

How's Laughter Changed from *Natyashastra* to New Media? A Narrative Review on the Trajectory of Political Satire from Print to Digital Media Frontiers in India

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ABSTRACT

The paper seeks to encapsulate the evolution of mediated political humor in the unique socio-political milieu of world's most populous democracy, India. The study conducts a narrative review of 23 shortlisted scholarly works (both theoretical and empirical) as well as authentic secondary sources. Grounded in the frameworks of humor studies, semiotics and rhetoric, it systematically and critically examines the transition of political satire from a means of entertainment in Hindu mythology to the instrument of resistance and persuasion in the contemporary online platforms. The paper also underlines the transformation of Indian political satire in terms of its reach, formats and implications, underscoring how the unprecedented revolution was brought up by the algorithm driven internet in positioning it as a potent agent of partisan politics.

Keywords: *Indian Political Satire, Memes, Stand-up Comedy, Digital India, Narrative Review, Affective Politics*

INTRODUCTION

Despite the conjectures, the scholarship around “humor” highlights that the function of humor and satire is anything but frivolous. The application of humor has been proven to be conducive in attention-seeking, retention and recall of the information (Coronel et al., 2021). This is attributed to the amusement factor associated with humor that make it ideal to be utilized for the discourses of significant yet intricate topics including science (Becker & Anderson, 2019), and politics. Political humor is essentially an amalgamation of two distinct words “politics” and “humor” which when blended refers to the creation and distribution of the political contents or messages served with an element of humor to produce an effect of amusement. Political humor can be defined as “an umbrella term that encompasses any humorous text dealing with political issues, people, events, processes, or institutions” (Young, 2014). In other words, political comedy can be seen as a non-traditional and creative form of political communication wherein the political information, be it news or views is disseminated using various comic techniques. Another interesting aspect of the phrase “political humor” is that it almost appears as an oxymoron on a superficial level as it is composed of two contrasting words. The word ‘political’ or ‘politics’ finds its root in the Greek word “Polis” or city-state, which is

explained as “the things concerning the “polis” by the Greek philosopher Aristotle in his book “Politics” in the 4th century BC (Aristotle, c. 350 BCE/1998). In present times, it is referred to as “the activities involved in getting and using power in public life and being able to influence decisions that affect a country or a society” (Oxford University Press, n.d.). Hence, politics is essentially considered to be a serious matter due to its association with things as important as the state, government, and development. On the other hand, humor, per se is frivolous and is stated as “the quality in something that makes it funny or the ability to laugh at things that are funny” (Oxford University Press, n.d.) Hence, with the combination of the two contrasting phenomena like politics and humor, came the development of the interest as to how and where the line between the two blurs and becomes complementary to each other.

Humor, especially in the form of satire, occupies a paradoxical space in public discourse. While inherently comedic, it also serves as a potent medium for critical reflection on power and politics. Besides, the speculations regarding the correlations between the consumption of political satire and the political sophistication of the consumers (that includes their political knowledge, political opinion, and political decisions) (Baumgartner & Morris, 2008; Baym, 2005; Holbert et al., 2011; Jones, 2010; Young, 2008) make it crucial to generate a

comprehensive understanding of the multiple concepts regarding political humor. Thinkers like Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) have located satire in the “carnavalesque”, a temporary subversion of social norms to allow marginalized groups to speak truth to power. Similarly, Habermas (1989) public sphere is now re-visited in the digital media space where political comedy is often substituting for traditional journalism in informing the public (Kumar & Combe, 2015).

In India, the transition is apparent, with content producers like AIB and EIC acting as entertainers and political commentators. Though individual experiments have connected points along evolutionary trajectory of political satire, there is a marked deficiency of comprehensive syntheses tracing the evolution of satire through successive media stages within Indian cultural-political context. This research places Indian political satire in historical and contemporary contexts in an effort to trace its development from nationalist printed cartoons towards meme cultures and YouTube comedy troupes. It considers how satire not only depicts sociopolitical milieu but also creates them, through viral circulation, networked publics, and affective resonance (Baishya, 2021). This analysis bridges that gap by providing an intermedia, diachronic analysis of Indian political satire. It aims not only to map that trajectory, but critically explore how satire is used under shifting regimes of power, censorship, and digital capitalism. In doing so, the paper situates satire as a discursive genre that is rhetorical, affective, and political. By placing historical continuity and digital complexity side by side within the analytical frame, this paper adds to multi-scalar, interdisciplinary account that can be used to inform future research in political communication, media affect, and platform resistance in the global south.

