



INTERNATIONAL
CENTRE FOR
ETHNIC STUDIES



CALL FOR PAPERS

**International Centre for Ethnic Studies
Sri Lanka**

and

**Department of Sociology - South Asian University
New Delhi**

Humour and the Performance of Power in South Asia: Anxiety, Laughter and Politics in Unstable Times

What does humour do or how does it work when the political circumstances in which we live experience ruptures or instability? Can we see humour that emerges in these circumstances as a very specific narrative on the nature of democracy in the region? It does not appear that social sciences in South Asia -- as a collective enterprise -- have posed such questions in intellectual terms so far. The basic premise upon which the conference has been conceptualized is that humour generated in these circumstances is not merely a matter simple 'jokes' with an inbuilt sense of liminality, but is meant to circulate over time with many after-lives. In this context, such a body of commentary on contemporary politics deserves more sustained scrutiny.

We know that in the most dire circumstances of the Nazi concentration camps during World War 2, jokes created by Jewish prisoners served as commentaries of their tragic lives, within which the prisoners managed to see humour not only in their own life-threatening conditions, but also in the seemingly limitless power in the hands of their tormentors. Much further into the past and closer to home, South Asian folklore and ritual performances also served as forums for humour. Much of this humour targeted the powers that be at the time, and worked as 'weapons of the weak' in the sense suggested by James Scott. They were sanctioned political commentaries by the oppressed against their tormentors, which carried no repercussions. The 1980s saw 'jokes' or humorous narratives on powerful politicians in the region circulating by word of mouth whenever democratic practices or institutions were threatened. The recent constitutional crisis in Sri Lanka between October and December 2018 also saw the generation of considerable political humour and satire, and much of this was 'performed' online. All these are affectively the 'voices of the people.' They are public commentaries without specified authorship. Today, in general this kind of political

humour has more decisively entered the Internet using cheaply and easily available online technologies, rather than circulated among people by word of mouth. But they continue to serve the same purpose they have already served over a considerable period of time: to be political commentaries of evolving politics, and generally without negative consequences.

How do these commentaries emerge and in what circumstances? What do they seek to achieve? Under what conditions have their performative parameters and dynamics changed over time? These will be among the most basic questions this multi-disciplinary conference seeks to answer.

The conference is open to academics, writers, journalists, and artists who are keen to address the issues outlined above. The presentations, in addition to usual formats, can also be in the form of video or pictorial presentations.

Dates:

27th and 28th June 2019

Venue and Venue Contact Details:

International Centre for Ethic Studies, No. 2, Kynsey Terrace, Colombo 8, Sri Lanka.

Telephone: +94-11-2685085 / 2679745 / 2698048

Email: viyanga.ices@gmail.com; mario@ices.lk

Due Date for Paper Titles and Abstracts:

Titles of proposed papers and a brief abstract (100 words or so) should be received by **20th March 2019** at the following email address: sasankaperera@soc.sau.ac.in
Potential paper writers will be informed of the acceptance of their ideas by 5th of April 2019.

Draft Papers:

Draft papers need to reach organizers by 1st May 2019. Send all draft papers to the following email address: sasankaperera@soc.sau.ac.in

Additional information:

For additional information, please write to Sasanka Perera (South Asian University): sasankaperera@soc.sau.ac.in / Viyanga Gunasekera (ICES): viyanga.ices@gmail.com
