor said, “Pick any female comedian’s Instagram and read the comments…they are absolutely shit…there have been some comments that said that you are talking about these issues and then you all complaint when rapes happen…both men and women…educated people like doctors and engineers make these comments…Even on my Instagram posts, there are comments like *I didn’t find it funny* or *was it funny*? When I am in that zone, I comment back saying that IT IS funny, and they should get themselves checked by a doctor.” Talking about the absence of caste as an issue, Sanjay, a

comedian from a ‘backward’ caste said, “Most of the comics are upper caste, audience is upper caste…who will talk about caste issues?” Caste system is India's traditional social stratification system categorizes people into strict, birth-determined groups reflecting their occupation and standing in society. Originating in ancient Hindu scriptures, this hierarchy comprises four main categories: Brahmins (the scholarly and priestly class), Kshatriyas (warriors and leaders), Vaishyas (businesspeople and traders), and Shudras (workers and service providers). The Dalits, previously called "untouchables," and now knows as Scheduled Castes (SCs) exist outside this framework and have historically endured extreme discrimination. Despite constitutional prohibitions against caste discrimination and government programs designed to support disadvantaged communities, caste identity continues to significantly impact social relationships, educational opportunities, job prospects, and political involvement throughout much of India. Sanjay belongs to the *Jat* community that falls under the umbrella term of Other Backward Castes (OBCs), also colloquially knows as ‘backward caste.’ OBC comprises of socially disadvantaged groups that are not Scheduled Caste (Dalits) or Scheduled Tribes (indigenous people) but have faced historical discrimination and social exclusion. OBCs constitute around 35-50% of the Indian population (Starr & Sahgal, 2021).

Echoing a similar sentiment as that of Sanjay’s, Varun thinks that stand-up comedy is guilty of contributing to the phenomenon by performing punching down (marginalizing already oppressed groups) humor, which is sexist, casteist, classist and able-bodied. Especially when stand-up comedy had initially started in India in early 2000s and comedians like Raju Shrivastava, Ehsan Quereshi and Sunil Pal were popular on comedy scenes, there was comedy content that pandered to the already prevalent social oppressions and continues to date, especially on the hugely popular Comedy Nights with Kapil featuring Kapil Sharma.

On a concluding note, I would like to emphasize on the promise of leveraging stand-up comedy for socio-political engagement and as a potent tool to counter the pro-Hindutva forces in India. These comedians who strive for hilarious and non-othering forms of comedy tap on the disenfranchisement and absurdity of an existing policy, incident or a situation and make fun of it rather than mocking a serious issue itself. As Chattoo & Feldman (2020) note, “With humor, we defy the closed, limited thinking of ‘no, but’ and we choose—with the optimistic, active prospect of ‘yes, and’—to imagine the possibilities that open up.”

Chapter V

Staging Dissent: The Performance of Resistance in Stand-Up Comedy

RQ2: How does stand-up comedy resist the pro-Hindutva narrative of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India?

Wearing a light pink Nehru jacket and a cream-colored kurta pajama, 23-year-old Shyam Rangeela stands in front of the microphone, visibly at ease as he performs his stand-up routine on the hugely popular TV show, *The Great Indian Laughter Challenge*. The year is 2017. Dark-skinned, clean-shaven, with neatly combed shiny hair, Shyam has a thin, angular face with prominent eyebrows. As soon as he starts performing in Hindi, there is an uncanny familiarity in his voice and inflection. I feel like I have heard him before. Though I do not recall seeing him, I am certain I have heard that voice. When he says, "Mitron!" (Friends!) in a shrill yet familiar nasal tone, the studio audience erupts in wild cheers. He is mimicking the Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi. 'Mitron!' is the iconic greeting that the Prime Minister frequently uses in his speeches.

Interestingly, the five-minute video I describe is a leaked clip that was excluded from the main episode aired on the channel Star Plus. The show's panel of judges included popular comedians such as Mallika Dua and Zakir Khan, as well as a super judge, the Bollywood actor Akshay Kumar. Zakir Khan and Mallika Dua visibly enjoy Shyam's performance, laughing, shifting in their chairs, and clapping boisterously. The end of the video shows Akshay Kumar giving a standing ovation to Shyam Rangeela, who also mimicked opposition leader Rahul Gandhi. Despite the success of Shyam's set on the show and its 1.8 million views on YouTube, his performance was edited out of the main episode.

Hailing from Sri Ganganagar in Rajasthan, a state in western India, Shyam Rangeela's unique selling point is his phenomenal mimicry, particularly of PM Modi. In an interview with The New Indian Express, Shyam stated, "I got a chance to be a part of this show because of my mimicry. But when I gave my first performance mimicking Modi and Rahul Gandhi, I was told to perform another act. I was informed by the channel that they didn't get approval from people in the government."

In 2022, Shyam Rangeela joined the Aam Aadmi Party in Rajasthan, one of the prominent opposition parties, and tweeted to PM Modi, claiming that he was unable to appear on TV shows because people feared him. Openly admitting that he had voted for the BJP in the 2014 general elections, Shyam said, "I was a big supporter of Modi ji until 2016. Back in 2014, when the BJP came to power, like many others, I too felt that he would bring change from the corruption of the previous Congress regime. At the time, I was a *bhakt* (devoted follower) who often posted on social media in his support."

Fast forward to 2024, Shyam pledges to contest elections as an independent candidate against Modi in the incumbent constituency of Varanasi—the same constituency that Modi won in 2019. "Politics is the comedy today," says Shyam, in an interview with The Wire. When asked why he decided to contest elections against Prime Minister Modi, he cites a recent incident in Surat, Gujarat, where the BJP won unopposed. The nomination papers of two candidates from the opposition Congress party were canceled by election officials, and the other eight candidates withdrew from the race (The Wire, 2024). A similar incident was reported in Indore, Madhya Pradesh, where the local BJP chapter poached the Congress candidate and inducted him into the party hours before the nomination withdrawal deadline. Lamenting the blatant undermining of democracy and alterations to electoral processes, Rangeela states that he did not want this pattern

to be repeated in Varanasi. Determined to ensure an alternative candidate, he says, "I felt that in every seat, there should be at least one candidate who will not withdraw, even if he gets only two or four votes."

A documentary film, *Jamoora* (literally meaning a performer who acts as a sidekick, often a character who complies with their master's commands while also subtly satirical) captures Rangeela's journey as he files his nomination papers as an independent candidate against the incumbent Prime Minister. Directed by Varrun Sukhraj and produced by comedian Kunal Kamra, the film follows Rangeela's struggles, triumphs, and challenges as he navigates the bureaucratic labyrinth to file his nomination. Despite his attempts since May 10th, Rangeela was not allowed to enter the district magistrate's office to submit his documents until May 14th, the last day for filing nominations. As Modi filed his nomination that day amid media fanfare, Rangeela and other independent candidates were prevented from submitting their papers until Modi had left. Rangeela said, "I have all the proposers and the documents. But they are not taking my nomination." He even sent a letter to the Chief Election Commissioner in New Delhi, complaining about the situation and accusing election officials in Varanasi of arbitrary behavior. Despite the official deadline of 3:00 p.m. on May 14th, some independent candidates, including Rangeela, were only allowed inside the District Magistrate's Office around 5:00 p.m.—without their lawyers. Elated that their nominations had finally been accepted, they celebrated what they saw as a victory for democracy. However, their joy was short-lived. On May 15th, the Election Commission rejected Rangeela's nomination papers, citing an 'incomplete affidavit.' The District Magistrate also added that Rangeela had not taken the 'oath and affirmation[6].'

[6] Rangeela's experience is part of a larger pattern observed during the 2024 elections, where several independent candidates reported bureaucratic hurdles in filing nominations. In Varanasi, out of 41 nominations filed, 33 were rejected, leaving only seven candidates in the fray, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi (Hindu, 2024).

After consulting with his lawyer and realizing the missing documents, Rangeela rushed to the election office around 10:00 p.m. that same day to take his oath. Despite the deadline of 11:59 p.m. on May 14th, officials told him to return the next morning. Frustrated, Rangeela recounts on X, "When we informed the DM that we had arrived with the affidavit before the deadline (11:59 p.m.), he said, 'Are you here for a picnic? You are roaming around at night. Is this a picnic spot? Get out of here.'" Devastated after the excruciatingly delayed nomination process and its subsequent rejection, Rangeela states, "It was settled that they would not let me contest from Varanasi. Now, it has become clear. My heart is broken, but my spirit is not."



Figure 6. Shyam Rangeela

The story of Rangeela exemplifies the subversive role a comedian can play in challenging political authority—not just on a comedy stage but also in the electoral arena. This chapter examines stand-up comedy performances as a form of activism, answering the *research question of how stand-up resists the Hindu nationalist narrative of the BJP*. Through an analysis of

comedians' propositions, language use, metaphors, choice of political issues, and interaction with humor, I establish that political stand-up comedy functions as an alternative public discourse. While I will analyze audience reactions through social media comments in the next chapter, this chapter also considers moments of live audience laughter in the examined performances. Since stand-up comedy is an interactive art form requiring both a comedian to perform and an audience to react, a complete analysis must consider both elements. By tracing the continuum from comedians' motivations for engaging in political comedy to an analysis of their performances, I argue that the stand-up comedian and their work are indistinguishably intertwined and cannot be meaningfully separated. I textually analyze one YouTube performance of Kunal Kamra, Sanjay Rajoura and Varun Grover. I choose not to analyze the performances of Zeeshan Iqbal and Noor Ahmed, despite their spectacular performances, to preserve the confidentiality of their identities.

Through textual analysis, I observed several key themes emerging from their stand-up routines that challenge political hegemony and authoritarian governance. First, comedy serves as a performative protest, where humor becomes a tool to critique government policies and expose contradictions in BJP's ideological framework. These comedians use satire to highlight the absurdity of political rhetoric, economic disparities, and the weaponization of religion in governance. Second, stand-up performances construct and assert an alternative vision of citizenship that directly challenges the BJP's Hindu nationalist project. By addressing themes of secularism, democracy, scientific temperament, caste, and freedom of expression, comedians offer counter-narratives that resist the exclusivist and majoritarian policies and discourse of the state. Third, the body and laughter itself act as a form of resistance, disrupting the rigid decorum of state control. Laughter, as a collective act, becomes a powerful means of subverting fear and creating solidarity among audiences who find common ground in critiquing the government. The

interactive nature of stand-up allows audiences to participate in dissenting discourse in ways that traditional political activism may not. Finally, digital platforms, particularly YouTube, extend the impact of stand-up comedy beyond comedy clubs, making resistance more accessible and far-reaching. By circumventing mainstream media censorship, these comedians amplify their critiques, ensuring that humor remains a resilient tool for political engagement. Through these themes, stand-up comedy digital performances emerge as a dynamic site of resistance, offering an alternative space for political discourse in an increasingly restrictive socio-political landscape.

Kunal Kamra's Stand-Up Comedy

For the first analysis of stand-up performance, I choose Kunal Kamra's video on YouTube titled, "KUNAL KAMRA | STAND UP COMEDY 2019". The video is 12 minutes long and has been the most watched video among all stand up sets that he has uploaded on his YouTube channel. Having around 2.5 million subscribers in total, this video has garnered 26 million views. I selected this video because it fulfills two primary requirements—it's a political comedy and was produced between 2014-2025, a time that has witnessed three re-elections of Modi to power.

The video opens with a spunky rap song created by Sumit Roy, Sohaill Gandhi and Dub Sharma. Kunal Kamra walks on stage, and there is a white, circle shaped spotlight illuminating the red brick wall behind him. A silver-colored board on the wall says 'That Comedy Club'. It's a regular stand-up set with a black colored bar stool right next to Kamra with a small plastic water bottle. Wearing a black colored t-shirt with a regular fit that says '*Wah Modiji Wah'* (Wow Modi Wow) paired with an army green casual pants, Kamra appears to be relaxed and conversational. Wearing full rimmed glasses and a full beard, and holding a wired mic, Kunal is making direct eye contact with the audience and is regularly moving his gaze to ensure that he is talking to all his

audience. The silhouettes of people looking at him, sitting in the front row are visible along with thunderous claps and laughter. However, we do not see the face of any audience member throughout the video.

Opening the video, Kunal says in Hindi, "Tell me one thing…what is Modiji doing between me and Ambani? Why can't I directly vote for Ambani…Please make him the PM…He has everything that I want in a PM…metro, clothes, petrol, wi-fi… " The audience howls and cheers. So much so that Kunal has to take a pause for the audience to calm down. He is referring to Mukesh Ambani, a billionaire businessperson who heads the Reliance Industries Limited, India's largest private sector corporation that has interests in telecom, retail, media, petrochemicals, oil and gas. According to Forbes, Ambani's net worth stands at 98.1 billion US dollars. According to the data released by the Election Commission of India under the orders of the country's Supreme Court, a Reliance affiliate, Qwik Supply Chain, has been one of the top donors to BJP that gave 43.4 million US dollars (Kawoosa, Varghese & Achar, 2024). Kunal further says,

> "I really think that corporations should fight elections. Like Ratan Tata and Mukesh Ambani should be competing with each other in the 2019 elections. It'll be such a good election. What will they talk about? They will talk about only development…vikas [development in Hindi] they don't know anything else…like Ratan Tata wont go to Uttar Pradesh (largest state in India) to talk to a room full of people and say…Mandir Yahin banega [The temple will be built here] It will be so out of character…noo?? This top corporate honcho, Ratan Tata, dressed up in a suit and yelling in a rally, "Mandir Yahin banega!" [The temple will be built here!] I'd be like, "Uncle, you are a Parsi[7], not even a

[7] Parsis are adherents of Zoroastrianism, especially descents of people who fled from Persia to India to escape Muslim persecution during the 7th-8th centuries.

> Hindu, please sit down!! We'll look into it, but just sit down, for god's sake! Whenever you go to UP, there will always be a person who will be yelling, "Mandir Yahin banega!" [The temple will be built here!] … Not a single person is equally excited about constructing a metro train … This enthusiasm is not there for upgrading hospitals … but … Mandir Yahin ..."

In his commentary, Kamra used satire to address the complex relationship between corporations and the government. He proposed that instead of having corporations influence government decisions behind the scenes, the public should simply vote directly for corporations to run the country. To illustrate his point, he specifically mentioned two of India's most prominent industrialists - Mukesh Ambani and Ratan Tata - suggesting their business-focused approach might better serve national development compared to the BJP government's religious priorities.

Kamra particularly critically assesses the BJP's emphasis on constructing a Hindu temple in Ayodhya, highlighting the contrast between economic development and religious politics. The Ayodhya dispute represents one of India's most sensitive religious conflicts, centered around a site sacred to both Hindus and Muslims. For Hindus, it's revered as Lord Ram's birthplace, while for Muslims, it was the location of the historic Babri Masjid, where they had worshipped since the 1500s (BBC, 2019). The conflict reached a violent climax in 1992 when Hindu activists demolished the mosque, triggering riots that resulted in approximately 2,000 deaths. The dispute involves competing historical claims: Hindu groups maintain that Muslim invaders destroyed an original temple to build the mosque, while Muslim groups emphasize their continuous worship at the site until 1949, when the situation changed after a Ram idol was placed inside the mosque. This complex religious and historical dispute wound its way through India's legal system for years,

culminating in the Supreme Court's landmark 2019 decision to grant the land to Hindus for temple construction.

By talking about the aggressive endorsement of building a temple, Kunal adeptly juxtaposes the misplaced priorities of the government that seek to seemingly fulfill religious vengeance and see the construction of Ayodhya as a victory of Hindus over Muslims, of 'good' over 'bad'. Instead of focusing on the real socio-cultural issues such as sanitation, employment, housing and infrastructure, Kunal's segment illuminates the absurdity of this government agenda and implicitly invites audiences to question why this temple has become seemingly so significant for a nation when it is still struggling with issues such as poverty, corruption and crony capitalism. Kunal further says,

> "When I say things like these, people call me *Dharamvirodhi* (hostile to religion)…I wonder why people call me a *dharamvirodhi* for cracking jokes on Modi… Is Modiji a religion? He is the fastest growing individual…He was a CM, then a PM and is now religion…even Reliance didn't show such exponential growth…When someone calls me *dharamvirodhi*, I tell them I am religious…I can show proofs…when I was a kid I am ringing bells in *aarti* (Hindu worship ritual). I have photos…genuinely…its not like Modi's degree…I can show photos...[audience roars and claps hard] I used to ring bells in all aartis because my mom used to tell me that religion will protect me..i like it…but I grew up and all the politicians are telling me that I have to protect religion…I am like when did the roles swap? How the hell do I do it? I can barely pay my phone bill on time…all our gods are so legendary…do they really need us to protect them? No, I need them!

