



**INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR ETHNIC STUDIES, SRI LANKA**

**DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY, SOUTH ASIAN UNIVERSITY, NEW DELHI**

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

*27<sup>th</sup> and 28 June 2019*

*ICES Auditorium*

**PAPER ABSTRACTS**

**Supported by**

**India Sri Lanka Foundation, New Delhi**

**Dakshin: South Asian Research Collective, New Delhi**

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## **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 humourous 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.

## ABSTRACTS

**'Dance-Drama' Performances in Northern India:  
Humour, Subversions and the Politics of Contemporary Gender(ed)  
Relations**

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This paper builds on the ethnographic study of the popular 'dance-drama' performances and indigenous ways of performative subversion by rural women in Northern India, especially in the state of Haryana. Popularly known as '*jakari*' and '*ragani*', the dance via humor, satire and erotic performative style portrays a dialogic context so as to subvert the masculinist and patriarchal gender relations in North Indian families. Further, this form of 'dance-drama' projects certain acts of subversion that generates a cultural insurrection in the intra-personal relations in the family, where the women are a subject of sexual objectification. The paper projects two anthropological underpinnings: firstly, it generates the ways in which smaller acts to overthrow hypermasculinism via means of satire and humor brings into evidence of women's groups that come-together to form a sense of gender-based solidarity to share sorrows and disgrace in their respective households. And secondly, the historic masculinism in the North India is challenged to a position where humor becomes the central argument of women's solidarity, evoking instances of how these women destabilize these gender relations by different instances of disruptions in the contemporary context of self-help groups, local NGOs, state-led gender and development agencies, education, reproductive health rights, and so on.

**Laughing About Caste:  
An Analysis of How Caste Finds Representation in the Genre of Stand-up  
Comedy in India**

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This paper examines the interplay between caste and comedy in the contemporary cultural sphere in India. Taking stand-up comedy performances — both on television and the Internet — as an entry point, this qualitative enquiry explores how, and how much, caste is represented in comedy in the country. This study uses content analysis to determine how frequently — if at all — caste is a part of the content of stand-up comedy performances, and also to fathom the nature of comic verbal compositions. Further, semi-structured interviews of comedians help

comprehend how their location in society determines why they choose to joke (or not) about caste. Employing Stuart Hall's reception theory, the paper analyses how the audience's sociocultural makeup influences their interpretation of a joke. The language being used to evoke laughter is important to this analysis, and an attempt is made to see how disparaging humor functions to facilitate normalized exclusion of caste groups.

### **Threatened Laughter?**

**Modernity and Humor in the Nambudiri Jokes (Namboori Phalitangal) from Malabar, South India**

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This paper attempts to examine the jokes, which used to circulate in the southern part of India among the Malayalee Brahmins known as *Nambudiri* jokes (*Namboori phalitangal* in Malayalam). From many of the surviving jokes, the referent period seems to be the period of colonial modernity – 1850s to the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In fact, a content analysis of many of them reveals they are about change – very often expressed through the *Nambudiri*'s "irrational" resistance against it. In this period of major changes, when the "other" seems to forget his or her position in society as lower than the *Nambudiri*, the jokes very often serve a double purpose, either of disciplining the undisciplined other (caste, gender or age marked) or the assertion of the *Nambudiri*'s difference with the rest of the "moderns." While *Nambudiri* jokes are, like all jokes, about "releases," we cannot see them as "liberatory" by any stretch of imagination now. They are jokes by a dominant, powerful group, jokes of a community, especially, of the male members of this community.

Saying this, should we see these texts as texts of simple dominance? How does dominance work at all? Through the use of brute power? Or, are they emerging at a time when there are serious threats to that dominance which is perceived by the creators of the jokes, and there is a way in which the ridiculous in the self is ironically placed as a defense mechanism to confront what brings changes to that dominance?