2. MATERIALS AND METHOD

This research employs the narrative review method, complemented with purposeful selection criteria and a source mapping strategy by categories, to analyze the historical and contemporary context of political satire in Indian media. Narrative review methodology is most appropriate for interdisciplinary research with differing historical timeframes, differing media types, and sociopolitical transformations (Grant & Booth, 2009). Rather than listing quantitative results, this methodology allows an interpretive synthesis of theoretical analysis, case studies, and cultural evolution, giving a snapshot of the evolution of satire in India. In pursuit of academic

comprehensiveness and exhaustive coverage, two of the leading open-access academic search engines, Google Scholar and JSTOR, were used as the primary sources of research. Google Scholar provided exhaustive access to peer-reviewed journals, working papers, book chapters, and grey literature, while JSTOR provided access to periodical journal collections and caches of cultural theory. Both sites were searched using a systematic search strategy that utilized Boolean logic and combinations of an exhaustive set of keywords such as “political satire” AND India; “evolution of political satire” AND India ; “political comedy” AND media evolution; “political satire” AND “Indian newspaper”; “editorial cartoons” AND India AND colonial OR postcolonial “digital humor” OR “online satire” AND India; “televised satire” AND India; “television satire” AND democratization; “stand-up comedy” AND “public discourse”; “news parody” OR “satirical journalism” AND Indian politics; “online satire” AND India; “digital comedians” AND “political discourse” AND India.

This study takes into account 23 scholarly works, spanning theoretical research, empirical studies, and historical analyses. This corpus is a varied selection of genres and methods, with the majority of the sources being post-2010 and therefore addressing the digital revolution of Indian media. Figure 1 illustrates the flow diagram showcasing the process of selection (inclusion/exclusion) of studies from the two shortlisted databases:

The analysis was focused on three key temporal domains: i) The contribution made by satire to Indian print media (newspapers, illustrated journals); ii) the emergence of televised satire and hybrid comic-news genres; and iii) the evolution of satire on social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter. Besides, it also relies heavily on other secondary online resources like authentic newspaper articles and editorials, interviews, etc. in order to develop a systematic chronology of major events in the development of political humor in India. By employing the narrative review technique, the paper systematically enquires its evolution in terms of the changing media for its dissemination, forms, presentations, and purposes served. The paper attempts to put forth the various lenses through which political humor has been viewed so far, identify the possible gaps and suggest future approaches to study the same. The paper is arranged in an order of the development of the political comedy from print to television and eventually to the new media.

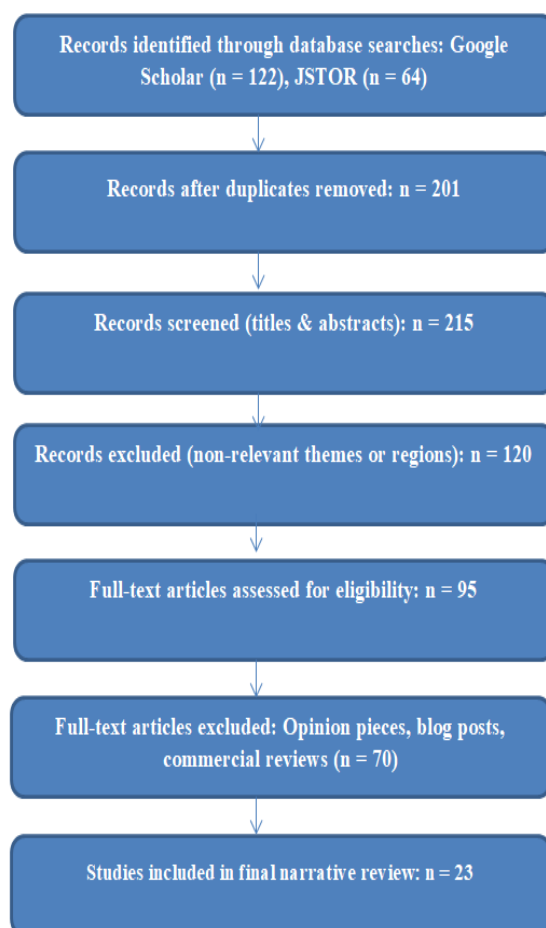


Figure 1: Flow of Narrative Review

Theoretical Underpinning

The study trails the trajectory of Indian political humor while integrating the frameworks of humor studies, semiotics and rhetoric. The framework is instrumental in comprehending the historical function of political satire beyond entertainment in the unique socio-political milieu of India. Humor studies allow lens to investigate myriads of formats of political humor across multiple forms of media including political caricatures, situational comedy shows, stand-up comedy, memes etc. from the lens of comedic techniques and its significance in sending out political messages. Semiotics, on the other hand, aids in gauging how the meaning is constructed and dispersed through mediated content from the times of national freedom struggle through print to the contemporary era marked by digital citizenry. It helps in decoding the significance of signs and symbols embedded within the satirical content in the discourse of topical political issues. Additionally, rhetoric offers a critical perspective on political humor positioning it as a persuasive discursive genre holding potential to enhance political awareness, influence political opinions and challenging powers by acting as a safer tool for resistance and dissent.