Talking about nationalistic politics, Kamra indicates that religion, especially Hinduism has been synonymized with Modi and vice versa. He draws from his own experience of growing up in

a religious household where he used to partake in *aarti,* a common Hindu worship ritual that takes place daily in practicing Hindu households. While he learnt from his parents that this ritual will bless him with good things, especially protection, he expresses bewilderment on the current re-framing of the purpose of religion, especially by BJP leaders. Now, there has been a systematic manufacturing of 'threat' to Hinduism by the 'outsiders', that happen to be primarily Muslims in this case. During the election campaigning in 2024, Modi sparked controversy over hate speech when he accused Muslims—who have been part of India's citizenry over centuries—of being the 'infiltrators' (Mogul, 2024). He reinforced the false conspiracy conceptualized by some Hindu nationalists that Muslims will displace the Hindu population by deliberately having more children and large families. The desperate attempts by Modi led to more boisterous calls by political leaders to save Hinduism and the reaffirmation that only Modi's leadership could do it. Additionally, Kunal also noted about the educational degree of the Prime Minister – an issue that garnered attention about the authenticity of Modi's genuine educational records (Dhillon, 2023). Unlike the proof of his educational records, Kunal humorously juxtaposed his own experience of being part of 'aarti' and willing to show 'proofs' illustrating authenticity of his experience.

Though this video was produced in 2019 by Kamra, Modi announced on his campaign trail that 'God has chosen him' in May 2024 (Mogul, 2024), fulfilling a prophecy made by the comedian. In an interview with the popular news channel NDTV he said, "I'm convinced that God has sent me for a purpose, and when that purpose is finished, my work will be done…this is why I have dedicated myself to God."

The media scholar Bambi Haggins argues that the intersection of comedian's life story and the broader culture is articulated in their stand-up comedy. Kunal's first-person perspective is, of course, making the audiences laugh and is simultaneously illuminating the modus operandi of

fascism, hateful ideologies propelling the government, and its followers and crony capitalism. This comedy pushes the boundary and helps reframe political issues in a way that disrupts the typical portrayal of social realities on mainstream media and acts as a counternarrative. This video locates the absurdity of the flawed logic of Modi and his aides, and the ridiculousness of the political agenda and hateful self-serving rhetoric that the government advocates for. Through self-disclosure of a story around growing up in a religious household, Kamra establishes a bond of intimacy between himself and the audience (Laurenceau, Pietrtomonaco & Feldman, 1988). This connection between him and the audience births empathy and understanding that can enable public engagement, positive attitudes and reduction in stigma around the issues being discussed (Schiappa, Gregg & Hewes, 2014; Brodie, 2008).

In this stand-up, Kunal further says,

> "Every year, the politicians give this speech on major Hindu festivals, "Hindus! You will get back your self-respect! You will get a *Hindu Rashtra* (Hindu nation)! I am like who has asked for it? (roars of laughter)…please get out of my way…Hindu Rashtra is one thing that I have always seen a politician giving…but no one is asking for it…I have never seen it in my life…imagine a kid has graduated from high school and the father is like should I give you a motorbike? The kid is like I want a *Hindu Rashtra*...right now! What the hell…Then all the politicians are going back in history. This is the fort where our *maharaj* (king) fought with the Mughals, emerged victorious over them and planted an orange flag…I am like that's fantastic...but please use *maharaj's* example to also introspect in your own life...*maharaj* built a fort 300 years ago and its still standing upright…(wild laughter)…you folks made a road 2 years ago and it has vanished…if *maharaj* comes back...forget *maharaj*, his horse will say no! The horse will be like, '*Maharaj*! Do you

know why every statue of mine has two of my front legs up, because your political leaders here didn't leave any space for me to put down all my four legs!!!' People abuse me on this…But Modiji has no problem with this…because he has said 'criticism is the backbone of a democracy (audience chuckles)…just don't tell that directly to me…please keep doing your own things..'"

Kunal articulates a disparity between the misplaced priorities of the government and the aspirations of people. He signals that the aggressive campaign towards the Hindu Rashtra has been manufactured by the government and is not something that people are asking for. Despite having centuries long coexistence of Hindus with Muslims and other minority religions, he uses storytelling to describe a high school boy who refuses the gift of a motorbike and instead asks for a *Hindu Rashtra* from his father. This segment interrogates the manufacturing and forceful imposition of a propagandistic narrative of the BJP government, providing a counternarrative to the conventional framing of news. Where the mainstream journalism has piggybacked on government's agenda and taken as its own responsibility to advocate for a *Hindu Rashtra*, this stand-up questions the dominant ideology which is not drawn from people's hopes and aspirations, rather is drawn from a divisive and hateful agenda of degrading Muslims and other religious minority religions as second-class citizens. Stand-up comedy like this not only questions those in power but, through playful and entertaining ways, seeks to provoke the audience and hold up a mirror of uncomfortable social realities (Chattoo & Feldman, 2020).

Additionally, Kunal seamlessly weaves in themes of corruption in his set and talks about the integrity and spectacular quality of 300-year-old forts built by Hindu kings, figures especially revered by Hindu nationalists. He compares that with construction of roads by current political leaders that do not hold up to the rough weather, rain or just the test of time for more than a few

years. In his storytelling, Kunal indicates that the kings were not just only fighting for the people but also had the sense of integrity and care for their people and provided solid services for them. This story locates the absurdity in the incoherent logic of political leaders and the irrationality that accompanies the vociferous calls for a *Hindu Rashtra*, and a Hindu identity for Indians. The text of comedy, in this case, works as a political critique, attention hook and comic relief from issues around Hindu nationalism that, on the other hand, are presented seriously on mainstream media and news channels. The humor employed by Kunal in his work serves as a buffer against the feelings of fear and anxiety among the audiences, especially around an emotionally charged, overwhelming and a controversial topic like Hindu nationalism.

While this assortment of the personal, political and humorous shapes the individual and collective socio-cultural imaginaries, the uproarious laughter in the comedy club becomes a crucial link of emotional intimacy between the audiences and Kunal. They connect through laughter and bond over finding same things hilarious. As Wood (2021) says, "laughter is a distinct kind of action, a corporeal and affective response that can solidify collectivity just as much as it can express individual desires, fears, histories and delights." Amidst the backlash to any kind of dissent and critique of the government in mainstream media, this show becomes a collective space of freedom where absurd logics visibilize and are mocked and laughed at. The state control of bodies that dictates its own rules of strict propriety and conduct, is directly challenged by the physicality of laughter that is centered around letting loose, clapping, howling, and becoming unruly. As this space disrupts the often expected, serious and rigid decorum of Hindu nationalism, the audience and the comedian become co-creators of resistance against a divisive ideology. In addition to Kunal's set that illuminates the incoherent, disjointed and hateful agenda of political leaders, the

norm flouting bodies and their laughter become sources of power who embody protest and disagreement with the idea of a Hindu-only India.

Varun Grover's Stand-up Comedy

The second stand-up performance, I analyzed is Varun Grover's video on YouTube titled, 'Indian Elections—Stand-up Comedy by Varun Grover.' Produced in 2019, the video is a part of his political satire musical group Aisi Taisi Democracy's *Azaadi* (freedom) tour which was performed in Mumbai in May 2019. The approximately 10-minute video garnered 16 million views and has been the most viewed video on electoral politics on Varun's YouTube channel.

The video opens with shots of a filled auditorium from the point of view of a performer with snippets of lean looking, wheat-ish skinned Varun wearing a relaxed fit *khaki* shirt and jeans. The other two members, Sanjay Rajoura and Rahul Ram, are sitting on the stage on stools while Varun takes the center stage in front of them. Having spunky music as the opening background score gives a similar vibe to that of the background music that played in Kunal's video. Interestingly, one of the creators of this song is Dub Sharma, the same artist who also contributed to Kunal's opening score. On examining the creative processes that go into producing and curating the performance of stand-up comedy, it is crucial to consider the collaborative networks that musicians and comedians work in. Rather than being an isolated effort, comedy increasingly relies on recurrent collaborations and networks, whose contributions shape the larger message of their performances. Dub Sharma composing scores for multiple stand-up acts is not a coincidence. It indicates a creative ecosystem with ideologically aligned artists who are essential for defining the comedic rhythm, improving the emotional texture and enhancing the impact of the performance. These networks of artists highlight comedy, especially the kind being studied in this dissertation,

as a collective cultural product that is shaped and advanced by artistic experimentation, collaboration and political resonance.

Talking about caste in Indian elections, Varun notes,

> "…remove caste from Indian elections and people will be so upset…who to give vote for? We have to give vote only on the basis of politician's work? How will we do it? *(wild laughter)*We are right in throes of action of Indian election and the world media is usually very fascinated with Indian elections…the dance of democracy…they think it's a sophisticated classical beautiful dance happening but if they come here, they'll see a *nanga naach* (naked vulgar dance) happening *(claps and boisterous laughter*)…We are standing right in middle of that mud…one of the Congress candidates (opposition party) said voters will suffer electric shock if they vote for non-Congress candidate…(shows the screenshot of the news story in video)…the villagers said that at least we will get electricity this way! *(reverberating laughs and claps that goes on for a while)...*then there is Hema Malini who found her candidacy ticket probably lying on the floor somewhere and this is her campaign going on (shows a picture of dressed up actress-politician Hema Malini posing with an elderly woman wearing a tattered saree and a shirt and carrying wood on her head in a farm field)…she thinks poverty porn is her campaign…she is going everywhere and randomly taking pictures with the villagers…she said that "I have worked a lot in Mathura (her constituency) but I don't remember"…this confirms that if you live with Dharmendra (Hema Malini's husband), you will get whiskey even in RO water."

Varun focuses on the exoticization of India as the most populous democracy in the world and how the global media comes down to cover the elections being held. The international media frequently focuses on the enormous magnitude of Indian elections and reduces it to a spectacle

rather than focusing on deeper political analyses (Landrin, 2024). Moreover, there is still a colonial tendency to frame Indian elections through an exotic lens that leans towards showing colorful imagery, traditions, and the cultural vibrance. While significant, it can detract from significant issues such as policies, governance challenges and socio-economic concerns. In fact, there have been calls for the western media to do more nuanced reporting of Indian elections that delve deeper than just surface level observations and capture the complexities of the political dynamics (PTI, 2024). However, this outside gaze of global media that exoticizes India and its elections is flipped by Varun when he equates the 'dance of democracy' to how it is perceived by Indians, the insiders, as the 'vulgar naked dance'. Replete with corruption and bribery, there have been reports about political parties promising cash, food, alcohol, jewelry and drugs in return of their votes (Khandekar, 2024). The Election Commission of India said that it confiscated more than a billion dollars and other suspicious inducements between March and May 2024 (PIB, 2024). Interestingly, the two states that witnessed the highest amounts of bribery are BJP's strongholds of Rajasthan and Gujarat, the latter being the home state of Modi (Tikekar, 2024).

Varun takes a jibe at a Congress party leader, Ajit Jogi, also a former Chief Minister of Chhattisgarh, who misled tribal voters in Kunkuri constituency that people will get an electric shock if they vote for any other non-Congress leader (PTI 2013). By talking about Ajit, Varun also alludes to the often-ignored realities of no electricity in areas of the state. The BJP complained against him and he was served with a notice. Furthermore, in 2024, as 960 million voters were gearing up to vote in the general elections, there were revelations that an 'electoral bond' scheme orchestrated a quid pro quo arrangement between political parties and corporations, alluring towards corruption and extortion (Sharma, 2024). An Al Jazeera article noted about this scheme, "…Multiple private firms, reeling from investigations by India's law enforcement agencies,

funneled funds worth millions of dollars through the electoral bonds to a range of parties in power, an analysis of the data published by India's Election Commission reveals. Many of them saw the government's attitude towards them change after the donations, while some even won praise from sitting ministers" (Sharma, 2024). The same report notes that while BJP received the maximum number of 'donations' to the tune of 720 million US dollars over seven years, followed by All India Trinamool Congress (a party based on West Bengal) and the main opposition party, the Indian National Congress (Frontline, 2024). By talking about the 'naked vulgar dance', Varun establishes that the system of elections is riddled with malpractices and corruption that runs across multiple political parties.

Varun then talks about a very popular film actress-dancer Hema Malini who is also a BJP leader from Mathura constituency of Uttar Pradesh, the biggest state of the country. Her election campaign includes tone-deaf material where she takes awkward and reluctant pictures with the people who are going about their daily lives, such as carrying wood or working in the farm fields. In an interview with CNN-News 18 TV channel, when the interviewer asked her what she had done for her constituency and if she'll be re-elected to power in 2019, Hema said, " I am confident because I worked well and people are very happy with me…so many roads and…so many things I have done which I just don't recollect right now…I don't remember much but I have done a lot" (CNN News 18, 2019). Emphasizing the absurdity of her byte and the lax attitude of not remembering things that she did for the people of her constituency, Varun noted about Hema Malini's husband, also a Bollywood actor, who is widely known to have a penchant for alcohol. Indicating towards a water purifier endorsement that Hema does, Varun deftly mentioned that perhaps her husband is mixing whiskey in her water due to which she is getting forgetful.

Figure 7. Hema Malini (on the right) taking an awkward picture



Varun's engaging narrative, informed by his spectacular writing and timing, makes for a compelling performance that takes the audiences into the imagined world of the stories, illuminating the comedy embedded in reality. The political stories he shares are further bolstered by his usage of screenshots of those news articles on the screen behind him on stage. This tactic reinforces humor in politics and encourages knowledge and attitude change consistent with his narratives and conclusions. Couched in a non-threatening comedic landscape, these political stories based on serious issues like poverty, corruption and the ever-widening disparity between the rich and the poor, find a lubricated path towards the audience. Providing a social critique, his jokes offer subtle critique, sheds light on the inefficiencies of electoral politics, even calls out the international media for exoticization of Indian elections and exposes the ingenuity of political leaders across the political spectrum.

Varun further notes in his set,

> "Modiji's 2019 campaign is so different from the one on 2014. There is a stark difference between the two. If we see his 2014 campaign…lets see his tinder profile of 2014 about he planned to woo you (audience)…(points towards a spoof screenshot of Modi's tinder profile)…In 2014, he came across like I am so cute, so adorable just like a teddy bear and he also had a bio written for himself by Prasoon Joshi (audience breaks into clapping)…I bring 2 crore jobs…I construct temple there…I bring 15 lakhs rupees…I remove article 370…get lost everyone and cow is our sacred mother. It was a very cute attractive bio of 2014…Just to clarify, there have been 2 crore jobs… of cow protectors….(laughter)…it was their promise to make a temple since 1992 and now Lord Ram has taken a 2 bhk temple on Ayodhya Faizabad highway…I have received 15 lakhs in my account…15 lakhs abuses in my twitter account…that was their cute agenda of 2014 now lets see their 2019

campaign…(shows another Tinder profile where Bollywood actor Vivek Oberoi, who plays Modi in his biopic, is dressed up as Modi in the profile picture)…this is the condition in 2019 that votes have to be asked in the name of Vivek Oberoi…If you take Vivek Oberoi's name even in his local neighborhood's corner market, that shopkeeper will not give you even a 5 rupee dish washing bar…the election commission watched the film and said please don't release the film otherwise you'll (Modi and BJP) incur losses (heckling, wild laughter and claps)…even in the film's trailer…there is a popular line that has also been included in memes…"My Gujarat is burning"…Its like Nathuram Ghodse saying my Gandhi is dying…(shots of boisterous laughter and claps)…and now that poetic bio of 2014 has condensed to just one line…"whats the other option, my friends?" If you talk to anyone now they will admit…yes, they fucked us quite a bit…but what is the option now?