### **Ridiculing Power, Destabilizing Politics:**

**Front-stage Performance of Youth in Contemporary Bangladesh**

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Humor as a form of non-violent resistance has attained significant attention in contemporary literature of performative politics. Theoretically, it has been adopted as a relief mechanism (Freud, 2003), politicized art (Benjamin, 1969), passive revolution (Schmidt, 2014), tiny revolution (Orwell, 1968) and so on. This paper uses the case study of the 'Road Safety Protest' led by high school students in Dhaka in 2018. The death of two students by a negligent unlicensed driver outraged the student community. This paper observes the multiple shades of that protest with special focus on the front-stage performance of youth through humor, and its impact on shaping spectators' opinions and forming counter-publics in the arena of political theatre. Finally, this paper, tracing the historical trajectory, seeks to uncover the changing dynamics of humor as *weapons of the weak* over time in literature, movies, editorial caricature, graffiti, art, jokes, satire and so on that ridicules and destabilizes the existing establishment of political culture in Bangladesh.

**Stand Up Comedy and Performative Politics:  
An Alternative Discourse of Power in Contemporary India**

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This paper attempts to analyze how stand-up comedies in India serve as an efficient rhetoric for political discourse. Through the proliferation of social media, irony, satires, parodies of current political figures and contexts find new forms of mediation through online comedy videos, cartoon caricatures and memes. Conformity is not mindless. It can be overt and symbolic with a covert ideological resistance, which is manifested in stand-up comedies. Here, the recognition of resistance is dependent on its visibility. These everyday forms of resistances initiate a life of their own through the effects they produce on audiences. These effects include laughter as a form of critique. This paper examines how spatializations of humor have evolved over time, and are instrumental in the emergence of political thought and criticism, and how the performance of power by comedians as a means of inculcating alternative consensus into public discourse signifies a visible yet invisible (non-threatening) form of opposition.

**Grease Yaka:  
Cartoon Narratives of Citizens' Anxieties in the Era of Political  
Uncertainties**

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The shape of the public sphere in South Asian societies in general and Sri Lanka in particular tend to get twisted by various political regimes at different times. The public opinion often do not tend to agree with these twists. In the Sri Lankan context, political regimes seem to be making use of traditional myths as a way of negotiating with such situations. As a large scale social phenomenon, the fear of specific manifestations of the mythical world surfaced for the first time during President Premadasa's period in which young women became quite anxious as there were rumors in society that they would be abducted to be used in some rituals performed to bless president Premadasa. More recent examples appeared between the beginning of 2010 and the end of 2011, where the focus was on the demonic figure of the infamous "greased devil" or "grease yakha." Against this backdrop, the focus of this paper is to discuss how cartoons published in two national newspapers, the *Lankadeepa* and the *Divayina*, explained this phenomenon. This happened specially in a context where people were quite concerned to be critical of then regime led by Mahinda Rajapakse, This is because there was a pervasive fear of people being abducted by unknown individual riding in unmarked white vans. The analysis of the cartoons suggests that the cartoonists have created a space in which they could critically look at the role of politicians, regimes and also suggest solutions to political mayhem even when in times of extreme anxiety and uncertainties.

**"Do Nat Blak da Gat":**

**English, Humor and Anxiety in the Trans-linguaging Era**

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Languages and their complex relationship with each other and with society in general, have much political resonance. The English language in particular has been implicated in social and political conflict in Sri Lanka, and is still popularly called *Kaduwa* or *Kadda* (meaning the sword in Sinhala) because of its potential to divide, discriminate and denigrate. As such, humor has frequently been used to deal with this complexity. This paper attempts to analyze a corpus of Internet memes related to the English language and Sri Lankan society, and widely circulated on social media, in order to gauge contemporary attitudes and reassess ambiguities related to English in Sri Lanka.

**Tales from Assam's Tea Gardens:  
Humor/Resistance in Everyday Life-world of a Laborer**

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Humor in Assam's tea gardens can be understood as a weapon of laborers. The purpose of this paper is to examine how successfully we read, interpret and understand the everyday forms of resistance of subordinates in tea gardens.

This paper will explore tea gardens as a social site for a 'hidden transcript' locating humor, hidden voice, anger, bitten tongues, rumor, sarcasm and laziness within everyday practice of an *adivasi* laborer. How can we study the subjective experiences of a tea garden laborer when he/she is making a strategic move in the presence of the powerful *sahib/babus/shardars* (bosses) through the weapon of humor? This paper will associate with the everyday power relations that exist inside the *cha bagans* of Assam.