POLITICAL SATIRE AND DISSENT IN THE HISTORY OF INDIAN PRINT CULTURE

India's tradition of political satire in print is among the oldest in the non-Western world, deeply intertwined with its anti-colonial struggle. Its emergence is deeply rooted

in the country's longstanding traditions of humor and satire. The concept of humor, or *hasya*, can be traced back to one of India's most esteemed ancient treatises, Bharat Muni's *Natyashastra*. Within the Rasa Theory articulated in this text, "*hasya*" is identified as one of the eight principal rasas (aesthetic essences), arising from the enduring emotional state (*sthayi bhava*) of joy (*hasa*). The rasa of "*hasya*" is manifested in the form of "*Anubhavas* (physiological responses) that ranges from vulgar laughter or *Apahasita* to gentle smile or *Hasita*" (Mani, 1950).

One can observe much of humor in the Indian tradition as well as in the mythological essence of *Vedas* and *Puranas*. Its presence can be traced in the different parts ranging from making fun of Gods to comic aspects in Hindu fables, from ethnic jokes to yogic humor. Elst (2011) in his book 'Humor in Hinduism', speaks of the occurrence of mild humour and satire in Hinduism mythology and tracing its origin in the Rig-Veda, wherein the human aspect of the God has been emphasized in the Vedic hymns. Elst (2011) observes that in Hindu myth, mockery and worship go hand in hand. When presented in front of Indians, the audience does not mind enjoying the lighter aspect and laughs at the very same Gods, which they otherwise worship (e.g., *Mohini Myth* describes the humorous story of Lord *Vishnu* rescuing Lord *Shiva* from his foes by taking the form of an beautiful lady, *Mohini*; the same is the case in the funny appearance of Lord *Ganesha*, etc.). Elst (2011) go on to depict the occurrence of humor in the 2 epics of Hinduism, i.e., *Ramayana* and

Mahabharata, using anecdotes like that of magic palace created by demon *Maya* in *Mahabharata*, wherein the *Kauravas* enter the room, they fall into the pool of water; and funny stories of Lord *Krishna*, wooing his beloved '*Radha*' and other milkmaids (*gopis*). He also traces the humorous narrative patterns in fable collections like *Panchtantra*, wherein serious morals and lessons were conveyed using comical and ironical styles of narration and stories. But another repository of religious humor, according to Elst (2011), is a satirical handling of priests and ascetics in Hindu drama as well as in more contemporary literature. Sanskrit dramas like those of Kalidasa's had a built-in tradition of having a jester or a comic character in them, which continued in most folk drama traditions like Yakshagana (Karnataka), East Chhau, Kathakali (Kerala), Tamasha (Maharashtra), Bhavai (Gujarat), where the jester made fun of nearly every God, kings and sages. The *Akbar* and *Birbal* story also has a special place in carrying on this tradition, where, the Hindu minister, *Birbal* is the witty jester in the court of the Muslim emperor, *Akbar*. Therefore, the use of 'humor' to deliver strong messages through 'narration' or 'story-telling' is not new to India. It is clearly borne out by the fact that 'humor' has been an integral part and parcel of India's traditional mode of communication, including mythologies, scriptures, fables, folklores and folk drama. India's fondness with satire was also harnessed to investigate those in power like political leaders and political authorities. India has always had a strong cultural connection to humor and satire, so it's no surprise that these tools eventually became a way to challenge authority and question those in power.

The roots of political comedy in Indian media can actually be traced back to the late 19th century, when newspapers and journals began publishing political cartoons during the colonial period. During the colonial era, political cartoons served as a relatively safe medium for expressing dissent and critiquing authority. Goswami (2016), in his comprehensive historical account of political cartooning in India, describes political cartoons as "a medium of framed visual satirical presentation that addresses contemporary public issues, personalities, events, political or social or economic or cultural trends with the perfect combination of wit, satire, and punch." Political cartooning is a form of what Foucault terms "subjugated knowledges," or remarks derived from those beyond mainstream discourse. According to Khanduri (2009), however, this practice didn't develop in isolation. Much of it was influenced by the well-known British satirical magazine "*Punch*", which left a lasting mark on the style and direction of Indian cartooning. During imperialism, such political cartoons served as a safe medium for resistance against the colonial administration.