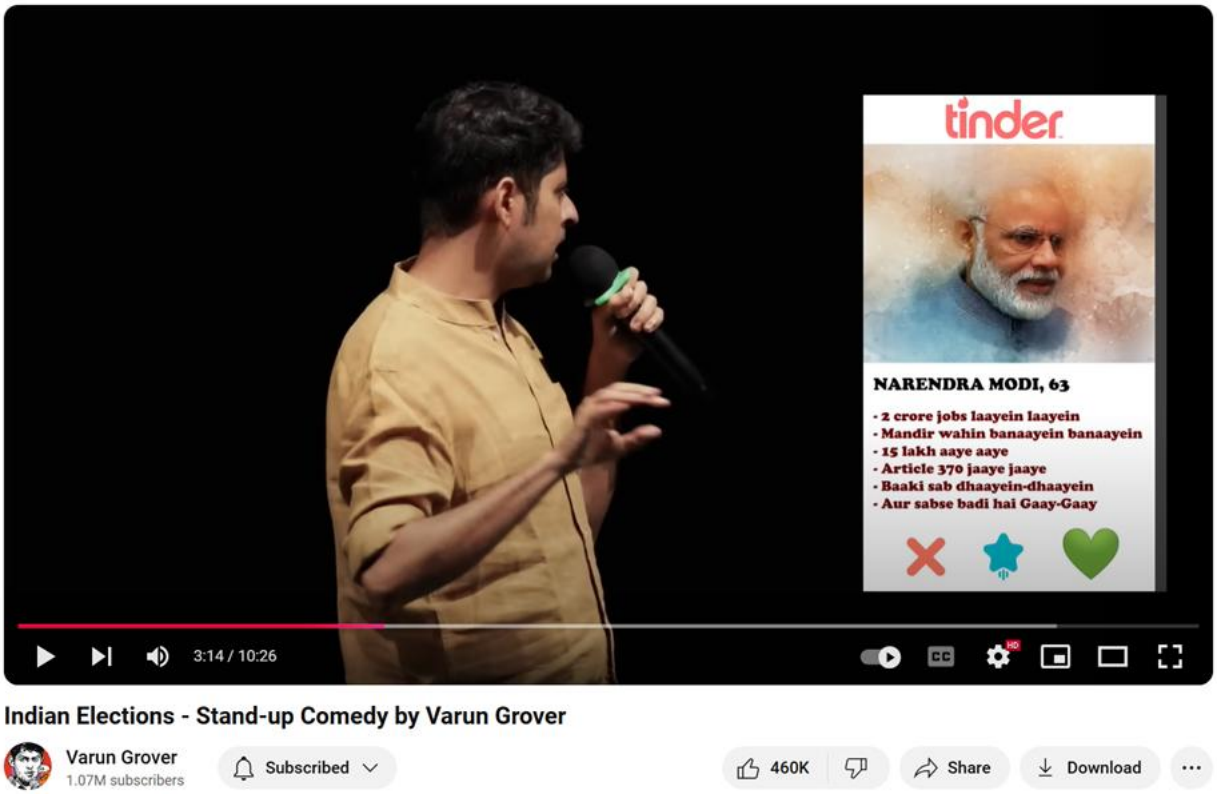


Figure 8. Varun Grover showing the Tinder profile of Modi

In a humorous re-imagination of how political leaders would present themselves on online dating apps, Varun compares the election campaign of Modi in 2014 and 2019. Imagining Modi's Tinder profile in 2014, Varun describes the tone of Modi campaign as 'cute, adorable and soft'. The agenda items on the profile note the generation of 20 million jobs. The construction of the Hindu temple in Ayodhya also makes place on the agenda, something that dates back to 1992. In fact, in 2024, the temple, also known as the Ram Mandir, (Ram Temple because its dedicated to Lord Ram), was constructed in at a place where a 16th century mosque stood till 1992 (Al Jazeera, 2024). The Hindu side of the story believes that the mosque stood on the site of a temple during the first Mughal ruler Babur in Ayodhya, which also happens to be the birthplace of Hindu God Ram. In 1949, idols were placed inside the mosque allegedly by Hindu priests after which the mosque became a disputed property and its gates were locked. On December 6th in 1992, a Hindu nationalist mob then led by the BJP leader Lal Krishna Advani tore down the Babri Masjid, followed by Hindu-Muslim riots across the country that killed nearly 2000 people. After several cases of civil disputes, the Liberhan Commission was instituted on December 16th, 1992, to investigate the incident. The commission files its report after 17 years of the mosque demolition that names leaders of the BJP and its ideological parent entity, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) as responsible for the demolition of the mosque. Advani, the BJP leader who led the mob in 1992 faces trial. In September 2010, the Allahabad High Court ruled that Hindus and Muslims should share the disputed site, but that ruling was suspended in May 2011. In November 2019, the Supreme Court ruled that there will be the construction of Hindu Temple, and a separate piece of land is awarded to Muslim groups. In 2020, Modi laid the foundation for the temple and senior BJP leaders, including Advani, were acquitted citing lack of evidence. In January 2024, a massive,

exuberant consecration of Ram Temple was organized that featured Hindu spiritual leaders and film celebrities, and an elaborate ceremony of statue of Ram being placed in the main sanctum of the building. The same Al Jazeera article noted that, "An Indian Supreme Court ruling in 2019 gave ownership of the land to a Hindu trust. The inauguration of the temple is being seen as a symbol of religious triumphalism, turning India's secular democracy into a Hindu-first nation, further polarizing politics that will likely benefit the governing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) months ahead of general elections."

Furthermore, comparing the election campaign to 2019, Varun speaks about Modi's biopic that starred Bollywood actor Vivek Oberoi, who was very popular in mid 2000s to early 2010s but subsequently lost his sheen. As Sanjay Rajoura had noted about the role of Hindi films in being a soft tool of propagating Hindu nationalism, this film's purpose was to humanize Modi. Making fun of the choice of the actor starred as Modi in his biopic, Varun also took a dig at the Election Commission, a body with the responsibility to supervise and conduct India's elections in a fair and neutral way. Raising questions on the supposed neutrality of that organization, Varun mentioned jokingly that after seeing the movie, they called on the BJP to not release the film otherwise it can affect their chances of coming back to power. In fact, an op-ed article in the Wire, published on January 2025 noted, "Among other activities, the alleged non-transparent manner in which elections are conducted and electoral rolls are prepared by arbitrarily adding the names of lakhs of people to the voter list and excluding scores of them just before the election schedule has raised doubts about the EC's fair functioning" (Sahu, 2025). A former Chief Election Commissioner, SY Quraishi, gave a 20-minute interview to critically acclaimed journalist Karan Thapar and critiqued the Supreme Court for its delays in handling how election commissioners are appointed. Lamenting over the process, he called the process a "joke on the nation and an insult."

Coming back to the film and a scene from the trailer where the character of Modi says, "My Gujarat is burning…" also signaled towards the alleged role of Modi in orchestrating the communal pogrom against Muslims in the state of Gujarat in 2002, when he was the Chief Minister of the state. On 27th February 2002, a train full of Hindu pilgrims returning to Gujarat from the city of Ayodhya in North India was burnt by a mob, killing 58 Hindu pilgrims. On February 28th 2002, as acts of revenge, Hindu mobs set out raping, murdering and looting Muslim families and neighborhoods. The violence continued for two months where an estimated 1000 people were murdered, at least 20,000 Muslim homes were destroyed and 150,000 people were displaced (Aswani, 2002). While all this happened under the leadership of Modi who was the erstwhile Chief Minister of Gujarat, he did not face any repercussions and was acquitted from all charges by the Supreme Court in 2012. In 2023, a BBC documentary titled *India: The Modi Question* accused Modi of direct involvement in the pogrom (The Express Tribune, 2023). The BBC report noted, "There was widespread and systematic rape of Muslim women with the intent to purge Muslims from Hindu areas…systematic campaign of violence has all the hallmarks of ethnic cleansing". In response to BBC's allegations, the Indian foreign ministry came out with a statement that noted that it was a propaganda piece that was replete with 'bias' and 'lack of objectivity' and continued the 'colonial mindset'. Not surprisingly, income tax officials conducted raids on BBC offices in New Delhi and Mumbai, just weeks after the broadcaster aired the documentary. The Press Club of India stated that the raids were 'clear cut cases of Vendetta' and Amnesty International perceived the raids as an "affront to free speech." At the moment, the documentary films are banned from being shown in India and have been taken down from Twitter and YouTube (Kumar & Frayer, 2023).

Varun also talked about Nathuram Godse who joined the Rashtriya Swamsevak Sangh (RSS), the ideological parent entity of the BJP and who was also the assassin of Mahatma Gandhi, hailed as a 'real patriot' by some Hindu nationalists (Al Jazeera, 2023). Blaming politicians right after independence who supposedly suppressed Hindu beliefs in favor of a secular democracy, Abhishek Agarwal, a member of the almost century old Hindu organization, Hindu Mahasabha, said, "It is because of Gandhi and his ideology that India was divided, and Hindus had to bow before Muslims and outsiders." Drawing parallels between Modi and his involvement in anti-Muslim pogrom with Godse who assassinated Gandhi, Varun makes fun of both and their hypothetical lament about the things they have deliberately and intentionally killed.

In this set, Varun's comedy acts like a re-telling of historical facts that exposes revisionist histories that the government is attempting to propagate and normalize. He exposes the hypocrisy between the humanized representation of Modi in the film and the actual events of the anti-Muslim pogrom that occurred under his leadership. Through comedy and laughter, it became easy and accessible for the audience to gain entry points in complex socio-political issues that are being re-written to fit the sensibilities of the current government, including attempts to reframe historical narrative and figures such as Gandhi, the compromised autonomy of other agencies such as the courts and election commission and the competing narratives around partition and independence.

In another section of the video, Varun says,

> "The main challenger in this election…who is being launched for last 15 years…the Jacky Bhagnani of Indian politics…Rahul Gandhi! (claps and cheers). Prime option for many many people…now the problem is…he is the kind of a guy who is the happiest when they are sitting at home, smoking a joint and watching Netflix…they are on Instagram and have plenty of followers and that is what he was supposed to do after 2014 elections but Arnab

Goswami and Modi provoked him so much…he is a loser…he knows nothing…Rahul Gandhi was like let me show you…I am coming! I feel that he has had a coming of age in these elections…his problem is that he has suddenly become a Hindu (shows a picture of him doing a *puja* in a temple)…he has become a disciple of Shiva, is showing his caste and subcaste but he doesn't understand that who is standing in front of him is standing tall and proud covered in ashes (symbolizing Modi)…Religion stuff is their core competency…don't go in there!! It will not work…Its visible that you have rented your clothes for this puja…you are entering the shiv temple and shivji is telling you 'hey bro, don't cheat! I can see that the mantras are being chanted, and you are singing bohemian rhapsody in your heart'. Just don't do this!! His masterstroke is that he has brought in his sister…to help him out…Priyanka Gandhi. What is her USP or her political experience? She looks a bit like the former Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi…(laughter and claps) so what…even Sunil Grover (a popular TV comedian) looks like her!



Figure 9. Rahul Gandhi performing a *puja*

Mocking the lack of a viable alternative option, Varun makes fun of Rahul Gandhi, a member of the Nehru-Gandhi political family that continues to lead the Indian National Congress, a major opposition party today. Aged 54 years old, Rahul did not seem to be a promising candidate early in his career and was launched repeatedly as a political leader to have an impact on the electorate despite his inexperienced and boyish candor. Equating him with the actor Jacky Bhagnani who has not done well at the Hindi box-office, despite his dad being a hotshot director-producer, Varun implied that Rahul Gandhi's performance has also not been that impressive despite full throttle efforts by his political party and family.

Also, his political agenda has been on the defensive where he was seen in a photo-op doing a *puja* (Hindu ritual of worship) in front of a Lord Shiva. Instead of concocting his own agenda on substantive issues such as economy, literacy, unemployment and development, Rahul pandered to soft Hindutva and portrayed himself as a believer and a true Hindu. Varun mocked Rahul's agenda indicating that the core competency of BJP and Modi is precisely in pushing the Hindutva narrative and it's already a failed battle to prove oneself as a Hindu when the opponents are the ideological fountainheads and guardians of the Hindu nationalist agenda. Crafting in a humorous way, Varun said that even God said knew that Rahul Gandhi was faking it and was singing the Bohemian Rhapsody in his heart instead of focusing on the chanting the mantras.

At different instances, his sister, Priyanka Gandhi-Vadra has also been called to run for elections but was initially reluctant to directly engage in politics. Though she has overseen her mother's and brother's election campaigns, the 52 year old only made a formal entry in 2019 when she was appointed as the All India Congress Committee (AICC) General Secretary and was in charge of the largest state of Uttar Pradesh. Despite not substantive experience in politics, she was touted as a potential leader only because she has an uncanny resemblance with her grandmother,

Indira Gandhi, the first woman Prime Minister of India. Exposing the ridiculousness of the criteria of judging her as a potential leader, Varun noted that there are several people who look like Indira Gandhi and then pulled up a picture of a TV comedian, Sunil Grover, whose hair also resembles Indira Gandhi.



Figure 10. Comparison between Indira Gandhi (left) and comedian Sunil Grover (right)

Through his performance, Varun laid out a conventional fascist plan that involves crushing down of any dissent, acquiring the autonomy of political entities to work in favor of the authoritarian regime, lack of any viable alternative options, usage of popular culture to humanize the divisive and hateful ideologies, and revisionist history that feeds the overarching ideological agenda. It might have been difficult to present it seriously and expect the same enthusiastic response and laughter from the audience as compared to performing it in a stand-up comedy performance. Nancy Fraser (1990) defines counter public as a group that forms their own discourse and commune in response to and alongside systems of power, devising 'oppositional interpretations' of identity and culture. Through this set, Varun talked about the fascist propaganda

wrapped with humor, thus making it more palatable to the audiences. The comedic performance employed jokes and the resultant laughter to talk back to the socio-cultural, political and historical narratives in the popular imagination.

Sanjay Rajoura's Stand-up Comedy

For analyzing the final performance, I choose Sanjay Rajoura's stand-up video on YouTube titled, "Science ki Honor Killing/By Sanjay Rajoura/Aisi taisi Democracy" (The Honor killing of Science). I chose this video because it is around the same length as the other two video performances by Varun and Kunal. With a length of 11:54 minutes and 22000 views, the video does not directly talk about electoral politics but is centered around scientific temperament, religion, and rhetoric by the Indian government, pointing towards the sociological imagination that serves as a conducive environment for authoritarianism to thrive.

The video opens up by showing Sanjay in a black colored casual t-shirt on stage speaking into the mike. After a few seconds long preview, the opening score comes in which is the same song that played in the background with Varun Grover. This video is a snippet from the same tour and performance of Aisi Taisi Democracy that Varun's performance was a part of. Now Sanjay is at the centerstage. He says,

> "In our society, Indian society, generally, we have usually sacrificed rationality and science. (audience chuckles). Especially in the previous five years, the way we have killed science has no parallel in the world. The way Indians behave with science is like how a married daughter's in-laws behave with her biological parents…they keep extracting things and then also say we already had this before. In our ancient scriptures, we had everything but some white person snatched it and ran away from us…now when the science is coming

> back to us we'll perform its honor killing to teach a lesson that it ran away with a white man…our prime minister said that the world's first plastic surgery was performed in India…you know whose surgery? He said Lord Ganesh! Even if I admit that world's first plastic surgery has been performed in India, at least you could have done a better job! (Audience laughs wildly) I feel you should not smoke weed and do things like these…And Jignesh Mevani did an excellent tweet…he wrote that if there was plastic surgery at that time and Ganesh's head was fixed, why wasn't Eklavya's thumb not fixed…(Ram speaks on the mike: because he was a Dalit!)…because he was a Dalit (repeats Sanjay)…(claps and cheers) The chief minister of Tripura says that there was internet during Mahabharat…if it was there, you could have made the Bharat matrimony website…Arjun was trying to target the eye of the fish for nothing…he could have written everything in his profile and Draupadi would have known that they were five of them!"

Articulating the patriarchal social structure of Indian society, Sanjay invokes the systematic crushing of scientific temperament, especially since the BJP came to power. His assertions are not without evidence. In 2023, an editorial published in Nature asked why India dropped evolution and periodic table from school science. The National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), an advisory body to the Government of India which aims at improving school level education wants "a rootedness and pride in India, and its rich, diverse, ancient and modern culture and knowledge systems and traditions." Some people are seeing this objective as the motivation to delete Darwin and Faraday from the curriculum and instead learn about India's precolonial history of science (Nature, 2023). The article further notes, "Researchers who study India's education policy have told *Nature* that organizations that are critical of science are advocating for or influencing these changes to textbooks…they point to one organization in

particular: the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, which has close ties to the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party." RSS is the ideological fountainhead of Hindutva, and the parent entity of its political wing, BJP.

Sanjay juxtaposes his content about rationality with the misogynist and illegal practices of dowry and honor killing. In India, dowry is a collection of gifts, money, and property that the bride's family presents to the groom's family during marriage. Though it is illegal, it continues under the garb of 'giving gifts' and there have been cases where brides have been harassed and bullied by their husbands and their families (Sukumar, 2017). Honor Killing is another practice that sustains in several parts of the country, especially in rural areas. The idea of 'honor' is associated to the reputation vested in female virginity and chastity (Namrata, 2024). When a woman transgresses the expectations, the honor of the family members is perceived to be threatened and the family or members of family resort to killing her to uphold the supremacy of their reputation. Though the data on honor killings is scarce, almost one-third of them take place in India and Pakistan (Namrata, 2024). Sanjay uses a single arrow of comedy to simultaneously illuminate two social ills—oppressive patriarchal practices and the rise of irrationality.