**Performative Politics:  
Dramatic Democracy in India Today**

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Political culture in most parliamentary democracies has been normatively ordered in a general scheme as well as within a 'Victorian' value system in particular. This is especially the case in former colonies of Britain. Parliaments as institutions formulate strict decorum and etiquette to maintain this culture, and any deviance by members of parliament usually invites criticism from all quarters. Contemporary media societies, especially through telecasting parliamentary proceedings are bidding to project the Parliament as the sacred space for operation of healthy democracy, where only deliberations and debates are welcome, while other forms of critique are censored and sensationalized. Historical origins and available evidence on the development of the idea of democracy emphasized its affinity with 'drama' and association with the space, 'theatre'. Scholarship on performative politics posits that the activity of deliberation and debate are to be understood as 'performative-in terms of practice. Performance studies have already highlighted the limitations of literary aspects of debate. And to extend this argument further, this paper tries to argue how Victorian political culture is suppressing and ridiculing alternative forms. Understanding the critical perspective over parliamentary space and practices in countries, which were once under colonial rule, is quite a gargantuan task even after six

decades of liberation. Engaging with select instances from the last five years, this paper presents a case of political humor in the Indian Parliament. It tries to highlight the demonstrations of a professional actor representing a parliamentary constituency from southern India. He has very often cast himself in many roles by dressing up and performing at entrance of the Indian Parliament Complex since 2014. The paper posits the possibility of understanding the nature of democracy by emphasizing the humorous-performative character of the institution called parliament.

### **Anthropological Framework for Performative Communication**

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The instances of performatively-communicated humor, on a variety of platforms (conventional as well as new media spaces), necessitates revisiting the approaches from anthropology of performance, performance studies, communication studies, and sociology of mass media. Cultural politics of humor in the post-liberalized and mediated communication has brought about a new found complexity that has diminished the distance between the manufacturer and the consumer, performer and audience, culture and politics. The binaries of the bygone century, which separated the cultural from the political, agency from structure, performance from power seemingly fail to work in making sense of the inherent complexities. As a result, in most instances, the media of dissemination enables the consumers to participate in manufacturing, the audience to join in the performance, and the cultural beings to become political.

Stitching instances from across the region, this paper would enable a discursive context for a conceptual apparatus vis-à-vis performative communication. In so doing, there would be an attempt to refashion theoretical-methodological approaches to the array of humorous content that dominate the mediated landscape in contemporary South Asia.

### **The Funny Thing About Pop Culture Censorship in Sri Lanka**

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Contrary to the supposition that humor and satire are ‘political commentaries... generally *without* negative consequences’ (my emphasis), the Sri Lankan experience shows that humor in art form has often been the subject of censorship, even at times of the violent kind. I use Paul O’Higgins (1972) categorizations of types of censorship in

democratic societies to explore examples of censorship exercised over different forms of satirical popular culture. O'Higgins posits six types of censorship: legal, extra-legal, social, voluntary, subterranean and self-censorship. I also add the category of 'vigilante' censorship, to extend O'Higgins' definitions to capture the violent nature of some voluntary censorship, as well as the unverifiability of the perpetrators. I consider each category of censorship and illustrate it with a Sri Lankan instance, drawing from examples from satirical popular culture ranging from television and radio broadcasting to political cartoons and theatre. While exploring these examples, I also demonstrate that censorship of humorous material presents a peculiar situation for the censor and protected political leadership. Censorship of humor can be embarrassing for the powerful: it appears they cannot take a joke. However, the decision to silence is exercised by an intermediary – whether a censorial body or the public. The protected political figure is then able to be 'above' this sensitivity and pardon the offensive material, demonstrating his/her magnanimity, even if this person created the culture of fear that drives people to pre-emptively censor in the first place.

**“Sahabgathwayai Wadagath”:**

**A study on Discourses of Civic Participation through Facebook Memes Circulated during the 2018 Constitutional Crisis in Sri Lanka**

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When news of the sudden sacking of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and the swearing in of former President Mahinda Rajapaksa by President Maithripala Sirisena in October 2018 broke, it seemed clear that the country was facing a major political and constitutional crisis. Almost immediately, a profusion of memes and jokes about this event quickly started to circulate on social media pages, a phenomenon that appeared to be at odds with the fairly 'serious' political situation that was unfolding. Drawing from attempts to theorize the function of humor as a form of political participation, this paper explores these memes and jokes for the conversations around democratic and civic participation that they engendered at the height of this particularly tumultuous moment in Sri Lanka's recent history. The data for this paper is sourced from an archive of nearly 500 that were collected in the immediate aftermath of the sacking of Mr. Wickremesinghe. It argues for recognizing the 'serious' dimensions of humor as a form of critically valuable social and political commentary on Sri Lanka's state-society relationship today.