Following the East India Company's handover of control to the British Crown, political satire gained popularity in the Indian subcontinent. There were *Punch* equivalents in India, such as satirical magazines like *Delhi Sketch Book* (1850–1857) in English, *Awadh Punch* (1877–1936) in Urdu, *Basantak* (1874–1875), and *Panca-Nanda* (1878–1883) in Bengali. Unlike its British counterpart, however, the Indianized version of *Punch* often blended folk idioms, local dialects, and hybrid scripts, reflecting a

subaltern critique beneath elite editorial structures (Saxena & Ofori-Parku, 2024). * Bengal took the lead in recognizing political satire as a tool for change and a means of increasing political consciousness. According to Basu (2012), the satirical journals and periodicals of the era pushed for a harsh critique of colonial power, while also outlining the timeline of the influence of two major satirical works of the era, *Pancananda* (1878-1833) and *Basantak* (1874-1875). The period also confirmed Bengal's growing literary consciousness. It had a profound effect on the nation's politics, exposing corruption and hypocrisy via satirical journalism. Satire journalism focused on significant contemporary events that were happening at the time. The story characters used to spread the message were carefully chosen based on the circumstances.

Khanduri (2014) suggests that the visual satire of the period created in India was not necessarily about outright mockery but about "ethical ambiguity," thus making it able to evade censorship by both colonial and postcolonial states. Through the nationalist movement, cartoons performed a double function as tools of resistance and sources of mockery within a culture of surveillance.

Goswami (2016) notes that the significance of political cartooning increased in the twentieth century, coinciding with the rise of professionalism in India. Prominent cartoonists such as Gaganendranath Tagore (Calcutta), K.R. Sharma (Tamil Nadu), Jatin Sen (Bengal), K. Shankara Pillai (widely known as Shankar), R.K. Laxman, Abu Abraham, Kutty, and R.K. Narayan (celebrated for his "common man" character) gained widespread recognition during this period. Their work not only heightened public awareness of political issues (Basu, 2012) but also exposed the hypocrisy, corruption, and abuses perpetrated by the British administration. Regarding the function and impact of cartoons and caricatures both before and after independence, Goswami (2016) observes that, during the colonial period, political cartoons primarily targeted the injustices and oppressions of British rule, serving as "weapons of social criticism" (Mitter, 1997). In the post-independence era, however, the focus of satire shifted towards contemporary politicians and governmental actions, aiming to uphold democratic ideals and highlight developmental concerns.

During post-independence times, R.K. Laxman's "The Common Man" was a symbol of democratic disillusion. Laxman's brilliance was in revealing institutional rot not in opposition, but in dry, ironic resignation, a feeling that resonated with a nation balancing the promises of democracy against bureaucratic shortcomings (Paul, 2017). Even today, the legacy of these print satirists is evoked by digital artists on Instagram and YouTube, who name them as influences when asked about their political leanings (Anto & Vyas, 2024).

A MEDIA HISTORY OF TELEVISED POLITICAL COMEDY IN INDIA

With the passage of time and the advancement of media technology, political comedy began to find a foothold on Indian television. However, the shift in medium also brought a shift in the format and delivery of political

satire. Humorous content addressing political themes expanded into Indian television through four distinct formats: (a) politoons, (b) news parody, (c) situational comedies (sitcoms), and (d) stand-up comedy. Politoons, or political cartoons in motion, emerged as a common televised form of satire. These are short, animated video segments, typically one to two minutes in duration, broadcast on television news channels to depict contemporary political issues with humor. Prominent networks such as India Today, India TV, and Zee News adopted this format through recurring segments such as So Sorry, OMG, and Excuse Me. Among these, So Sorry is considered India's first televised politoon series, launched on Aaj Tak on August 2, 2013 (IMDb, 2013). OMG (Oh My God), a 90-minute satirical segment, premiered on India TV in February 2017, while Excuse Me, broadcast on Zee News, features concise humorous skits running 100–110 seconds.