Some contemporary political leaders claim that the streak of scientific temperament was always present in ancient Hindu scriptures but was destroyed during colonization. Imagining the scriptural knowledge as the daughter who ran away with the white man (British colonizer) and came back as science (a matured woman and a wife), Sanjay wittingly fits that analogy in the modus operandi of honor killing and the inevitable fate of science that should be murdered to protect the 'honor'. To exemplify this, Sanjay talks about how PM Modi said that the first plastic surgery happened in India with Lord Ganesh who has a human body but the face of an elephant. In fact, according to a news website alt news (2018), PM Modi has repeated this assertion more

than once. He referred to it when he was addressing a gathering of medical professionals in Mumbai in October 2014 (Rahman, 2014). He said, “We worship Lord Ganesha. There must have been some plastic surgeon at that time who got an elephant’s head on the body of a human being and began the practice of plastic surgery (Rahman 2014).” Modi has also written a foreword to a book for school students in Gujarat that mentioned that Hindu Lord Ram flew the first airplane, and that the technology of stem cell existed in ancient India (Rahman, 2014).

Noting a tweet by Jagdish Mevani, an Indian politician, Dalit journalist and a lawyer who also is a member of the opposition Indian National Congress, and the convener of Rashtriya Dalit Adhikar Manch (RDAM), Sanjay was the only comedian who strongly invoked a caste critique. In 2019, Mevani’s tweet noted, “If plastic surgery was there while fixing Ganesha's head, Why didn't it work for fixing Ekalavya's thumb? Defeat saffron agenda in education! Higher education institutes must run on progressive ethos, not on Manusmriti! Join Young India Adhikar March on 7th Feb. #7FebDilliChalo” (X, 2019). Eklavya (a character from the Indian epic Mahabharata) was a young boy from the tribal community of Nishada who was keen on learning archery. He approached the great archer of his time, Dronacharya for mentorship who after learning that he was from a lower caste, refused to teach him and then later demanded one of his thumbs that effectively killed his future in archery. Eklavya is often invoked with ancestral and allegorical connections with the lowest caste (Dalit) populations and represents their struggles in Dalit movements. By espousing both Ganesh and Eklavya together, Sanjay used a rhetorical strategy that exposed the differential treatment that people from lower caste historically received and continue to this day.

Since several politicians have followed the PM’s suit of claiming that there was internet during the times of Mahabharat, Sanjay took it a step forward saying that perhaps they should have

made an online matrimonial website that could have been used by Arjun, a mythological prince and archer in Mahabharata, to marry Draupadi, a princess which could have saved him all the trouble of competing with other eligible bachelors. Eventually, though Draupadi married Arjun, she became the common wife of five Pandava brothers. He said that it could have been more transparent for Draupadi to have learnt earlier that there were five of them. Through his satire about creating matrimonial websites for mythological figures like Arjun and Draupadi, Sanjay further subverts attempts to project modern technology onto ancient texts. His comedy serves as resistance by revealing the absurdity of these nationalist claims while advocating for rational thinking in a political landscape increasingly dominated by religious mythology presented as historical fact.

Sanjay further said,

> "Satyapal, the commissioner of Mumbai Police said that 'the theory of evolution is not true because my grandparents never saw any ape turning into a human' (laughter and chuckles) Its evolution and not Maggi Noodle…In Delhi there is also a BJP leader, Mr. Harshvardhan…he made a statement the very next day after Stephen Hawking died, that "even Stephen Hawking has said that the Hindu *vedas* are superior to e=mc2…" what the fuck do you mean? Equal to, less than and more than are all signs we know but what is the sign of 'superior' my brother? He is so smart that he is saying this after Stephen Hawking died…so we cannot even cross-check now...For three weeks, I was so confused about what he is trying to say and then after a while I realized that for an upper caste Hindu, everything is about superiority of *vedas.* The world is trying to make pictures of Black Hole and there are efforts to find Higgs Boson particles in CERN but we are trying to find plutonium in cow dung!"

Continuing the imagination of an alternate history that is rooted in traditions, and without any evidence, Sanjay also invoked the former police chief Satya Pal Singh's statement that denounced Darwin's theory. Also, a former union minister in Human Resources (education!), he said, "From the time we have been hearing stories from our grandparents, ever since books were written, until today, nobody has, either in a story or in writing, said he went somewhere into a jungle and saw an ape turning into a man. This is not written anywhere. Darwin's theory is scientifically wrong and so, in schools and colleges it must be changed. Since man came on Earth, he has always been man and will always be man. You may not be aware… but in foreign countries, our scientists have said this about 35 years ago… that there is no truth in this." Interestingly, he has a PhD in Chemistry which did not influence his decision to reject such a significant scientific theory about evolution of humankind. He further added that there is a need to change the school and college curriculum and expressed his wish to organize an international event to prove Darwin wrong (Thapar, 2018). As a response to the former minister's statement, the Indian National Science Academy, the National Academy of Sciences and the Indian Academy of Science issued a joint statement signed by around 2000 scientists that noted, "There is no scientific basis for the minister's statements. Evolution theory, to which Darwin made seminal contributions, is well established. There is no scientific dispute about the basic facts of evolution. This is a scientific theory." Referring to extremely popular Nestle Maggie noodles which are known to have a cooking time of 2 minutes, Sanjay vocalized that evolution's 'cooking time' was a bit longer than the noodles, much to the disappointment of Singh.

In a separate incident, the former Union Minister of Science and Technology, Dr. Harsh Vardhan made a statement at the 105th Indian Science Congress saying that the ancient *vedas*[8] had a theory of relativity that was superior to Albert Einstein's E=mc2. Also, with a tweet, he said, "Each and every custom and ritual of Hinduism is steeped in science; every modern Indian achievement is a continuation of our ancient scientific achievement. Even Stephen Hawking said, our Vedas might have a theory superior to Einstein's law E=mc2. When quizzed by the media about the source of this information, he retorted back saying that the media should do their homework and find out (India Today, 2018). On further digging, the only source that came out was a fake Facebook page by the name of Stephen Hawking that had only 1000 followers and that information was posted back in 2011.

Perhaps the most radical aspect of Sanjay's comedy is his willingness to address caste, a topic largely absent from mainstream Indian comedy. Sanjay talked about caste again and indicated that it seemed like that for upper caste Hindus, all that mattered were the superiority of *Vedas*. Incorporating caste criticism in the comedy was truly resistant to the dominant narrative of politics and comedy because it does find any airtime on mainstream media. Even most stand-up comedy performances and comics in India do not include caste related content for the risk of offending audiences and the authorities. Sanjay, a member of the Jat community, that comes under the Other Backward Castes (OBCs), is the only comic in mainstream Indian comedy culture who talks about caste so openly. Even in his interview with me, he had lamented the lack of caste

[8] Vedas are religious texts composed in Sanskrit, considered among the oldest religious works in the world. They were first transmitted orally for centuries and then later written down. "They inform the religion of Hinduism and supposedly contain fundamental knowledge about the underlying cause of, function of, and personal response to existence" (Mark, 2020). There are four Vedas—Rig Veda, Sama Veda, Yajur Veda and Atharva Veda. Though there is no definite date of its composition, the period of 1500-1200 BCE is considered to be acceptable to most scholars.

representation in Indian comedy and the issues that were popular and more accepted by comedy audiences. In fact, majority of mainstream stand-up comedy come from upper caste, English speaking and urban or semi-urban backgrounds. These social locations often remove them from caste-based discrimination that results in complete absence of material around caste or just a cringey and disconnected treatment of it. Additionally, since talking critically about caste can provoke strong reactions such as legal threats, political pressure and trolling, comedians might want to play safe and steer clear of any controversy. Due to the market and platform constraints, comedy around caste can risk alienating large sections of audiences, especially the privileged caste who might be uncomfortable confronting their own complicity in the system. Streaming services such as YouTube and Netflix may subtly favor 'safer' content that caters to broader and more affluent audiences. Caste is often seen as too 'serious, complex or divisive' to be joked about, reflecting a cultural unwillingness to confront and engage with caste as a structural reality.

Continuing the line of killing scientific temperament, Sanjay talked about finding value in cow dung in India when the rest of the world is preoccupied with taking pictures of the Black Hole. Cows are sacred in Hinduism and a potential inspiration for this story came from the comments by V Kamakoti, the director of the prestigious Indian Institute of Technology Madras in Tamil Nadu who is talking about an ascetic in a viral video saying that the ascetic "drank cow urine and in 15 minutes, his fever subsided" (Muzaffar, 2025). The head of a premium engineering institution further advocates for cow urine as 'anti-bacterial and anti-fungal' and touted its medicinal value for Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS). The BJP members came to support him and accused critics of 'politicizing his remarks'. The BJP president in Tamil Nadu said to reporters, "The IIT-M director is an expert in quantum physics, and he was also a member of top government agencies. He is firm in his religious beliefs and respect for cows, which are not wrong." In 2020, over 500

scientists reportedly asked the Indian government to cancel its request for research proposals regarding the 'unique qualities' of native Indian cows and the alleged healing properties of cow urine, dung, and milk, including their potential applications in treating cancer (Muzaffar, 2025). The renewed interest in cow-based beauty products has been increasing since 2014[9]. When BJP came to power, it conceptualized a special mission to bring the role of cows to the forefront. There have been beef bans in many states along with cow protection squads and angry mobs lynching people suspected of smuggling cows (Pathak, 2018).

Through the content of the comedy, Sanjay highlighted the spread of pseudoscience by top officials in education and research universities as a step towards larger concerts efforts for the political project of Hindu nationalism. In a media landscape where, certain topics receive little coverage, Sanjay's comedy serves to fill critical gaps in public discourse. The mainstream media's reluctance to address caste issues or critically examine Hindu nationalist policies creates an environment where comedy can function as an alternative platform for resistance. His comedy reveals how seemingly isolated incidents—rejections of scientific theories, promotion of cow products, or claims about ancient Hindu knowledge—are part of a coherent political project. Through his performances, Sanjay not only entertains but also educates and empowers his audience to question the functioning and the ideological underpinnings of Hindu nationalist agenda in India.

The last set for analysis of Sanjay's comedy says,

[9] Cows have strong reverence in Hinduism, particularly owing to their links with agrarian life, mythology, moral philosophy. Considered to be symbolic of abundance, nourishment and the Earth, they are associated with wealth, fertility and abundance. In the Rig Veda, cows have been considered as 'Aghnya', meaning not to be killed. What began as symbolic has now turned to rigid doctrine, making cow as a central figure in Hindu politics.

> "We are not scientific and feel cool about it! I am an atheist, and I don't believe in God and all that bullshit (loud claps and cheers) But there are people out there who, trying to pretend that they are cool, say things like 'I don't believe in God but I believe in some energy.' I am like you idiot! Do you believe in potential or kinetic energy? They come up with ridiculous theories like 'I am not religious, but I am spiritual.' I am telling you if you ever come across a snake and a spiritual person, you should smack the spiritual being! If people had done that, we would never have gotten these self-proclaimed gurus like Asaram Bapu, Jagatguru, we would never have gotten these goofballs! We were talking the other day…when people say things like that there must be something that is sustaining the world and is keeping things okay…I am like does this look 'okay' to you? Everything is fucked! And this emphasis on religion…religion is anti-planet, anti-human beings, anti-everybody."

Articulating explicitly about his own personal beliefs, he declares that he is an atheist and does not believe in any specific religion or spirituality. However, also commenting on a trend where people are aligning themselves with spirituality, Sanjay satirized the rise of self-proclaimed Godmen and how they exploited people by tapping on their insecurities. Asaram Bapu, a guru mentioned by Sanjay, was a self-styled godman who had millions of disciples and followers and fell from the high pedestal after he was convicted of raping a minor girl (Firstpost, 2018). Simultaneously, other cases emerged such as crimes involving land grabbing and practicing black magic in his ashrams. Starting from humble beginnings, he amassed a wealth of approximately 1.2 billion dollars and had 400 ashrams across the country. His rise was accompanied with an increasing clout with politicians of all parties and he shared the podium with people like the former PM Atal Behari Vajpayee, LK Advani, and Uma Bharti. In fact, he also shared the stage with the

current PM Narendra Modi. After the rape allegations of a minor girl, two more Gujarat based sisters came out and accused Asaram Bapu and his son of sexual assault. To avoid the arrest, the godman remained in his Ashrama in Indore, a city in central India's Madhya Pradesh where clashes broke out between his disciples and the police. Eventually, he was arrested in September 2013.

Critical of the people who believe in the existence of a supreme power for sustenance of the world, Sanjay reframed the narrative by lamenting on the current state of the world. He questioned the significance of religion and openly said that it was against the sustenance of the environment and a threat to humans. Saying his commentary in a comedy show situated his thoughts at a unique location that were met with laughter and cheering claps. Being on a comedy stage changed the concept of propriety that allowed him to air his personal opinions which were radical, compared to the erstwhile socio-political scenario. Based on this video performance, a complaint was filed against Sanjay Rajoura who faced an onslaught of abuses on social media on the allegations of 'hurting Hindu sentiments'. His X account has been suspended. In fact, a news article published on news laundry website in 2021 quoted a comedian who refused to be named, "As a comedian, you don't want to be scared or admit to self-censorship. You want to be fearless and take on the system. After all, our very existence is dependent on being able to talk about things that you and I don't want to talk about. But then, as a human being, a family member, as a child, as a lover, I also want to be safe" (Suresh, 2021).

Conclusion

Stand-up comedy in India has evolved into a powerful and subversive medium that actively resists the pro-Hindutva narrative of the Bharatiya Janata Party. The performances of comedians such as Kunal Kamra, Varun Grover, and Sanjay Rajoura serve as potent examples of how humor,

satire, and storytelling can create a space for counter-narratives, challenge political hegemony, and foster a culture of dissent in an increasingly authoritarian landscape. Through a critical examination of their performances, this chapter has demonstrated that stand-up comedy is not merely a form of entertainment but a significant site of resistance where political critique thrives.

One of the primary ways in which stand-up comedy resists the BJP's Hindutva ideology is by exposing the contradictions, hypocrisies, and absurdities within its narratives. Kamra's performances, for example, dismantle the manufactured perceptions surrounding Prime Minister Narendra Modi, revealing the constructed image of a leader who oscillates between being an economic reformer and a God-like figure. His satirical take on the BJP's economic promises, crony capitalism, and religious politics highlights the ways in which the ruling party has prioritized ideological supremacy over substantive governance. The juxtaposition of Modi's self-proclaimed divine purpose with the realities of unemployment, failing infrastructure, and censorship allows Kamra's comedy to cut through the propaganda and offer a clear and relatable critique of the state's priorities.

Varun Grover's stand-up further illustrates how comedy acts as an alternative form of political commentary, one that is often more accessible and resonant than conventional journalism. His re-imagination of Modi's electoral campaign as a Tinder profile humorously lays bare the contrasts between the BJP's promises and their actual delivery. By drawing attention to the performative nature of politics, Grover deconstructs the BJP's Hindutva project as an exercise in image-building rather than nation-building. His emphasis on the absurdity of India's political elite—whether it be the opportunistic Hindutva posturing of opposition figures like Rahul Gandhi or the misplaced priorities of leaders like Hema Malini—ensures that his critique transcends mere

partisanship and becomes a broader commentary on the frivolousness of political leaders and erosion of democratic values.

Sanjay Rajoura's stand-up, the most radical and explicit in its scope, challenges the BJP's Hindutva ideology by questioning its fundamental premise—the supposed superiority of ancient Hindu civilization over scientific rationality. His satire on the Indian government's efforts to replace scientific education with mythological narratives exposes the ideological underpinnings of the BJP's project. By critiquing the government's erasure of scientific knowledge, the promotion of pseudoscience, and the glorification of Hindu religious texts as superior to empirical research, Rajoura's comedy serves as a potent tool in resisting the intellectual regression that the BJP seeks to normalize.

Beyond their specific critiques, these comedians collectively highlight the larger mechanisms of authoritarianism that operate under the BJP's rule. Their humor underscores the increasing criminalization of dissent, the censorship of media, and the co-optation of state institutions to serve prejudiced interests. Through their performances, they also expose the ways in which the BJP has weaponized religion to consolidate power, manufacturing a sense of Hindu superiority and victimhood at the same time while systematically marginalizing minorities, especially Muslims. This aligns with the broader global trend of populist leaders leveraging majoritarian anxieties to maintain political dominance, a phenomenon that has been observed in other right-wing nationalist movements worldwide.

