



INTERNATIONAL
CENTRE FOR
ETHNIC STUDIES



International Centre for Ethnic Studies and the Department of Sociology, South Asian University, New Delhi, present a conference on

Humour and the Performance of Power in South Asia:

Anxiety, Laughter and Politics in Unstable Times

27th & 28th June 2019

**ICES Auditorium
No 2 Kynsey Terrace
Colombo 8**

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, held over one and a half days, seeks to answer.

PRIOR REGISTRATION WITH LAKMALI by 20th June
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The draft programme and paper abstracts are attached with this email