Another important branch of political satire on television is the news parody, where the familiar style of a news broadcast is imitated in order to poke fun at political disputes and offer biting commentary. Kumar (2012) compares two well-known Indian shows that fall into this category: *The Week That Wasn't* (TWTW) and *Gustakhi Maaf*. Drawing inspiration from the American program *The Daily Show*, TWTW began airing on CNN-IBN in 2006, with comedian Cyrus Broacha as its host. *Gustakhi Maaf*, on the other hand, debuted a few years earlier in 2003 on NDTV India and stood out for its puppet-based satire developed by Brij Bhushan Shukla. Both shows critique socio-political developments and public figures through humor. However, as Kumar argues, they cater to divergent audiences: TWTW, with its use of English and references to international events, primarily resonates with India's urban elite, while *Gustakhi Maaf*, grounded in Hindi idioms and localized themes such as caste, religion, and agriculture, appeals more to vernacular-speaking rural audiences. Kumar (2012) observed that these shows were basically an indianization of global formats (like Stephen Colbert's *The Late Show*, John Oliver's *Last Week Tonight*, and Trevor Noah's *The Daily Show*) done through situating the issues into the local cultural nuances of the country.

Situational comedies (sitcoms) also served as an avenue for political humor, albeit in more subtle forms. Sitcoms are defined as short narrative comedies, usually 24–30 minutes in length, that revolve around recurring characters and consistent settings (Mills, 2014). Despite their seemingly light-hearted nature, some Indian sitcoms have offered bold critiques of systemic issues. *Flop Show* (1989), created by Jaspal Bhatti, is widely regarded as one of India's most iconic satirical shows for its portrayal of government corruption and public apathy (Jha, 2020). Bhatti's humor, characterized by deadpan delivery and calm irony, tackled serious topics such as bureaucratic inefficiency and societal hypocrisy. In one memorable episode, Bhatti mocks government inaction by quipping, "The status of a man in India is defined by the number of meetings he attends in a day." His earlier show, *Ulta Pulta*, aired on the state-run Doordarshan, also delivered fearless political commentary. Jha (2019) points out that Bhatti's brand of comedy was fearless, taking aim at everyone

from politicians and dishonest bureaucrats to in-laws demanding dowry, all with a sharp but subtle touch. Carrying this tradition forward, sitcoms like *Office Office* (2000), featuring Pankaj Kapoor, continued the satirical spirit by spotlighting the inefficiency and corruption often found in India's public service system. The trajectory of political satire on Indian television also illustrates the country's difficult balance between democratization and state control. While in the earlier era of Doordarshan (1980s–90s) programming, humor was employed as an indirect critique of India's socio-bureaucratic condition in shows like *Ulta Pulta* and *Flop Show*. Television satirical programming was, unlike their print counterparts, subject to bureaucratic censors. As such, early on television satire was what media theorists have termed "soft subversion," or political critique masked as domestic comedy (Paul, 2017). These early shows in television comedies were avenues of not just entertainment, but also affective registers of middle-class frustration, particularly with respect to issues of rising corruption, state inefficiency, and cultural hypocrisy. As Punathambekar (2015) notes, this era was a shift not from oppositional satire, but an era of institutional venting, humor was allowed but was rarely pointedly directed at individuals in positions of power.

Stand-up comedy, a comparatively newer concept, represents a more recent addition to the formats of political satire on Indian television. In this format, comedians engage directly with a live audience, using personal monologues to critique society and politics. One of the earliest televised stand-up shows was *Movers and Shakers* (1997), hosted by Shekhar Suman on SAB TV. At first, the show leaned heavily on mimicry and slapstick, but over time it began shifting toward more socially and politically aware humor (The Era of the Special, 2018). This shift became more apparent with the launch of *The Great Indian Comedy Show* in 2004 on Star One, which blended sketch comedy with stand-up to cover, everything from daily life situations to political themes. The ensemble featured well-known comedians such as Kiku Sharda, Suresh Menon, and Vishal Malhotra.

Not long after, the format of stand-up itself was taken in a new direction with the arrival of competitive reality shows. *The Great Indian Laughter Challenge* (2005), first aired on Star One and later Star Plus, became a landmark in the genre, where comedians performed before both a jury and live audiences, competing for recognition. The panel included Shekhar Suman and Navjot Singh Sidhu as judges. Building on its success, several other shows followed a similar reality-contest model like *Comedy Circus* (2007), *Laughter Knights* (2008), *Laugh India Laugh* (2012), *Comedy Superstars* (2015), and *Mazaak Mazaak Mein* (2016).

A unique experiment in this space was *Wah! Wah! Kya Baat Hai!* (2012), a comic poetry show modeled after the traditional kavi sammelan format and hosted by Shailesh Lodha. Another landmark moment came with *Comedy Nights with Kapil* (2013) on Colors TV, led by Kapil Sharma, who later brought the concept to Sony TV with *The Kapil Sharma Show* in 2016. These programs stood out for their mix of celebrity interviews, light satire, and sketch performances. Around the same time, *Comedy Nights Bachao* (2015), anchored by Krushna Abhishek,

Sudesh Lehri, and Bharti Singh, introduced Indian audiences to the roast format, in which public figures were playfully targeted with carefully scripted jokes and witty insults.