Unlike traditional forms of resistance, which often face suppression in mainstream media and academia, comedy clubs and online platforms provide a relatively unregulated sphere for political critique. The laughter that erupts in these performances is not merely an expression of

amusement but an act of defiance, a collective assertion of agency against an increasingly oppressive state apparatus. In this way, comedy becomes a shared experience of resistance, fostering solidarity among diverse audiences who might otherwise feel isolated in their dissent.

However, the effectiveness of comedy as resistance is not without its challenges. The backlash faced by comedians which ranges from censorship to legal action and physical threats, reveals the limits of humor in a society where free speech is under attack. State's crackdown on comedians, often under the pretext of maintaining public law and order or preventing religious offense, demonstrates the anxiety of those in power when faced with comedy's incisive critique. The suspension of Sanjay Rajoura's social media accounts, the repeated FIRs against Kunal Kamra, and the exclusion of Shyam Rangeela's Modi impersonation from television broadcasts all indicate the extent to which the BJP seeks to control the narrative and suppress counter-discourses.

Despite these constraints, the resilience of stand-up comedy as a form of resistance lies in its adaptability. With the rise of digital platforms such as YouTube and social media, comedians have found alternative ways to reach their audiences, circumventing traditional media gatekeepers. This shift not only democratizes access to political satire but also amplifies the impact of comedic resistance by reaching a broader and more diverse audience. Furthermore, the global circulation of Indian stand-up performances allows international audiences to engage with and critique the BJP's Hindutva project, adding an additional layer of pressure on the regime.

In conclusion, stand-up comedy in India functions as an essential counter to the BJP's pro-Hindutva narrative, offering a space for critical reflection, subversive humor, and collective resistance. Through satire, comedians illuminate the contradictions of the ruling party, challenge

the manufactured legitimacy of its ideological project, and provide an alternative discourse that fosters democratic engagement. The ability of stand-up comedy to transform laughter into a political act ensures that, despite the challenges, it continues to be a powerful force against authoritarianism and religious nationalism in contemporary India. As Varun said in the interview with me, “It’s a great success of comedy as a medium and comedians that they are seen as a threat and not just as jokers who are saying sh*t on stage.”

Chapter VI

Laughing in the Comments: Comedy, YouTube and Counterpublics

RQ3: How does stand-up comedy use social media as an extended space for subaltern counter publics?

Wearing a green and black check shirt with folded sleeves till the elbow, and donning black sunglasses, Arnab Goswami is sitting on a seat in an airplane. The plane is visibly airborne. The video seemingly captured by a mobile phone is showing Arnab, a news anchor known for his hyper nationalistic style of journalism and screaming matches during primetime news television. There comes a voice from behind the mobile phone camera. It's of the comedian Kunal Kamra. He is saying, "Here, I am asking coward Arnab Goswami a question about his journalism and he is doing exactly what I expected him to do…he is being a coward…first he called me mentally unstable and now he says that I [Arnab] am watching something…he is not ready to answer my question viewers…Viewers today want to know if Arnab is a coward or a nationalist? Arnab! This is for national interest!" Arnab is watching something on his laptop, has earphones plugged in, and refuses to make eye contact or acknowledge Kunal's presence in any way. Mimicking the news anchor's probing and sensational tone, Kunal continues, "I am part of your *tukde-tukde*[10] narrative. You should deflate me…you should take enemies of the state down…you should ensure that the country is in safe hands of Narendra Modi… you should fight against dynasts like Rahul Gandhi who has support on 10, Tuglak Lane…Arnab! You should have a reply Arnab…Arnab! Are you a coward? Or are you a journalist? Or a nationalist? Who are you, Arnab? (The airhostess speaks something inaudible in the background on the plane

[10] *Tukde-Tukde*, literally meaning small pieces, has become a slur for anyone critical of the Modi government. *Tukde tukde* gang is being used to signal that those critical voices want to break the country into small pieces.

speaker) Who are you? Tell me Arnab! I am here waiting for your answer. You will have to answer (Arnab scratches his eyebrows and wipes his mouth in exasperation while intently gazing on his tablet). As I expected, the cowardice has gotten the better of you! I wanted to have a conversation with you politely, but you don't deserve my politeness…you know you don't deserve my politeness, and this is not for you…this is for Rohith Vemula's mother whose caste you were discussing on your fucking show…I know this is not allowed. Its fine…Its fine if this is not allowed. I'll go to jail for this! But this is for Rohith's mother…And go fucking find time and read that 10-page suicide note that Rohith wrote so that you have some emotion or some heart…or just become human! Just become human! Do that! Do that in your free time! You nationalist!!"



Figure 11. Arnab Goswami in a video grab from Kunal's video

The above incident unfolded during an Indigo Airlines flight from Mumbai to Lucknow in January 2020. Arnab Goswami, the 51-year-old managing editor of the Republic news network, is known for his polarizing, heavily biased and pro-BJP government sentiment. He

often rebukes panelists on his shows, demeans government critics and opposition leaders, and passes judgements in support of the government on 'news issues.' He has also called guests on his shows 'traitors' and 'anti-nationals' and has openly called to go to war with Pakistan (BBC, 2020).

During this encounter in the plane, Kunal can be heard berating Arnab using some of his own catchphrases like 'the nation wants to know!' and 'if Arnab is a coward or a nationalist.' Just after a few hours, Indigo Airlines tweeted that they were banning Kunal from flying with the airlines for six months and tagged India's aviation minister, Hardeep Singh Puri. In turn, Puri asked all airlines to follow the precedent. Soon thereafter, the national carrier, Air India along with two private airlines, Spice Jet and GoAir suspended Kunal from flying in their airlines (Kuchay, 2020).

Responding to his banning of flying, Kunal said, "its not shocking at all to me that for exercising my right to speech, three airlines have given me a temporary ban." He noted that he ensured to follow the orders of the cabin crew and the only thing he had caused was a 'damage' to Arnab's 'inflated ego'. According to a BBC article, this decision was questioned by people on social media considering that Arnab and his reporters have gone up to people in the past, including in airplanes, and raucously demanded answers themselves (BBC, 2020). Delhi-based activist-politician, Yogendra Yadav, described the incident as astonishing and noted, "Is Mr. Goswami a state dignitary? Why this special treatment to him?" Connecting the dots, he further added that Arnab was considered to be a friend of the BJP government and Kunal was seen as a critic. He stated, "The interesting thing is the response from the airlines. It gives is a sense of what this regime is all about" (Kuchay, 2020).

In the video, Kunal was asking Arnab about Rohith Vemula, a 26-year-old PhD student and a Dalit scholar at the University of Hyderabad in Southern India who committed suicide in January 2016. Two weeks earlier, Rohith and his four Dalit friends moved out of their hostel rooms and were barred from entering common spaces after suspension from the university administration. Part of a campus political group, the Ambedkar Students Association, they camped outside the university shopping center and staged a hunger strike, calling their camp as Velivada—a Dalit Ghetto. It all started when the leader of the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP)—the student wing of the BJP, accused the five students of assaulting him, following which an inquiry was instituted by the university's vice chancellor. The protests in the aftermath of Rohith's suicide alleged that the decision of suspension for five of them was significantly influenced by a 'series of letters' written by BJP ministers Bandaru Dattatreya and Smriti Irani who repeatedly labelled them as anti-national and anti-casteist (Vadlamani, 2016). Sheikh Riyaz, a friend of Rohith said, "His (Rohith) family story haunted Rohith all his life…He faced caste discrimination in the house where he grew up. But instead of succumbing, Rohith fought it out. He broke many barriers before he got to the final stretch, his PhD. He gave up when he realized he could go no further" (Mondal, 2016).

This encounter between Arnab Goswami and Kunal Kamra exemplifies the struggle between the mainstream media that has been pressured into towing the ideological line of the government, and the alternative media that is challenging and questioning the ideological push of BJP's Hindutva, and consequently facing punishment. As earlier chapters have established the personal motivations of the comedians in curating their comedy, and how their performances use political issues to coalesce them into hilarious yet upfront truth telling, this chapter deals with the reaction of audiences. This chapter examines *how stand-up comedy uses social media as an*

extended space for subaltern counter publics. Through an analysis of YouTube comments on each comedian's stand-up performance video which has been examined in the last chapter, I analyze how the social media comments foster and validate an online space of marginalized perspectives that do not find airtime in the mainstream media. Even if they do find space in the mainstream media, those responses are often met with strident attacks and vicious trolling. In the process of my analysis, I first establish the contemporary mainstream media of the country as the public sphere. I investigate the types of ideologies and views that are circulated and treated as the normative 'consensus' and what perspectives this viewpoint leaves out? Who are the people it leaves out and why? To contextualize and ground my analysis, I often support my social media analysis with news stories and the impact that comedy and the comedians have been met out with. Similar to chapter 2, I do not examine the social media comments for the Zeeshan and Noor Ahmed to protect the confidentiality of their identities.

Through the analysis of the comments under the stand-up videos of the comedians, there are prominent themes that stand out. Firstly, the audience members applaud and cheer the comedian and their work, demonstrating agreement with the opinions of the comics and leading to a sense of collective identity based on shared experiences. Secondly, there is a recurrent comparison between the mainstream journalism and comedy work of Kunal, Varun and Sanjay, with an indication towards the failure of the former. Thirdly, since the life of the comedy is prolonged on social media compared to a live show, some comments written after years of the upload show their relevance to the continuing politics of the times. The relative unregulation of YouTube in India makes it a potent platform to enable people to challenge the dominant political, social, and economic discourse by speaking their dissatisfaction and disenfranchisement. Fourthly, the audience members talk within themselves about the comedian

and their work outside the traditional media gatekeeping. Lastly, this chapter also describes the patrolling of digital foot soldiers by the BJP troll army who co-opt the subaltern counterpublics sphere, threaten the marginalized perspectives and create a chilling effect. This chapter reiterates that the active engagement of audiences with online stand-up comedy is empowering for subaltern communities and perspectives as it provides a counternarrative space against the systematic erasure of their dissent and viewpoints from traditional media.

State of India's Mainstream News

An article by France24 notes, "Press freedom is in crisis in the "world's largest democracy" with attacks against journalists, concentration of media ownership, pro-government bias and expulsions of foreign reporters. Since India's Hindu nationalist Prime Minister Narendra Modi came to power in 2014, several mainstream Indian TV channels have "effectively turned into government mouthpieces" (Alvarez & Suresh, 2024). Reporters without Borders echoes this sentiment and notes that India is now one of the world's most dangerous countries to work in for journalists, with an average of 3-4 journalists killed every year in connection with their work (RSF, 2024). Journalists critical of the government are prominent victims of online harassment, bullying, trolling, physical attacks and arbitrary arrests. Reporters without borders that has ranked India at 159th out of 180 countries on the World Press Freedom Index, has also taken special note on how the supporters of Hindutva constantly call for revenge against anyone who is critical of the establishment and brand them as 'traitors' and 'anti-nationals' (RSF 2024).

Mainstream Indian news channels such as Times Now, Republic TV, India Today TV have towed the ideological thinking of the government with fervor (Kesavan, 2024). The article by Mukul Kesavan, a Delhi based columnist, in Foreign Policy noted that the primetime panels

organized by these news channels on political issues such as the farmer's protests, Delhi riots of 2020, undocumented Muslims and the repercussions of the Citizenship Amendment Act were so severely skewed in favor of the government that their anchors 'came across as willing foot soldiers in the government's Hindutva project.'

The political economy of these news channels constitutes interesting case studies. In 2022, after almost nine years of Modi getting elected to power, NDTV, the only English language news channel that regularly questioned the government's ideological agenda and policies was acquired by Indian businessperson Gautam Adani, the country's second richest man and a close associate of PM Modi. There have been other mainstream media outlets that have been owned in various capacities by India's richest billionaire Mukesh Ambani, another confidant of Modi. The tonality of these news channels, colloquially referred to as *Godi* Media, or lapdog media, has been soft and pampering of BJP, Modi and their policies. Modi, who has not held a press conference since coming to power 11 years ago, is asked questions by the *Godi Media* journalists that give him airtime to reflect on his superhuman self (Kesavan, 2024). In fact, in one of these interviews he claimed his divine origins and said, "When my mother was alive, I used to believe that I was born biologically. After she passed away, upon reflecting on all my experiences, I was convinced that God has sent me. This energy could not be from my biological body but was bestowed upon me by God. I believe God has given me abilities, inspiration, and good intentions for a purpose… I am nothing but an instrument. That's why, whenever I do anything, I believe God is guiding me" (The Wire, 2024).



Figure 12. Visual of Arnab Goswami's primetime debate

According to the France 24 article, one person who embodies this shift in India's journalism from a skeptical watchdog to the government's mouthpiece is Arnab Goswami. A graduate of University of Delhi and Oxford University, this anchor specializes in 'debates' that are marked with his accusatory and defamatory styles with anyone who dares to disagree with him and, by consequence, the BJP government. The episode narrated in the beginning of this chapter with Kunal Kamra captures a more demure, lesser-known version of his persona. In opposition to Arnab Goswami's journalism, the journalist who stands up to the bigotry and the vociferous push towards authoritarianism is Ravish Kumar. Known for his straightforward and hard-hitting reportage, he has criticized news outlets, including Arnab Goswami, for explicitly taking stance in support of BJP and Modi, and fomenting communal tensions between Hindus and Muslims (Sen, 2023). Once a Hindi senior correspondent with NDTV, he resigned from the channel after Adani acquired the news outlet and launched his own YouTube channel with the current following of 12.6 million subscribers. Having a huge audience in the Hindi heartland,

Ravish Kumar has also been the subject of an award-winning documentary film ‘While we Watched’ (PBS, 2023).

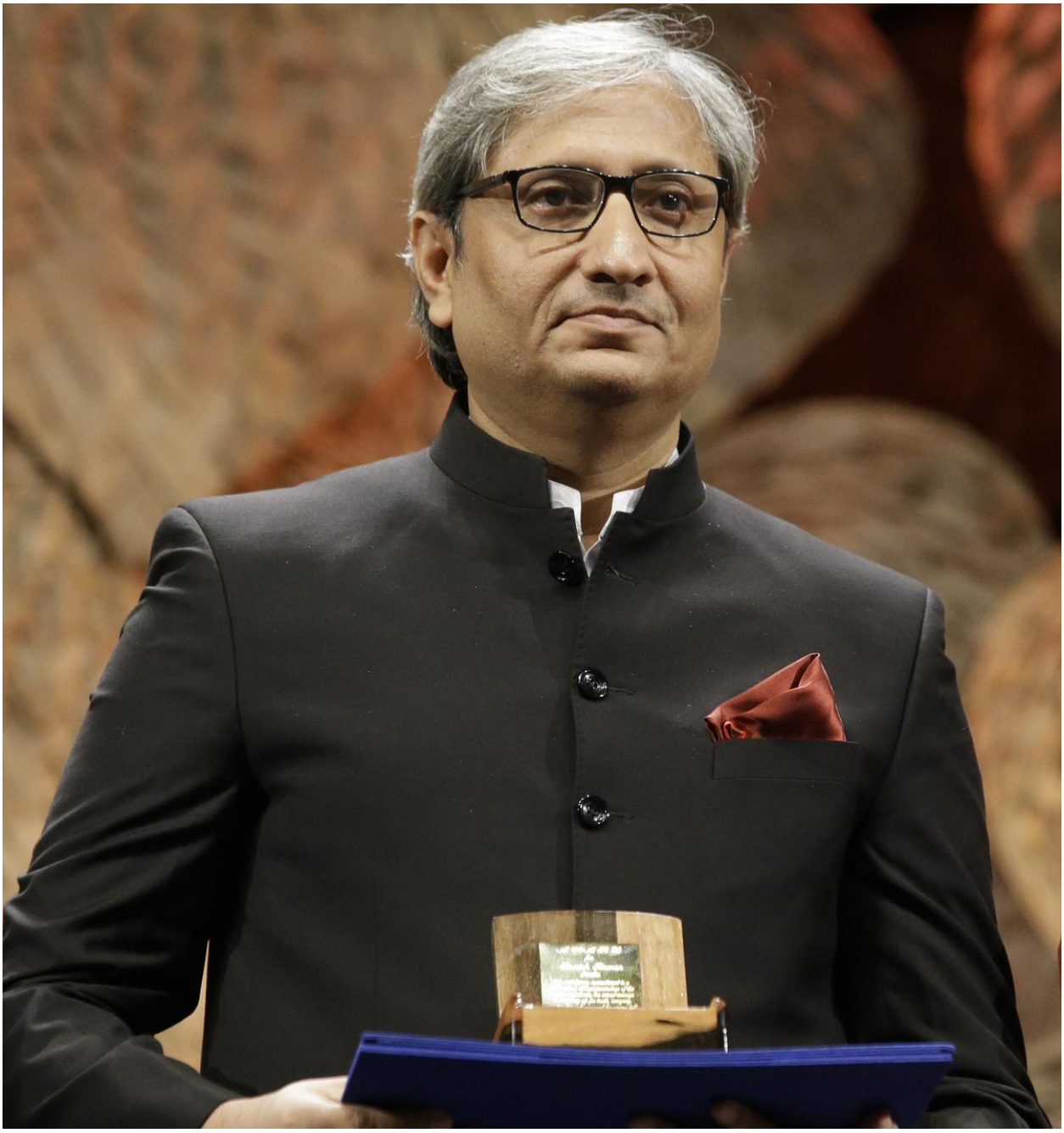


Figure 13. Ravish Kumar

While mainstream TV channels devolved into government instruments, online platforms, especially YouTube, have become a place of solace and refuge for critical and independent journalists and media outlets. Stand-up comedians are not lagging and have effectively caught up with uploading their content on YouTube, surpassing the territorial and financial barriers of accessibility. Zeeshan Iqbal, Noor Ahmed, Kunal Kamra, Sanjay Rajoura, Varun Grover, Shyam Rangeela and Vir Das are all using YouTube to not just upload their comedy work, but also non-comedy work such as talk shows, poetry, and interviews. The following section now looks at political stand-up comedy on YouTube as a space that acts as a subaltern counter public and examines the comments under those videos as extensions of the counter public sphere.

