

INDIANS SITTING IN A DARK ROOM CAN TAKE A JOKE, BUT...



All India Bakchod has taken stand-up comedy out of clubs and into people's homes with their online content

In a society where anyone in the spotlight has to be careful about what they say, is stand-up comedy the only space where there's any freedom of speech?

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Kadoo katega to sab mein bantega, thoda Adani, thoda Ambani. Baaki khaye thanedar ka saala" (literal translation: when the pumpkin is cut, it will be distributed between Adani and Ambani, the rest will go to the policeman's brother-in-law). These lyrics are a part of a unique stand-up comedy act titled *Aisa Taisa Democracy* featuring Indian Ocean's Raghu Ram and stand-up comics Varun Grover and Sanjay Rajoura. It also features in the closing credits of Jaideep Varma's upcoming documentary *I Am Offended* which examines the growth of stand-up comedy in India in an environment of intolerance. What's interesting is that the song above, like most of the stand-up comedy acts today, can be construed as

that they have no control over the viewers (in terms of region, age or background).

AUDIENCE-PERFORMER DISCONNECT

Scriptwriter, comedian and novelist Anuvab Pal believes there's a different psychology at work when people are sitting and watching a show. "I think people (and I guess by which I mean Indians) sitting in a dark room with muted lights can take a joke. Say the same thing in a dinner party or at someone's house sitting around and someone will get angry or offended," Pal observes. "They see us like they do zoo animals. We are allowed wild behaviour others aren't. As long as we are in our cage (which is a stage)."

New York-based stand-up comic Radhika Vaz who first brought her act down to India in mid-2010 and has been performing regularly since, doesn't agree with the perception that most Indians are

comic," says Varma, referring to celebrity roasts and comedy sketches featuring A-listers on popular American TV programmes like *Saturday Night Live*. Varma, who has earlier directed the National Award-winning documentary *Leaving Home — the Life & Music of Indian Ocean*, decided to document the thriving stand-up comedy scene after being introduced to it by two friends in the business — Andy Zaltzman (also famous as a writer on *Cricinfo*) in London and Varun Grover, a writer and stand-up comedian from Mumbai. The film, as the write-up on it, says, "is as much about humour and its mechanics as much a portrait of a modern-day young India, warts and all. The disquieting intolerance and smugness in Indian society today forms the basis of the context within which this new arts scene is examined."

and did a routine on typical Indian habit of moral policing at home or the way Indian parents react to condom ads on TV if their kid is in the room," Grover says. However, for reasons best known to the organisers (they felt he was being anti-Indian), Grover had to stop and even fight for his payment.

Bengaluru-based comedian and actress Rubi Chakravarthi, who will be performing her act at Starbucks cafes across the city starting Sunday, faced a similar situation at a corporate event a few years ago. "I was scheduled to anchor this corporate training event which was to be in three parts, beginning with an ice-breaker stand-up comedy act. However, this company, which was facing high attrition rate when it came to their women employees, cancelled the two sessions after my act." While Chakravarthi doesn't recall being offensive (she doesn't believe in using slang in her act), she felt she was targeted because she spoke about the attitude of people from different parts of the country to women-related issues, discrimination, etc.

Stand-up comic and IT consultant Sanjay Manaktala, who moved to Bengaluru from Los Angeles in 2010, and is part of the city's first comedy collective The Polished Bottoms with Praveen Kumar and Sundeep Rao, believes the blame doesn't always lie with the audience. "People can be uptight if the topic is controversial — for instance, religion — whether it's in the US or India. But the problem mainly arises if a comic is not experienced or skilled enough to handle sensitive issues," he says. He recalls this instance of a British comic performing in Mumbai about three years ago who brought up the *Shiv linga* and the room went silent. "He probably hadn't researched it enough which became a problem."

NEW CULTURE OF COMEDY

To a certain extent, All India Bakchod perceived by many comics as well as Varma as the game-changers in the Indian comedy scene, is creating a new comedy culture. They've taken comedy out of the bars and clubs and into people's homes with their online content. Plus, they are also organising the first celebrity roast in India with The AIB Knockout, a one-night event featuring Ranveer Singh and Arjun Kapoor taking place in Mumbai on December 20. "It started out as podcasts by Tanmay Bhat and Gursimran Khamba (in 2012) and grew into a live format," Sakya says, "We had no idea it would explode the way it did." He points to their *Dhoom 3* parody video as well as the *Alia Bhatt: Genius of the Year* video as helping them bring about a cultural shift at least where Bollywood is concerned. "The idea is for them to have fun; it's not about just promoting a movie."

The good thing — as most stand-up comics point out — is that more and more Indians (and not just in the main metros) are becoming aware of this relatively new art form and loving it. But most pros in the business believe that there's a lot of growing up to do — for the comics as well as audience — before comedians really push the envelope in terms of their content and diversity. Meanwhile, of course, there's a lot to laugh at as long as you can handle a joke as well as that funny guy on the stage.