Conclusively, comedy on Indian television in the post-liberalization era was simultaneously enabled and constrained by its capitalist context, drawing in masses, but also reducing satire to spectacle. As further noticed in the digital media era, satire's sharpest tool moved from the model of broadcasting into decentralized, user-driven networks.

POLITICAL SATIRE IN INDIA'S POST-TELEVISION DIGITAL ECOLOGIES

The advent of social media has profoundly transformed multiple dimensions of human life; social, cultural, economic, and political. Among these, the political sphere has experienced a significant shift, particularly in how political comedy is created, disseminated, and consumed in the age of new media (Kumar & Combe, 2015). This transformation has been enabled by the comparative affordances of digital platforms, which have contributed to both the proliferation and democratization of political satire.

Unlike traditional media, social media operates as a decentralized communication space, largely free from institutional censorship and editorial gatekeeping (Coban, 2016). These platforms offer interactive environments where political information is not only shared but also actively debated, effectively functioning as an affective public sphere. Additionally, digital media fosters hybrid spaces that merge elements of print, broadcast, stage, and internet-based satire, thereby collapsing traditional media silos (Kumar & Combe, 2015).

Digital access has enabled a new generation of Indian comedians to bypass conventional media hierarchies and directly reach pan-Indian audiences. Kay (2018) emphasizes the catalytic role of YouTube in launching careers of prominent political comedians such as those from All India Bakchod (AIB), East India Comedy (EIC), and The Viral Fever (TVF). These creators benefit from the flexibility and cost-effectiveness of online media as compared to mainstream platforms.

In terms of early digital efforts, Garrison (2012) identifies Jai Hind!, launched in 2009 as India's first online late-night political comedy show, noted for its unapologetic stance on social and religious fundamentalism. The rise of dedicated comedy venues such as Canvas Laugh Club (2008) and The Comedy Store (2010) played a crucial role in shaping stand-up as a recognized platform for political expression in India (Mishra, 2019). Alongside these spaces, digital media created opportunities for a new generation of comedians, including Biswa Kalyan Rath, Zakir Khan, Tanmay Bhat, and Kunal Kamra, many of whom first drew attention through viral YouTube performances or later on OTT platforms like Netflix and Amazon Prime (ANI, 2017). Online shows further expanded this space. EIC Outrage, for instance, reviewed weekly news stories with a humorous spin, while On Air with AIB, under the tagline "Tragedy mein Comedy Hai," tackled social and political issues with sharp satire. At the

same time, Being Indian's Aisi Taisi Democracy blended political critique with light, accessible comedy, helping widen the reach of the genre in the digital sphere. Individual performers such as Kunal Kamra, Vir Das, Munawar Faruqui, and Shyam Rangeela also built strong personal followings through their social media presence, using humor to challenge political leaders, institutions, and contemporary events.

Another newer format that emerged in a digital age on various social media platforms are "memes". The Oxford Learner's Dictionary (nd.) defines it as "an image, a video, a piece of text, etc. that is passed very quickly from one internet user to another, often with slight changes that make it humorous." Prior to 2014 General Elections, memes were mostly known for their satirical takes on popular genres like cricket and Bollywood (Dixit, 2024). The circulation of political memes of social media were sporadic, surfacing occasionally to take jibe on the controversial cases like Anna Hazare's Protest for Jan Lokpal Bill (anti-corruption bill) and 2G Spectrum Case. However, political memes seems to have visibly gained impetus around 2014 General Elections, during the social media campaigns of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) candidate, Narendra Modi. BJP harnessed the power of "memes" for mass appeal and actively used it as new age digital propaganda tool (Ganguly, 2024). Gradually, a systematic political discourse began to flourish through meme culture all over Facebook and Twitter. They are also shared rapidly over the WhatsApp groups and Instagram, wherein the elements of humor and amusement, end up garnering attention towards topical political issue of even those who are otherwise not interested in politics like young and apolitical users (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006).