Stand-up Comedy as Subaltern

Subaltern counterpublics are spaces that develop in parallel, and often in response to the exclusionary 'official public sphere' where 'members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and need" (Fraser, 1992). The term is conceptualized by conjoining the terms 'subaltern' from Gayatri Spivak and 'counterpublic' by Rita Felski. Fraser emphasized that the formation of public sphere was marked by significant exclusions, mostly women and non-proprietary male working class. Fraser also argues that these excluded groups often made competing counterpublics. They included woman only voluntary association, working class publics, peasant class meaning that there was never one single, unitary public. Critiquing the Habermasian concept of public sphere, Fraser sees it as a bourgeoise instrument used to manufacture hegemony and political domination. The 'common sense' is constructed by the proliferation of discourses that normalize and naturalize the existing socio-political order.

In the context of this dissertation, the mainstream media has emerged as the public sphere and several other media outlets critical of the government has emerged as the subaltern counterpublics—namely newslaundry, the wire, scroll and reporters collective among many others. This streak of subaltern counterpublics extends to stand-up comedy.

Cultivating a Sense of Collective Identity

Vasu Primlani, India's first openly gay comic who is also an environmentalist, athlete and a somatic therapist said in an interview to the German news outlet DW, "Political statements in India are censured at best, and dissent is criminalized" (Krishnan, 2021). While several of these comedians critique the government's ideological agenda and question the hyper nationalistic sentiment, the comments spaces under their stand-up videos provide a glimpse of people's reception and impact of that comedy. The online space of comment section becomes an avenue of opinions that have been erased by the mainstream media, finding visibility and legitimacy. Resonating with the comedians, several comments articulate their frustrations and reinforce a collective identity rooted in discomfort and skepticism towards the BJP's Hindutva narrative.

For example, @karrydocks, one of the viewers commented on Kunal's video, "*Its been 5 years since this Masterpiece. I have always loved Kunal's comedy, I wish our country was tolerant, I wish our country didn't have these politicians who are even worse than buffoons who have just gaslighted the honest and truth speaking citizens of our country. Kunal I wish you all the best from my Heart, and I believe you can turn it around please dont lose hope. Your comedy is nothing less than an honest mirror and we dont want to lose that. The day this government is toppled I want to see you Back On Stage with the same energy*." Rooted in nostalgia when satire

and political comedy were more accepted, this comment serves as a rallying cry for resilience, perseverance and collective spirit of resistance. It actively criticizes the government, equates political leaders as 'buffoons' and creates an 'us vs. them' rhetoric that positions the critics of the government as the sensible, ethical and oppressed group compared to the ruling elite. When this commenter notes, "to not lose hope…I wish you all the best from my heart", it builds a sense of hopeful, inclusive and supportive community that shares very similar frustrations.

Another commenter, @rahul7152 under Varun Grover's comedy video noted, "This the optimal type of opposition that is necessary to keep the democracy alive. *Actually, the opposition party should take tips from you. Very well done*👍🏻👍🏻*."* This comment positions Varun's comedy as a crucial tool that cultivates political dissent, reveals the weaknesses of political opposition, something that Varun partakes in his work as well, and reinforces the idea that the maintenance of democracy requires space for dissent and fearless questioning. Seemingly neutral and polite, the comment implies dissatisfaction with the government, and the inadequacy of viable political opposition. Saying that the 'opposition should take tips from you' indicates towards the potent power of satire as counterpublics which is offering an alternative space for dissent when mainstream avenues such as the media and political opposition have been weakened or co-opted. By suggesting that the comedian, an organic intellectual leader, is doing a much better job than the elected leaders, the comment undermines the credibility of institutional opposition and laments on the lack of a coherent, strong and proportionate dissent within formal structures.

A commentator @ajaypradhan5260 under Sanjay's stand-up video said, "*Most hilarious jokes on religion ever.*" Written succinctly, this comment indicates a resonance with Sanjay's style of comedy that challenges dominant narratives about institutional religion and encourages the stifling of scientific temperament among Indians. Uncovering the nexus of politics and

religion, especially in the realm of the current government's ideological agenda, this comment affirms Sanjay's sentiment against its role in the political power. Beyond the nationalistic agenda, this comment also provides a perspective that is alienated by mainstream religious discourse. Since religion and politics are so interconnected in the country, the jokes on religion inevitably serve as political critique by linking religious nationalism, dissent, critical thinking, and political oppression.

Comedians as the New Journalists

In the digital era, individuals and groups engage with policy makers, government and media in ways that have weakened the traditional gatekeepers and facilitated previously underreported issues to come to the forefront (Borum Chattoo & Feldman, 2020). Roy Wood Jr., a comedian and a former correspondent on *The Daily Show* who now hosts *Have I Got News for You on* CNN which quizzes celebrities about current events said in an interview to NPR, "You have to know what regular people are going through. And you can't do that by just living in Uber Blacks your entire life. I consider comedy to be a form of journalism, living anthropology, in its highest form. You do anthropology on things that are still alive, things that are still evolving, so you have to be immersed in that. You have to be yourself in that a little bit (Mosley, 2025).

Roy's claim also finds resonance in the comment section under the stand-up videos that I examine. Talking about issues such as questioning the attempted distortion of the secular fabric of the country, exposing media bias, corporate-political nexus, and compromise of the autonomous constitutional entities, Kunal, Sanjay and Varun create alternative spaces for discourse and often face backlash like journalists.

For example, a comment by @Vishal Parmar-gb3qv noted, "*I am loving the fact that standup guys are doing media's work and media is doing standup comedy now days*." Another comment by @ehatacho2183 noted, "*In India : comedians are journalist, and Politicians are comedians now,..... Great "Kunal kamra "*😂 Exhorting Kunal to stand for elections, another comment noted, "*Before I start the video views are 33k after end of video 80k....kunal bhai election me khade ho jao [Brother Kunal please stand in elections]."* From Varun's video, a comment also noted, "*News anchors doing comedy and comedians telling the truth,,, aur kitne ache din chaiye mitron [how many more good days do you want?]*". Another comment said, "*One has to admit, this is the factual analysis. This is not comedy, this is the art, the satirical one."* Lamenting on the crackdown on dissent another comment by @lankasur7942 on Varun's comedy said, "*I literally miss the time when everyone hated Politics. I dunno why people have started defending politicians without any facts."* Indicating towards the deteriorating state of journalism in the country where it has failed to be the watchdog of the government and has become sensationalist, hyper nationalistic and a tool of serving vested political interests, these comments suggest a role reversal. Implying that comedians are filling that void by providing thorough political analysis, exposing logical inconsistencies, and offering counter narrative to revisionist histories, these comments reinforce a loss of faith in the mainstream press. With the roles now swapped, news media known for its dramatic, sensationalist and prejudiced rhetoric has become the laughingstock whereas stand-up comedians are now more trustworthy commentators and public leaders. These comments reinforce the idea of mainstream media acting as an exclusionary public sphere that excludes critical and dissenting perspectives, which then create and lead counterpublics spaces such as stand-up comedy on social media platforms.

Additionally, asking Kunal to stand for elections acts as a testament to the power and influence of political comedians and the quality of their work. Illustrating frustration with existing political options, the ask from Kunal to run in the elections suggests that people seek and value authenticity and directness in political discourse, traits that politicians lack but comedians often demonstrate. Comedians transitioning into politics is also not an uncommon phenomenon—figures like Volodymyr Zelenskyy, the Ukrainian President has successfully made the shift. Even in India, Bhagwant Singh Mann, the current Chief Minister of Punjab has been a former comedian, singer and actor who successfully came to power in 2022 from Aam Aadmi Party, one of the archrivals of BJP. This thinking in the comments represents increasing significance where people re-imagine new forms of governance, leaders and representation.

Responding to Sanjay's comedy, a comment by @sanjudewan2526 says, "*A logical masterpiece of Sanjay Rajoura Sir…*" "Another comment by @akshaybhalerao5028 addressing Varun's comedy says, "*The aazadi tour addresses more issues than the parliament of India*." Another comment said, "*4th piller of democracy: stand up comedians."* The comments indicate that the comedians are not just entertainers but are well versed critical researchers and opinion leaders who are successfully mobilizing dissent, re-imagining ways of governance and intelligent leadership, especially in the context of absence of credible and trustworthy media.

Extending the Longevity of Stand-up Comedy videos: Subaltern Memory and Archive

During my field work in India, which included attending comedy shows and understanding the functioning of the comedy circuit in New Delhi, it emerged that it is an expensive affair to attend a show. Several shows happened in restaurant bars in high end malls of Delhi and the suburbs. In addition to buying the ticket, most of the venues make it imperative to

also buy food and beverages from the restaurant, often making the total cost of attending a show more than double the price of the ticket. Since I had funding from my department, it helped in covering the costs. Otherwise, it would have been difficult to attend the shows paying out of pocket.

In the thick of hot, sweltering summer of 2023, I attended a show of the comedian Jeevishu Ahluwalia in a restro-bar in Noida, a popular suburb of Delhi. The comedian and the organizers had prohibited the usage of mobile phones, including recording or taking pictures. It was a nice moment to just focus on the jokes, enjoy the expensive food that I had just brought from the counter and have a good laugh without worrying about documenting it in some form. After a few weeks, I saw a video of the exact same content, only much more refined in delivery with a dressed up Jeevishu on his YouTube channel. I realized why we were not allowed to record or take pictures during his performance. Several comedians do not allow audiences to record or take pictures of their performances because often the comedians post the polished versions of their performances on their YouTube handles, or for a special streaming platform. Often, they are practicing in shows and after a while of performing and refining according to the audience feedback, they hone their delivery and record for YouTube uploads or TV specials. I attended a Hasan Minhaj comedy show in Eugene, Oregon where my phone was zipped in a bag and taken by the staff of the show venue, ensuring that we would not record. A few weeks later, I saw the exact same performance on his Netflix special titled, *Hasan Minhaj: Off With His Head.*

Bypassing the financial barriers of attending a live show, stand-up comedy uploaded on YouTube plays a crucial role in enhancing the longevity of the content. It contributes towards the formation of a digital public forum, where the viewers collectively engage in political critique, collective identity and sustaining conversations over extended periods of time. Comedy on

YouTube extends the moments of embodied resistance beyond the comedy clubs and takes it to literally people's hands and living rooms where they can watch and rewatch it.

For example, one of the comments by @kusummathew9064 on Kunal's video said, "*I am watching it now after 2019 in 2024 it is so good and relevant. Please don't give up you are too good*." Another comment noted, " *2024 still Relevant..,as it's yesterday...".* As the video was uploaded in 2019, there are more comments appreciating the relevance of his content such as " *Who is watching during loksabha election 2024", "He was ahead of his time 2024 same condition here. Hat's off* 🔥👏*"* and *"Oh My God...5 years and the video is still so so relevant... comedians enabling good journalism..*👋*"* Unlike in live shows, comedy on YouTube and comments section facilitate continuous and asynchronous engagement. These comments demonstrate that stand-up on YouTube is often revisited, re-interpreted and reshared. Sustaining counter public discourses over a longer period of time makes Kunal's comedy timeless critique of power structures in contrast to just episodic events. This kind of comedy remains important across different political moments that allow audiences to engage and re-engage after years to make meaning of socially and politically relevant instances. It allowed the critique to not just fade away but evolve with time. This is exemplified by the virality of Kunal's videos of corporate-political nexus that reemerged during elections controversies, maintaining the vibrance of the counterpublic sphere long after the video's initial upload.

For Varun's comedy, a comment by @blackswan6963 noted, *" This is 4 years old…..but the jokes still hold good." Another comment noted, "Kon kon 2024 mein sun rha hai*😂 *[Who is listening this in 2024?].* Having the same streak of watching Varun's comedy now after its initial release in 2019, another comment noted, *"2024 feb, and im still thinking how true this still is.*

what is still the option?" One comment exhorts the comedian to make another video in 2024, *"Varun grover we want one more of such video in 2024 elections."* Comments like these suggest that YouTube serves as a space of subaltern memory and archive. Amidst the absence of any space for dissent or opposition, combined with censorship and state surveillance, these comments create an alternative archive of political dissatisfaction with BJP. In case of the mainstream media doing attempts of revising and modifying narratives to advance BJP's interests, YouTube acts as a subaltern digital memory of resistance. The comedy of Varun, Kunal and Sanjay and the responses of viewers to their work can be accessed over a period of time, thus providing a longitudinal evolution of the issues, responses and digital memory of resistance.

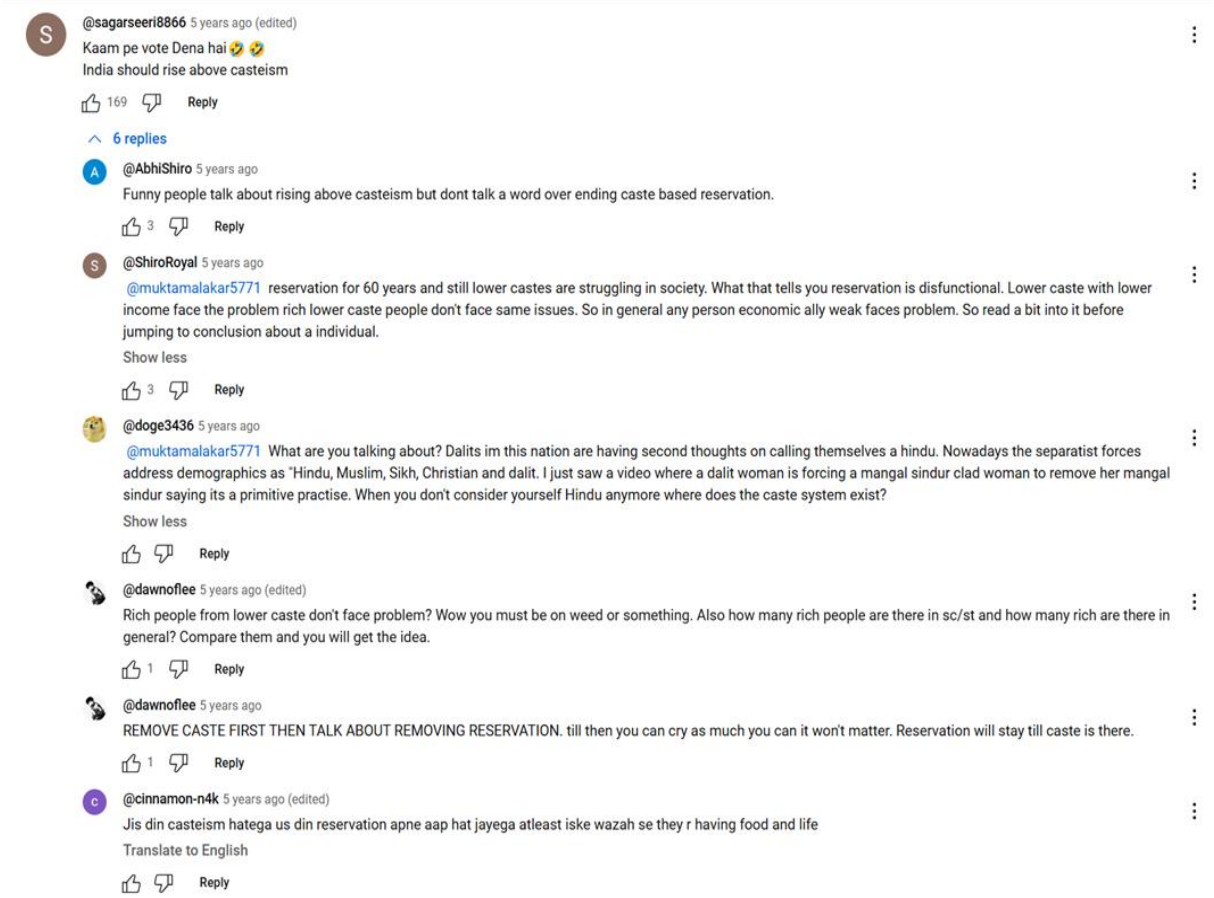
For Sanjay's comedy, one of the comments noted, "*Yaar why am I watching this soo late 😔you are rock star.*" Comedy videos and the comment section on YouTube demonstrate a creative workaround against the censorship of the mainstream media. While the opinion of Sanjay in his comedy will not be carried by a mainstream media outlet, YouTube does not pose any immediate censorship to the content and enables existence in the digital repository. The platform acts as a crucial tool for the subaltern counterpublics to express dissent without the fear of immediate repercussions. However, for his comedy video that I analyzed in the earlier chapter, the original one was taken down due to the onslaught of police complaints based on hurting religious sentiments. The video I analyzed was a segment of Sanjay's stand-up uploaded by a YouTube channel Jahid who has 371 subscribers. It suggests that even if a video is taken down due to pressure of the government and its supporters, users can slice, re-slice and re-upload clips, and discuss it in the comments, thus exhibiting a decentralized form of digital resistance towards the erasure of the critique of the dominant narrative.