**Standing Up:  
The "Comic" Public Sphere**

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The paper is interested in exploring dissenting voices in times of intolerant regimes and the construction of a 'public sphere' through Stand up comedy in India. The texts under consideration are musical pieces by EIC (East India Comedy) on Narendra Modi and Donald Trump amongst others and the responses they generate. The essay will base itself on reading these pieces as political critique by unraveling specific moments in the musical pieces in order to outline the possibilities and limitations of such a public sphere in the twenty first century. The second section of the paper interrogates the visual mode, the satirical style, the editing camera, and the viewing audiences who share such videos. The paper concludes with directions to nuance a simplistic admiration or visceral criticism of such performances of humor.

**Who's the Man?**

**An Analysis of Gendered Representations of Political Leadership in  
Cartoons Illustrated by Awantha Artigala and Gihan de Chickera**

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This paper seeks to understand the ways in which different cartoonists' narration of similar events may give rise to varied commentary on gendered political representation, participation and contribute to political discourse in Sri Lanka. It focuses on a series of cartoons published between 26th October and 20th December 2018.

Each of the cartoons analyzed allude to issues of governance, and by combining the elements of caricature, humor, differentiation and the depiction of absurd alternate realities, they contribute not only as a genre to national discourse on politics, but also serve as a point of reference for encouraging citizens to engage with political discourse themselves.

## **The Ambivalence of Laughter and its Aftermath: An Existentialist Perspective**

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**What is a joke and what are its repercussions? This paper attempts to understand the significance of laughter to lie in its potential for subversion, and argues that Laughter (or the Joke) is essentially a negation. The paper further investigates the nature of this negation. Given the destructive and universal characterizations of laughter, it appears to be a threat to the possibility of meaning. The same characterizations, however, give rise to freedom, required to create new meanings. But is freedom enough, or can the constructive aspect of laughter extend to its potential to produce 'narratives' and commentaries? Using a Nietzschean perspective, the moment of the paper is to show the ambivalence of laughter as destructive, yet as that which is potentially constructive of meaning.**

## **Media, Politics and Humorous Public in Bangladesh**

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**In a contested political climate, there might be apprehensions about democracy as well as doubt on the scope of media to become playful about politics. But the “television public” can activate their playful pleasure and foster heterogeneity, multiplicity and divergence in power. This paper pieces together the jokes people crack in relation to television news culture and politics in Bangladesh. It examines the role of humour in making a localized public sphere in the wake of people’s interaction with television. As a consequence of TV’s failure of accommodating humour, alternative platforms such as various YouTube channels and app-based TikTok videos are trending online. Thus, in examining the humor within and beyond the screen, trajectories of mediated humour and natures of the humorous public are discussed with analytic standpoints of media culture and politics. The attempt is not only to understand the potential of humor as a means of political discourse and communication, but also to investigate the public humor as a tool for empowerment. In the ultimate analysis, the paper will shed lights on the interactive dynamics between media, politics and humour. The paper is based on empirical research and have adopted multiple methods including ethnography, observation and social network analysis.**

**“Ado, Umbath Lankave- dhe?”:**

**The Politics of Humoring ‘Sri Lanka’ and ‘Sri Lankan’ in a Collection of Modern Folktales**

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While folkloric speech acts are valorized as national heritage and mirrors of cultural conventions — Sri Lanka being no exception—there is a tendency to marginalize folkloric humor about nations possibly owing to their perceived ‘negative’ or ‘disapproving’ construction of nations and nationalities. The present study wishes to engage such hypercritical notions by undertaking a close reading of a collection of recently published humorous folktales whose plots are constructed around ‘Sri Lanka’ or ‘Sri Lankan.’ Using folkloristic theoretical frameworks of ‘folk ideas’ and ‘world view,’ this study wishes to locate, analyze and thus problematize the ‘conditions of possibility’ that uphold the humor in the folktales under focus and wishes to understand the cultural postulates that surround/uphold the nation state of Sri Lanka in the minds of story creators/tellers and listeners.