The growing online audience for digital satirists points to their potential role in shaping public conversations, though systematic studies on their actual impact remain scarce. Existing research on Indian digital satire generally identifies four broad strands: satirical videos (Punathambekar, 2015; Kumar, 2015; Badola, 2018), stand-up comedy (Paul, 2017; Saxena & Ofori-Parku, 2024; Singh, 2024), memes (Kumar, 2015; Kulkarni, 2017; Baishya, 2021), and parody news sites (Kumar, 2015). In Contagious Memes, Viral Videos, and Subversive Parody, Kumar (2015) describes digital satire as "repetition with a difference," where political themes are reshaped through participatory media formats that increase both visibility and engagement. He narrows this down to three dominant forms; viral videos, memes, and parody websites that are often lead by collectives like AIB, TVF, and EIC.

Punathambekar (2015) further underlines satire's electoral resonance, noting how works such as Nayak 2 inserted humor into the 2014 political landscape by spotlighting issues of corruption, caste inequalities, and nationalism. Such interventions, he argues, transformed election campaigns into moments of deeper political reflection. More broadly, the spread of humor through SMS jokes, memes, parody Twitter accounts, and YouTube skits shows the increasingly networked and intertextual character of digital political comedy in India.

Comedy venues such as *Canvas Laugh Club* (2008) and *The Comedy Store* (2010) represented more than just new stages for stand-up. They signaled a shift in how comedy could operate as a forum for political commentary in India (Mishra, 2019). These spaces, alongside the sudden accessibility of digital platforms, helped launch performers like Biswa Kalyan Rath, Zakir Khan, Tanmay Bhat, and Kunal Kamra into the public imagination. A lot of their visibility came not from traditional television but from viral YouTube clips or, later, specials on Netflix and Amazon Prime (ANI, 2017).

Online shows provide another layer to this story. *EIC Outrage* offered snappy, week-by-week takes on the news, while *On Air with AIB*, carrying the intriguingly blunt tagline "*Tragedy mein Comedy Hai*", leaned into heavier political and social themes, though always through the filter of satire. Around the same time, *Being Indian's Aisi Taisi Democracy* managed to pair accessible humor with pointed political critique, quietly broadening the audience for satire online.

Of course, the scene hasn't just been shaped by collectives. Individual comics like Kunal Kamra with his persistent jabs at politicians, Vir Das with his more global perspective, Munawar Faruqui with his sharp edge, and Shyam Rangeela's uncanny impersonations, have all carved space for themselves by using social media as both stage and amplifier. Their growing followings tend to indicate an ability to shape or at least nudge public discourse. Scholars tend to group Indian digital satire into four main categories: satirical videos (Punathambekar, 2015; Kumar, 2015; Badola, 2018), stand-up comedy (Paul, 2017; Saxena & Ofori-Parku, 2024; Singh, 2024), memes (Kumar, 2015; Kulkarni, 2017; Baishya, 2021, Parray, 2021), and parody news sites (Kumar, 2015).

In "*Contagious Memes, Viral Videos, and Subversive Parody*", Kumar (2015) intriguingly frames digital satire as "repetition with a difference": political tropes recycled and reframed through participatory media in ways that boost visibility and engagement. He identifies three recurring modes, i.e., viral videos, memes, and parody websites that are often associated with creative collectives like AIB, TVF, and EIC. Punathambekar (2015) goes a step further by stressing satire's role in moments of electoral intensity. He points to examples like *Nayak 2*, a video that circulated widely in the introduction to the 2014 elections, which tackled corruption, caste, and nationalism in ways that arguably kept those issues alive in public debate beyond the campaign season itself. More broadly, the spread of jokes through SMS forwards, the rise of meme culture, parody Twitter handles, and the constant churn of YouTube political sketches suggest that digital humor in India is becoming increasingly intertextual and networked. What once might have been a throwaway joke in a small gathering now ricochets across platforms, sometimes shaping how politics itself is remembered and discussed.

Paul (2017) conceptualizes English-language stand-up as a "new public sphere" where political and cultural critiques are delivered through humor, inviting audience responses via applause, silence, comments, or social media engagement. These are supported by recent

researchers like Saxena and Ofori-Parku (2024), who note that digital political satire encourages critical thinking and civic participation, particularly among digitally native content consumers aligned with their ideological persuasion through YouTube and meme-based sites.

Baishya (2021), on the other hand, examines how memes are a vernacular form of critique of Hindu nationalism and demonstrates how digital satire is used as a low-risk form of dissent in increasingly autocratic environments. Indian stand-up comedy has also turned into a politically charged genre. Singh (2024) traces the legal, religious, and ideological boundaries within which Indian comedians operate, specifically when they employ satire on political elites and religious orthodoxy. The tensions were brutally illustrated in cases like Munawar Faruqui's arrest and the Supreme Court contempt case of Kunal Kamra. Patel (2024) theorizes comedians as "parrhesiastes" (truth-tellers) who are suspended between criticism and complicity in neoliberal media economies.