Despite the censorship and right-wing pushback, YouTube facilitates a subaltern counterpublics sphere by preserving the stand-up routines of comedians like Varun, Kunal and Sanjay, challenging the mainstream media narratives, serving a digital memory and archive of resistance, prolonging the life of social satire, and illustrating a space of evolving political discourse across political moments.

Conversation Between Viewers Beyond Traditional Gatekeeping

So far, I have examined the comments of the viewers as a response to the comedian and their work. This section examines how YouTube allows the users to interact with each other and have a dialogue that would not be possible as openly and efficiently in the mainstream media. The comment section demonstrates conversations of varied kinds happening where users agree and disagree with each other. Since the mainstream news, which is controlled by the political and corporate imperatives, YouTube advances a space that is relatively open and decentralized where people discuss and extend the narratives presented by Sanjay, Kunal and Varun. It forms an organic parallel discourse outside the traditional gatekeeping of mainstream media that allows people with similar or differing opinions to have a conversation and amplify the perspective of the comedians.

It emerged that there are subsets within the comments section that are centered around agreeing with the comedian and other users supporting that agreement, the second subset demonstrated where people are disagreeing with the comedian and other users supporting the disagreement and spheres where users with differing opinions are arguing with each other. For example, a comment about caste system in India spurred a conversation about the advantages and disadvantages of the reservation system.



Invoking Varun's comedy that said that the Indian electorate is often clueless when they are asked to vote politicians based on work done and not caste, a comment by @Sagarseeri8866 said, "*Have to vote on work…India should rise above casteism*." This invited a series of comments discussing that the caste-based reservation should end if the country wants to rise above caste whereas some views defended the caste-based reservation indicating that its needed for people from lower castes to progress. One comment by @cinnamon-n4k noted, "*when casteism is eradicated, the reservation system will go away on its own…people are having food and water on their tables because of this*." This exchange of comments under Varun's video exemplifies that using laughter as an initial hook, the viewers deliberate the current socio-

political topics that might be tangential to the comedy, facilitating political consciousness. Unlike mainstream media, comedy on YouTube do not have a designated gatekeeper who regulates, influences or censors discussion. Thus, important issues such as caste politics that do not find adequate space and weightage in the mainstream media are discussed by users in the YouTube comments. However, due to this participatory and un-regulatory nature of the YouTube comment section, combined with anonymity, the democratic deliberation also runs the risk of turning hateful and unruly.

Another comment under Kunal's comedy noted, "*We live in a era where Reality is itself comedy."* Having a total of 6.7k likes, these comments spurred a spate of agreements.

@AB-be7xu 4 years ago

We live in a era where *Reality is itself comedy.*

6.7K Reply

20 replies

@arunhegde1695 4 years ago

Oh bhai correct

23 Reply

@jmsmung5790 4 years ago

Well said 👌 👌

15 Reply

@alinachrist8416 3 years ago

Agreed

11 Reply

@sids5392 3 years ago

Bhai 2 saal phle use smjh gaya aur hme abhi...Hm 2 hmare 2 wala concept...

Translate to English

12 Reply

@jijio000 3 years ago

It's damn true'

7 Reply

@atisbasak 3 years ago

This is the harsh truth of our lives.

9 Reply

@shivamroy4075 3 years ago

Criticism is always comedy.

5 Reply

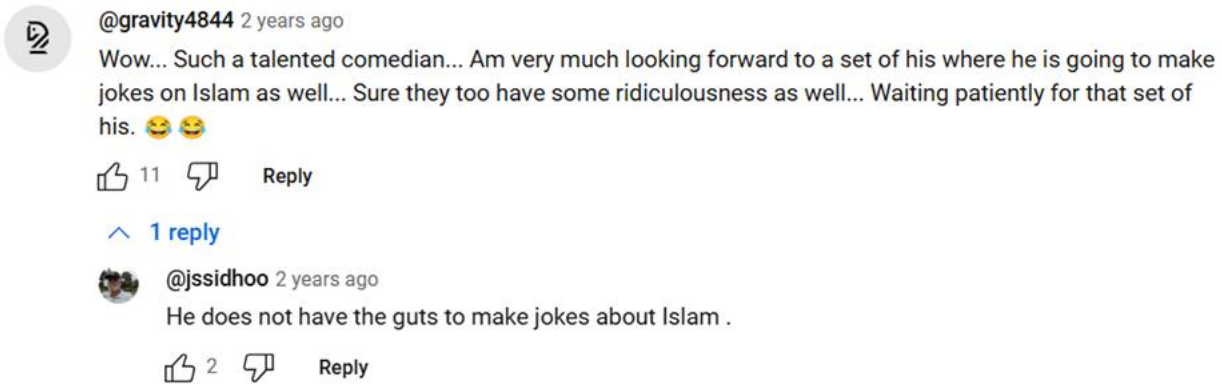
@DAREDEVIL-dm4yh 3 years ago

One of the truth's of this universe



Agreeing with each other on views and perspectives cultivates a sense of solidarity and collective identity. As Sanjay had noted in his interview with me, people find relief when they find others who share their sense of frustration with the government. When this viewpoint is not represented in the mainstream media, finding the presence of likeminded people in YouTube comments who have similar views about the government and its ideology fosters a sense of collective identity, integral to the sustenance of a subaltern counterpublic sphere. Political dissent, especially when there are rampant efforts to quash it, can feel isolating when the mainstream narrative is lopsided. Thus, when users agree with each other, the YouTube comment section assumes the role of a 'virtual town hall' where people validate anti-BJP sentiments and reduces feelings of loneliness. Additionally, when multiple people agree with each other, it translates personal dissatisfaction to a collective sentiment. This process makes it harder to simply dismiss the comedian's social commentary as just one person's biased view—instead it becomes symbolic of the collective sentiment that several people are feeling.

A comment on Sanjay's video implied that he would not make jokes on Islam because he 'lacked' the guts to do it, implying that he was 'Hindu phobic'.



While the agreements in YouTube cultivate collective dissent and resistance, disagreement of several users with the comedian reflects the ruptures of its extension as a subaltern counterpublic sphere. The very existence of the attacks on Sanjay reiterate that his work is politically significant and impactful, otherwise it would not attract vicious attacks. These attacks enhance the visibility of the comedians in the mainstream narratives which garners more viewership, perhaps even mobilizing more followers. Even algorithmically, YouTube interprets this virality as trending and can promote it to more viewers, who might not actively seek it out but might be interested in consuming it. Moreover, the talking points of negative comments towards the comedian demonstrate the deep reach of mainstream media narratives and BJP agenda of a Hindu majority state, emphasizing the importance of the stand-up comedy as subaltern counterpublic sphere.

Co-opting the Subaltern Counterpublic sphere by Hindutva Forces

For Sanjay's stand-up comedy, while there are comments that support his comedy, several comments are vitriolic and attacking. It is noteworthy to mention that due to this video

Sanjay had an onslaught of police complaints, and the original video had to be taken down from YouTube. This is a re-upload of the original video. Some examples of the negative comments being "*That's why indian culture decreasing day by day..... 😞😞", "Can he himself listen to whatever he's saying? Mkng any sense? Can anybody file a case on him maybe? 😡😡😡😡😡😡😡😡Wht a stupid guy honestly. I dnt understand why people are laughing, I would hv collected shoes frm everybody in the meanwhile n would hv thrown on him continuously", "Learn a bit of science (plus manners) from our ISRO [Indian Space Research Organization] scientists who proudly visit their temples. What do you jobless people know??", "Oh people like you are responsible for spreading hate. To all the hindus watching him and applauding for him when he is cracking jokes on hindu gods godesses and vedas need to stand up for their religion. This is what you support ?"* and *"Wow so cool !!!!!!!😠 just for few likes and fame these people's are making jokes of there own religion. Have you ever listened any muslim talking like that about there religions? if you don't believe then don't follow but please at least don't make jokes on feelings of religious people's."*

Through these comments, I want to emphasize the phenomenon of how subaltern counterpublics could be co-opted by dominant publics through state surveillance and censorship. In fact, trolling, posting hateful and attacking comments under political comedy videos that questions the establishment can also act as an extension of state surveillance co-opting and suppressing the discourse of subaltern counterpublics. These comments can potentially be emblematic of the organized online groups and supporters of Hindutva who discredit, attack and discourage dissent in any and all forms. BJP has an IT cell that plays a crucial role in being the digital foot soldiers and ensuring that the online spaces, especially critical of the government, are threatened and disrupted. In the 2024 assembly polls in India, BJP's IT cell publicly stated that

its ‘intensifying’ the efforts and all states have been divided in 7 zones to ensure the presence of social media volunteers down to the local, grassroot level. According to a news article in Deccan Herald, a senior party leader who wished to remain anonymous said that there are dedicated teams of 300 social media volunteers in every state and are not officially attached to the party. The leader said, “The criteria for these individuals, apart from their professional prowess, will be that they are ideologically attuned to the BJP, are nationalistic and believe in our ideology of integral humanism. These volunteers will each be a leader in his region, driving the party’s work among the voters” (Madhukalya, 2023).

Not everyone in the comment section is a cheerleader or dismissive of the comedic critique. While not all the users fall neatly into the binaries of cheerleaders or dismissive trolls of the comedic work, many commenters exist in the middle space where they just enjoy the humor. It helps make the subaltern counterpublic sphere nuanced because it’s not just resonating with similar opinions but is expanding with comments that lay in somewhere on the middle ground. This offers space where the bystanders could be persuaded by comedians to engage in good faith discussions and commenting. Instead of just aligning with the binaries, seemingly neutral comments can be a way of convincing and inviting people into the counterpublic sphere.

On January 18th, 2018, Kunal posted on his Facebook and Instagram that he was ousted by his landlady due to ‘lot of political issues coming up’. Beyond the state surveillance and control, it illustrated the ramifications of social and cultural mechanisms that penalize the anti-establishment critique through ‘softer’ tactics such as not having them as a tenant, corporate blacklisting, and not getting an opportunity for international shows. Adding a piece of advice for younger comedians, he wrote

As a comedian having a political opinion comes at a cost. Perhaps, you are thinking ‘What is the big deal in making fun of people in power?’…But there are consequences. A corporation will call you 2 days before your show and say "Sorry, We'll have to cancel this one because our CEO is a big fan of the PM and we don't want any political jokes". You protest as you asked them this exact question 40 days ago...but they respond saying “He only joined last week, but let us work together on something soon”.

Or you are booked for a news conclave kind of event when someone from a political party decides to show up at the last minute. You get a call saying "We don't want to take a risk as our guests are really powerful people who we can't piss off, so we are entirely cancelling the comedy session". The next day you see a photo of another comedian performing there saying "What an honour it was perform at....”

Private shows are mostly out of the question because they want clean family friendly humour (most are wedding enquiries). Brands commission you to work, get you to make a piece and then don’t use it at all because "He's ok but his affiliations with these radical activist types could land us into trouble. You know people na… they just nitpick at everything". Then you see a colleague posting "What an honour it was to be working for this for this brand".

Public figures who have some power will continuously tell you on DM that they love your work but they will never share your stuff or stick up for you. When asked by newspapers about you, they deny even knowing you or having seen any of your work. You often think, ‘I don't need this validation, the joy of doing stand up is enough”. Then you get a FB message enquiry. You give them your number to take it forward. Then he

starts abusing you, telling you how much he hates you and how he's going to put your number out in public. You wonder if you should to take legal action but you think ‘Fuck it, eventually I will just change my number anyway as too many people have it’. A few college shows & mostly live ticketed shows will be your source of income. No you will not be going international anytime soon because ‘Sir NRI log ko desh ka bare main acha sun na hai, aur nostalgia feel hona chahiye. NRI log ko india main kya chal raha hai malum hi nahi hai.’ Then you see a colleague posting "Thank you Hong Kong for being such a kind audience". Slowly and steadily you will even see that comedians who started out with you, don't want to be seen with you on social media because they don't want to risk what they have going for themselves. You are ‘Ya I get it, our friendship doesn't need insta validation.

One day your land lady will ask you to vacate her house and look for another place because of your political opinion. And while all this going on and you're particularly suicidal, HDFC will message you asking you if you've linked your Aadhar Card. So CHOOSE wisely about the comedian you want to become.

Conclusion

The relationship between stand-up comedy and social media has provided a powerful and evolving space for the conceptualization and sustenance of subaltern counterpublics in India. In a media landscape where the mainstream press has increasingly become an apparatus of state and corporate control, comedians such as Kunal Kamra, Varun Grover, Mohammad Zeeshan, Noor Ahmed and Sanjay Rajoura have emerged as alternative voices of dissent, offering critiques of political authoritarianism, BJP’s Hindutva ideology, and media complicity. However, their

resistance does not occur in isolation. Rather, it is actively sustained and extended by social media platforms, especially YouTube, where audience interactions in the comment sections foster dialogue, solidarity, and vibrant political engagement.

The findings from this chapter suggest that stand-up comedy on YouTube extends the subaltern counterpublic sphere in five key ways: by providing a platform for dissent that bypasses traditional media gatekeeping, fostering a sense of collective identity among marginalized perspectives, enabling the longevity and re-circulation of political satire, allowing audience members to engage in discourse outside mainstream regulatory frameworks, and revealing the co-optation of these counterpublics through the proliferation of organized trolling by the government's IT cells.

Bypassing Traditional Media Gatekeeping

One of the most significant contributions of stand-up comedy on YouTube is its ability to bypass mainstream media censorship in India. As my research illustrates, comedians such as Kunal Kamra have been systematically excluded from television news panels, commercial sponsorships, and corporate events due to their critique of the BJP government and its ideological apparatus. However, through YouTube, comedians are directly reaching audiences without institutional mediation, gatekeeping or regulation. This bypassing of traditional media gatekeeping democratizes access to political critique, allowing voices that would otherwise be silenced.

Moreover, as demonstrated in the comments analyzed, many viewers perceive comedians as fulfilling the role that mainstream journalists have abandoned. Statements such as "comedians are doing the media's work" and "news anchors doing comedy while comedians tell the truth"

exemplify an increasing dissatisfaction with traditional journalism and an acknowledgment of the importance of satire as a form of political analysis and critique. YouTube thus not only acts as a dissemination tool but also re-imagines credibility and authenticity in public discourse, positioning comedians as the new journalists.