(Clockwise from top) Anuvab Pal, Rubi Chakravarthi and Sanjay Manaktala



There is nothing worse than a man who can't take a joke about his mom, or a woman who can't laugh at how annoying her five-year-old is — RADHIKA VAZ, NEW YORK-BASED STAND-UP COMIC

politically incorrect but that hasn't deterred most comedians. In a society where "the public" could take offence at anything remotely controversial, be it issues about politics, religion or caste, stand-up comics seem to be the only ones who can say anything and get away with it.

URBAN PHENOMENA?

What makes stand-up comics immune to the haters? Is it the humour? Or the fact that stand-up comedy is still quite new and niche in our country? Most comics across the country feel that it could be a culmination of all these factors. "The growth of stand-up comedy has been mainly in the metros and urban elite space who are all for freedom of speech," says Ashish Sakya, who is part of Mumbai-based comedy collective All India Bakchod. Sakya points out how they have a lot more freedom when it comes to their live performances which is usually in front of an urban, middle-class audience as opposed to the YouTube videos they put up which have to be filtered given

missing a funny bone or the fact that they can't laugh at themselves. "There are boring, humourless killjoys no matter where in the world you go and then there are people who can take it as well as give it. BUT the one thing we could do as a population is to stop being so bloody sincere. There is nothing worse than a man who can't take a joke about his mom, or a woman who can't laugh at how annoying her five-year-old is. We are sometimes a little bit too reverent of things that don't necessarily deserve it."

Interestingly, Vaz, whose new show, *Older. Angrier. Hairier.*, includes some universal themes like how a childless woman past 40 is harangued about having babies, doesn't tailor her content for the Indian audience — and the reactions have been uniform whether it's India or NY. "I think Indian women are very capable of handling a joke — and they do," she adds.

EMBRACING SOCIAL SATIRE

"Abroad it is considered a badge of honour to be made fun of by a stand-up

So, whether it's picking on certain double standards that the society, at large, may have, weird Indian quirks or issues in the news: rapes, Modi, elections, corruption... nothing is sacrosanct to a comedian. "It's actually telling the audience what they don't want to hear. That's what's interesting about stand-up comedy. What would be really great is that if the audience gradually changes and accepts this aspect of it," Varma adds.

MIND YOUR LANGUAGE

The one place where stand-up comics do have to watch themselves is corporate shows. Ironically, these are the shows that also pay the most (over Rs2 lakh for an experienced comic for a half-an-hour session and Rs60,000 to a lakh for newcomers). Varun Grover recalls one instance where he was pulled off stage about 10 minutes into the show. "I had been notified of things that I couldn't bring up: Hindi *gaulis*, politicians, etc., so I kept clear of that

Open Mic nights in the city

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URBAN SOLACE

Ulsoor
LOL @ Urban Solace was the earliest comedy open mic in the city (started in 2010) and is possibly the longest-running one in the country. Wednesdays at Urban Solace are a regular weekly fixture for stand-up comics in the city. It can be called the cradle of Bengaluru comedy with many now-famous comedians like Kanan Gill, Biswa Kalyan Rath and Satish Perumal popping their stand-up cherry there. "We cater to all forms of self-expression including comedy," says owner Perry Menzies. "We've had issues with sound from our neighbours but no complaints from the audience. There is an underlying respect and artists and comedians are sensitive to acknowledge if there are kids or elders in the audience and choose their content appropriately. I find that the Bengaluru audience is very evolved; they pick up even the most subtle of jokes or remarks made by the comedians."

Open Mic nights at Urban Solace draws about 20 to 50 patrons every week

TAKE 5

Indiranagar
Take 5 is one of the few places that allows people to wash away the Monday blues with a dose of comedy. "We had been doing live music for a while but there was no particular demand for comedy. However, we thought it would be an interesting property to have when Ahmed Shariff approached us. We had a night free and we started the open mic in February 2013," says owner Sunny Sodha. "The live music we have on the weekends is the main draw, but during the week the stand-up night pulls in a larger crowd than the karaoke night we have running for about the same time."

THE BIERE CLUB

Lavelle Road
The Biere Club hosts a comedy night once a month every Thursday featuring the Mumbai-based group East India Comedy. Vishal Nagpal, Director — Operations, says they place no restrictions on the comedians, except one. "We discourage picking on the audience for no reason. Also, the Bengaluru audience is mature enough to handle sensitive issues and touchy subjects." Recently, Biere Club was also the venue for the prelim rounds of the Indian leg of the Melbourne Comedy Festival which saw Bengaluru's best comedians face-off each other. On an average, their comedy night draws about 100-150 people.

WHAT IS OPEN MIC?

Open Mic is a live show where audience members may perform at the microphone. Usually, the performers sign up in advance for a time slot with the host or master of ceremonies. These events are typically focused on performance arts like poetry and the spoken word, music, and comedy.

"Bengaluru audiences are mature," say cafe and bars owners who organise regular comedy nights



Take 5 started Open Mic night in February 2013

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