However, some studies temper the perceived influence of digital satire. Kulkarni's (2017) survey-based research on political memes concludes that internet humor has limited effect on political decision-making, with 64% of respondents rejecting a direct link between meme consumption and voting behavior. Instead, political opinions appear more influenced by party manifestos, televised debates, and mainstream news.

The emergence of social media algorithms has also altered the landscape of the efficacy of political satire in India in terms of public engagement and discourse. The algorithms utilized by social media platforms can create echo chambers that privilege certain messages, while concurrently suppressing others. Therefore, political satire released via social media might not impact agendas or effect public discussion regarding political issues, but rather privilege certain biases. (Klinger, 2023). Additionally, with the rise of political satire correlated with stand-up comedy and memes, political satire is serving as an alternative journalism form that pushes back against traditional media (Anto & Vyas, 2023) and blossoms public discourse around political matters. Social media can be a fruitful site for both political engagement, but this comes with a vast set of simultaneous drawbacks. The tension between these two worlds (algorithmic influence, satirical engagement and satire as a form of journalism) raises a myriad of benefits and challenges (Mazumdar, 2024). Mehta and Kaye (2021) illustrate how Indian digital producers engage in "platform labor," wherein content creation, such as comedy, is tied to algorithmic demands and audience management. The tension between comedy, going viral, and social responsibility is a new issue in this arena. Other scholars also relate digital satire to platform affordances. Boxman-Shabtai (2019), for example, speaks of YouTube parody as a hybridized cultural site wherein aesthetics, activism, and algorithmic exposure entwine. During times of crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic, satire not just acted as criticism but also as catharsis. Parray (2021) speaks of how memes that circulated during India's lockdown acted as both comic relief and sociopolitical critique. However, regardless of its potential, digital satire also comes with consequences; creators are subject to algorithmic

censorship, coordinated reporting, and informal suppression. Data from Saxena & Ofori-Parku (2024) suggests that political satire is being viewed with concern by audiences in India as a way of engaging with politics, particularly with satirical content aimed at majoritarianism. While platforms such as Instagram and YouTube have vague content moderation policies the algorithmic result has often seen political content deprioritized through shadow-banning, which is restricting critical voices (Udupa, 2018). Despite the fact that these digital formats allowed possibilities for political critique, often it was at the expense of commercial priorities and this led to a form of selective political engagement, what Baishya (2021) identifies as "memetic affect," the practice of permissibility of content shaped by virality more than civic engagement.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE SCOPES

A systematic analysis of the available literature on the evolution of political comedy, especially in the context of India, suggests that political comedy serves as a medium of political resistance and criticism since its inception in the state, irrespective of the medium chosen for its propagation. Looking at the prior works, there is no denial that the phenomenon has witnessed a gradual yet consistent development not just in terms of the magnitude of contents but also in a variety of formats, amount of gained attention or consumption, and apparently in the scale of its possible effects. However, there has been a serious lack of substantial studies regarding the extent of influence and efficacy of political comedy. Although the secondary resources provide clarity on the fact that political comedy, especially in the contemporary digital era does more than just amusing and entertaining people, like drawing attention towards the long-standing political issues, unveiling the double-standards of the politicians, and hence act as a competent tool to enhance political sophistication, what remains ambiguous are the ethical aspects that need to be addressed, keeping in mind the upsurge in the number of such contents and creators as well as growing ease in accessing them. Also, looking forward, research on political satire in India ought to shift from describing political satire to interdisciplinary, empirical, and comparative work. Quantitative and mixed-method studies must develop into findings on how satire has changed behaviour towards media literacy, political behaviours and voting behavior. There are other forms of studies that scholars should explore, the structure of satire when we consider the changing agenda-setter under the condition of digital publics, especially during election cycles and times of socio-political crises in India. Finally, we need studies that analyse the role that platform structures including content moderation, links and recommendation algorithms play in amplification or silencing political humour and satire. This is especially vital in an increasing atmosphere of algorithmic curation. Eventually, this concern leads us to question the magnitude of the effect political comedy (online political comedy in particular) may have in persuading the political opinions and political decisions of the people of India. Hence, cues can be drawn from the intellectual discussions and studies taking place around the globe, especially in western countries which can be utilized to

approach online political comedy from the critical lens of a) medium of political engagement (Kucera, 2015), b) agenda-setting (Boukes, 2019), c) propaganda, etc. and incorporated within Indian settings while keeping a careful consideration on the differences in the nuances of socio-cultural and political milieu.

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