Fostering a Collective Identity

The comment sections under political stand-up comedy videos serve as critical sites of articulation of shared sentiments and frustrations. Unlike the mainstream public sphere, which often erases dissenting perspectives, the digital counterpublic formed around stand-up comedy creates a space where marginalized voices find validation and solidarity. This process of identity formation is particularly important in a political environment where dissent is increasingly criminalized. To know that audience members actively support comedians who are being targeted, whether through legal actions, corporate blacklisting, or social ostracization, suggests that social media promotes not just passive consumption of satire but active political consciousness. The subaltern counterpublic thus emerges not merely as a space of discussion but as a community of resistance that extends beyond the individual comedian's performance.

Furthermore, audience members are not merely passive recipients of comedic critique; they actively engage in meaning-making as spect-actors, co-producing the resistance alongside comedians. The humor only resonates because both comedians and their audiences share a schema of understanding—an interpretative framework rooted in collective political awareness (Chattoo & Feldman, 2020). This co-creation of joyful resistance strengthens the counterpublic by making it a participatory and dynamic discourse rather than a just one-sided performance by the comedian.

Sustaining Political Critique Through Longevity

Unlike live performances, which are contained in a specific physical moment at a comedy club, stand-up comedy on YouTube allows for indefinite access and engagement. This longevity transforms stand-up into an archival space of resistance, where critiques of power remain accessible and relevant long after their initial performances. The comments analyzed in this chapter emphasized the enduring nature of political stand-up, with users noting that jokes from five years ago remain just as relevant today. This re-circulation of content ensures that political critique does not fade from public memory, even as the public sphere of mainstream media narratives attempt to alter or erase the public memory.

Embodied Resistance: Laughter as a Physical Rejection of State Decorum

Beyond its verbal and textual dimensions, stand-up comedy operates as a bodily act of defiance against state-imposed decorum (Wood, 2021). The physicality of laughter—where the body is let loose and uncontrolled—is positioned in contrast to the disciplined postures, decorum and performative seriousness expected by authoritarian regimes. In laughing at the state, audiences and comedians engage in a collective rupture of hegemonic order, momentarily reclaiming autonomy over their expressions, emotions and bodies.

This act of embodied resistance is particularly significant in India where expressions of dissent are heavily discouraged and crushed. The inability of BJP to control laughter, its unpredictability and its contagious nature, makes stand-up a potent tool for extending the counterpublic. YouTube amplifies this effect by allowing laughter to go beyond the physical boundaries of a comedy club to the larger digital forum, ensuring that political satire not only disrupts but also remains as an active form of resistance and digital memory.

As the analysis showed, stand-up comedy on YouTube is not just an extension of political entertainment; it is a crucial mechanism for sustaining and extending dissent in India, with an increasingly authoritarian regime and state-controlled media. By providing a platform for marginalized perspectives, fostering collective identity, sustaining critique through longevity, enabling open discourse, and resisting co-optation, stand-up comedy serves as a powerful counterpublic that challenges oppressive, dominant narratives.

Chapter VII

Conclusion

"To all those hounding for a quote-

The mainstream media at this point is nothing but a miscommunication arm of the ruling party. They are vultures who report on issues that dont matter to the people of this country. If they all shut shop from tomorrow till eternity they will be doing favour to the country, its people & their own children."

-Kunal Kamra

On 27th March 2025, Kunal issued this statement on X after he has been facing an onslaught of backlash and police complaints, for his comedy show where he referred to the Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Mr. Eknath Shinde as a 'traitor'. The police complaint charged Kunal with public mischief and defamation. Angry with Kunal's remarks, the party workers of Shinde's Shiv Sena vandalized the iconic Habitat Comedy Club in Mumbai where Kunal had performed. The owners of that comedy club decided to shut down the venue. Twelve people were arrested for vandalism and were subsequently given bail. On March 28th, Kunal was also granted an interim anticipatory bail by the Madras High Court. His lawyer V. Suresh sought urgent relief citing 'multiple death threats' that Kunal was receiving after his new 45 minutes long stand-up set was uploaded on YouTube (Ghoshal, 2025). To add to the crackdown on Kunal, Bollywood studio T-Series flagged his stand-up special for copyright violations on YouTube that led to its blocking for copyright infringement (Tiwari, 2025). Kunal performed parody of songs such as 'Hawa Hawai', which belongs to the T-Series label, to critique the

Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman. A spokesperson of the T-Series said, “Mr. Kunal Kamra has not taken any authorization or approval for the usage of the underlying musical work in the song. Hence, the content has been blocked for infringement of composition rights.” Kunal posted on his X handle, “Hello T-Series, stop being a stooge. Parody and Satire comes under fair use legally. I haven't used the lyrics or the original instrumental of the song. If you take this video down every cover song/dance video can be taken down. Creators please take a note of it. Having said that every monopoly in India is nothing short of Mafia so please watch/download this special before it’s taken down.”

This incident, out of several others, illustrates the threat that comedians are considered by the state, and how state’s backlash is doubled down when the cultural industry of Bollywood combines forces. The involvement of Bollywood reiterates its central role in constructing a national imaginary that mostly aligns with the majoritarian, upper caste, Hindu ideals. Since BJP came to power in 2014, there has been an emergence of films that glorify the military, have lionized Hindu mythology and have depicted the idea of India as an ideological project of Hindutva. Films such as Uri, Kashmir Files, and Kerela Story have really blurred the boundaries between entertainment and state-sponsored propaganda. Large entertainment corporations such as T-series, Yash Raj Films, and Dharma Productions exercise almost complete control over content distribution and intellectual property. Bollywood, through music and romance, has been a massive instrument of subtly embedding ideologies to make them appear ‘natural’ and desirable, around the country and the world. Especially with Kunal’s case, these entertainment corporations weaponized copyright law to repress satirical use of Bollywood content, even when a lot of it may fall under fair use. The penalizing action of T-series against Kunal reflected how

Bollywood and the state work together to delegitimize humor and dissent, especially politically critical comedy.

My dissertation explored the role of stand-up comedy as a crucial non-violent force for socio-cultural and political resistance against BJP's Hindutva project in India. Through case studies, I examined the phenomenon by conducting semi structured interviews, textual analysis and social media discourse analysis to understand how standup comedians function as organic public intellectuals, challenge dominant, hateful narratives pushing for a Hindu-only India, reveal contradictions and absurdities in government's ideological agenda and foster alternative avenues for public discussion, especially dissent. By wielding humor and satire, Kunal Kamra, Sanjay Rajoura, Varun Grover, Zeeshan Iqbal and Noor Ahmed redefine the notion of dissent in an increasingly controlling and repressive socio-political environment.

This chapter synthesizes the major arguments presented throughout my dissertation and reinforces the importance of stand-up comedy as a resisting force towards an autocratic regime. Answering the broader research question *How can stand up comedy be used to resist the BJP's Hindutva project?* Drawing from the theoretical frameworks of laughtivism and subaltern counterpublics, I use this chapter to summarize my analysis and conceptualize the larger implications of comedy for subaltern resistance and dissent, its limitations and future directions.

Stand-up Comedy for Political Resistance

An important contribution of my dissertation has been to establish standup comedy, especially the likes of Sanjay Rajoura, Kunal Kamra, and Varun Grover, as a subaltern counterpublic sphere where these voices articulate and lead the resistance against the revisionist, polarizing and divisive politics of Hindutva in India. Drawing from Nancy Fraser's (1992)

concept of subaltern counterpublics, the comedians studied in this dissertation have successfully used the affordability of YouTube and created parallel public discourses that have contested the claims and legitimacy of Hindutva. In developing the social satire capabilities of the comedians, their individual backgrounds, lived realities and experiences played crucial parts in shaping them to be critical thinkers and power skeptics. Performing comedy about politics gave them the creative space and freedom to combine the two tenets and produce satire that questioned the BJP's policies.

Comics like Varun Grover, Sanjay Rajoura and Shyam Rangeela have used their work, both comedic and non-comedic, to subvert the larger socio-political power structures. They deconstructed and ridiculed government policies, exposed the complicity of mainstream media in bolstering the government's politics and pushed the acceptable boundaries of the public discourse. Using humor made the critique more accessible and palatable for audiences who might have been, disengaged from the political debates. Serious commentary wrapped in humor facilitated dissent to proliferate popular consciousness that cultivated political engagement even in climates of state-controlled media, censorship and trolling.

Stand-up Comedy for Disrupting the Legitimization of Hindutva

The comedians and their performances framed the modus operandi of the government of building a Hindu state. The efforts of the government to position Hindutva as an aspirational political idea begin with incorporating it in everyday lives of people through cultural hegemony, a narrative of 'us v/s them', mainstream media, revisionist history and strategic media propaganda. The comedians disrupted this normalization by exposing the socio-cultural machinery of Bollywood, killing of science and scientific temperament, crony capitalism, state-

controlled media and narratives, lack of a viable political opposition and crushing of dissent. For example, joking around re-writing educational textbooks and using Hindu mythology as historical facts exposed the government's efforts of reshaping the public memory in alignment to Hindutva, and weakened the rationale for a Hindutva project.

This comedic re-framing of the government's agenda provided a starting point for media literacy, and an orientation that discourages uncritical acceptance of the government's Hindutva narratives.

YouTube for Social Resistance

My dissertation illustrated the significance of social media, especially YouTube, when the government is coming down on any kind of dissent. YouTube is used to circumvent the conventional media gatekeeping and reaching a wider audience. However, it also showed that these spaces are not without their own challenges. While YouTube comedy videos and viral stand-up clips serve as democratic spaces of collective resistance and extensions of subaltern counterpublics, the proliferation of BJP's digital foot soldiers, organized trolling and legal crackdown indicate the co-optation of subaltern counter public spheres by the hegemonic forces. While YouTube facilitates democratic participation, it also exposes comedians to increased surveillance, harassment and criminalization. This duality of the digital counter public reveals tension between using social media, specifically YouTube, to resist power and the authorities using YouTube to crackdown on comedians doing politically critical comedy.

Additionally, comedy on YouTube also bypasses the financial barriers of viewing a live comedy show which can be an expensive affair. Acting as a digital archive of resistance and subaltern memory, YouTube prolongs the longevity of comedy that can be revisited and

reinterpreted repeatedly at various political moments, spurring reinvigorated political discussions that are people driven. In the digital era where traditional media is towing the ideological line of state interest, comedy on YouTube has enabled and amplified counter narratives.

Repercussions of Speaking Truth to Power

My dissertation has highlighted the opposition and backlash that the comedians who perform socially critical commentary continue to experience. The arrests of Munawar Faruqui, ousting of Kunal Kamra from his home by the landlady, terrorism charges on Sanjay Rajoura, police complaints on Vir Das and denying electoral candidacy to Shyam Rangeela reinforce the rising intolerance towards satire and shrinking spaces for dissent.

Combined with the legal tools of blasphemy, defamation, sedition and terrorism laws, there are economic and social pressures that are strategically deployed to penalize comedians. For example, platforms denying shows to controversial comedians, corporate shows backing out last minute and brands pulling out to commission their work with them illustrate the intertwined interplay between economic and political forces. To illustrate it in more details, Kunal Kamra has posted a picture ‘How to Kill and Artist: A Step-by-Step Guide’ on his X handle that illustrates this.

How to Kill an Artist:
A Step-by-Step Guide

1) Outrage — just enough for brands to stop commissioning their work.

2) Outrage more- until private and corporate gigs dry up.

3) Outrage louder- so big venues won't take the risk.

4) Outrage violently- until even the smallest spaces shut their doors.

5) Summon their audience for questioning—turning art into a crime scene.

Now the artist is left with only two choices: Sell their soul and become a dollar puppet—or wither in silence.

This isn't just a playbook, its a political weapon.
A silencing machine.

Though this kind of backlash has demonstrated the vulnerabilities of comedians and the use of comedy in unsettling the status quo, the fact that comedians face such intense government backlash highlights the efficiency of satire in revealing the lopsided logic of dominant and oppressive ideologies. While this dissertation argues for a nuanced approach to comedic resistance, one that is centered in critique and an ethical consciousness of implications, humor also has the power to reinforce stereotypes and trivialize serious issues. The comedians examined for my dissertation are navigating a thin line, ensuring that their critique punches up and questions power rather than making fun of already marginalized communities. They have

illustrated that effective comedic resistance functions in the framework of accountability, and an intentional, deliberate awareness of their work.

Limitations & Future Directions

Firstly, I think the distance between India and the US was a primary challenge. I would have loved to attend more comedy shows in India, beyond Delhi and talk to more comedians. If there were no distance constraints, I would have preferred to meet them in-person and conduct participant observation. Though textual analysis of their digital performances, semi-structured interviews on zoom and analyzing comments on YouTube has been efficient, it would have been helpful to be more immersed in the comedy scene. However, since I am now based out of the US, attending in-person comedy shows was not a viable option. While visiting family in Delhi during summer of past years, I was only able to attend comedy shows in the city. Attending shows in different, especially in smaller cities, will be helpful in gaining an in-depth understanding of the political comedy landscape and its audience reception when expanding this research for a future book.

Secondly, it was difficult to find female comedians who were willing to speak to me. When male comedians doing political comedy face intense backlash and disciplining, the backlash for female comedians is only more intense, quickly translating from online to physical spaces. So, for understandable reasons, female comedians did not respond to my outreach messages despite offering to keep them anonymous or using pseudonyms. I am extremely grateful that Noor Ahmed spoke with me because her insights add much needed depth to my analysis. Also, I commend her bravery to speak with me and be honest about her thoughts, motivations and the process of curating her comedy. I deeply value the trust she put in our

conversation and in speaking with me. Going forward, it will be extremely useful to interview female comedians to understand their personal motivations of performing political comedy. In fact, it will also be helpful to learn more about why many female comedians choose not to include anything related to electoral politics in their sets.

Thirdly, I only examined Hindi and English comedy routines of Kunal, Sanjay and Varun due to my own limited language capabilities. For future ideas of research, it will be useful to expand in it and include regional and vernacular comedy to understand its significance and contributions for resistance, especially in non-metropolitan cities. Engaging in examining regional comedy will only make sense because it will aptly fit into the pluralistic idea of India where all languages find respectable space with no perceived hegemony of Hindi or English.

For more future directions, I'd recommend conducting a comparative analysis examining comedic resistance in the Majority Nations such as Bangladesh, Armenia, Nigeria and Pakistan, among a few. To have a comparative analysis of these different countries will provide a global perspective on the interaction between satire and power. Additionally, intersectionality in Indian comedy should also be researched to understand how caste, gender, religion and class interact in comedic resistance. It will be helpful to get insights about who gets to participate in humor-based dissent and who does not. Moreover, as I note in the Introduction section of my dissertation, my dissertation only examines stand-up comedy as a tool to question the authoritarian tendencies of the government. There is a wide array of different media such as print, TV, radio, along with more grassroots media such as community theatre and puppetry in India that could also be examined to learn how they can resist and question the government.

Final Thoughts

My dissertation has reiterated the potential of standup comedy for nonviolent resistance against BJP's political project of Hindutva. When dissent in any form has been increasingly criminalized, comedy has emerged as a subversive force that continues to speak to power and reimagine political alternatives. The comedians researched in this dissertation challenge dominant narratives and carve spaces for alternative discourse and political engagement. Their intentions and performances emphatically remind us that resistance does not always take place in the streets; it can also happen on a stage in a comedy club. Just laughing and making people laugh can also be equally revolutionary.

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Appendix

Interview Questionnaire for stand-up comedians.

1. Where are you from and where did you grow up?
2. Tell me about your family?
3. Have they been politically conscious? Were there any memories where you remember political discussions happening in the common living space?
4. How was growing up? As its generally common in Indian families to ask kids to perform (dance, sing, etc) in front of guests, were you asked to do that? Any significant memories around it?
5. Did you have any creative hobby while growing up?
6. Where did you go to college? How was college life? Were you part of any society in undergrad?
7. How did your foray in stand-up comedy begin? Is there any incident that was crucial in deciding it?
8. How has your stand-up comedy journey been so far?
9. How do you choose the topic to perform in the stand-up comedy? After you've decided, how do you write your scripts? Is there a process that goes in? Please tell me more about it.
10. Why do you perform in (language)?
11. How do you imagine the audiences when you are preparing?
12. Are there any strategies that you use to engage your audiences? How do you hook the audience?
13. How do you organize the content of your performance?
14. Is there any self-censorship that you notice in topic and/or language selection for your performances?
15. How do you know/reflect if your performance was successful? (Prompts: good press; laughter; audience reactions; social media reactions)
16. Is there a response that you anticipate from the audience after watching your show? Something behavioral, action-based, anything?
17. When you perform, is there any aim or purpose of your performance?
18. Do you see yourself as an activist, artist, comedian, all three or none of that? Why/why not?
19. Have you ever had experiences when you were mocked or lampooned?