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Comedy as Resistance:
Indian Stand-Up Comedians and Their Fight
Against India's Anti-Democratic Tendencies

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Zusammenfassung

Die vorliegende Arbeit *Comedy as Resistance – Indian Stand-Up Comedians and Their Fight Against India's Anti-Democratic Tendencies* beschäftigt sich mit der Frage, ob und inwiefern Stand-Up Comedy in Indien als Mittel zum sozio-politischen Widerstand genutzt wird und wie weitreichend dieser Widerstand einzuschätzen ist. Um diese Frage zu beantworten werden zunächst die Merkmale des Genres sowie ihre Funktionen untersucht, um herauszustellen, weshalb sich besonders Stand-Up Comedy dafür eignet, indirekten politischen Widerstand zu leisten. Auch die Geschichte des satirischen Widerstandes und des Genres Stand-Up Comedy im indischen Kontext sowie die soziale Spaltung der Gesellschaft, die durch verschiedene Konflikte zum Ausdruck gebracht wird und sich auch in der Stand-Up Comedy widerspiegelt, werden hierzu beleuchtet. Hier wird deutlich, dass die Zielgruppe, bedingt durch die gesellschaftliche Spaltung, relativ gefestigt ist und prozentual gesehen nur eine Minderheit überhaupt Zugang zur Stand-Up Comedy hat. Gleichzeitig befindet sich die Szene jedoch auch in einem Dilemma: da unter der aktuellen Hindunationalistischen Regierung eine zunehmende Zensur der Meinungsfreiheit stattfindet, ist es für politisch orientierte Stand-Up Comedians der sicherste Weg, ihr Programm in Englisch zu halten und über das Internet zu verbreiten. Somit wird die potenzielle Zielgruppe derer, die hierdurch beeinflusst werden können, klein gehalten und die Comedians stellen keine ernsthafte Gefahr für die Regierung dar.

Schließlich wird in einer Analyse von Stand-Up Clips diverser indischer Stand-Up Comedians auf Youtube herausgestellt, welches die dominierenden Themen in Hinsicht auf die soziopolitische Lage sind und wie mit dem Risiko, zensiert zu werden, umgegangen wird. Es wird beleuchtet, wie die Themen aufbereitet werden und welche Stimmen der indischen Gesellschaft hierdurch repräsentiert werden. Es wird deutlich, dass die Comedians sehr unterschiedliche und kreative Stile haben, um auf die momentanen gesellschaftlichen Missstände aufmerksam zu machen und nicht davor zurückschrecken, sich auch über Premierminister Narendra Modi lustig zu machen. Dennoch stellt sich in vielen Bits heraus, dass die Art und Weise mit der die Themen aufbereitet werden, vor allem die urbanen, gebildeten und Englisch-sprechenden Mittel- und Oberschichten ansprechen und die weniger gebildeten, eher rural situierten Unterschichten vom Diskurs des humorvollen Widerstandes, ob gewollt oder ungewollt, weitgehend ausgeschlossen werden.

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1 Introduction

[A] few laughs and hecklers later, you go home after the show, open social media, find a meme about you with a caption “Congress ka Kutta¹”. You, my friend, are no longer a comedian. You are now an opinion-maker, a person many love to hate. (Kamra)

In January of 2018, *Indian Express* published a column written by stand-up comedian Kunal Kamra. In this column, that almost reads as an open letter to the Indian public, he writes about the hardships that a political stand-up comedian has to face and stresses the Indian society’s need for political comedy. He urges the public and his colleagues in the scene in particular to reflect on the currently conflicted socio-political climate and what role they want to take on in this conflict (Kamra). Kamra wrote this column about one year after having received major backlash for a stand-up video where, in Hindi, he mocks Indian patriotism and depicts it as a result of the government’s brainwashing. Apart from receiving hate and even death threats from the public, he was asked by his landlady to move out of his apartment in Mumbai and failed to get further show contracts for the time following (Das; Kamra; “Comedian”).

Kunal Kamra’s example shows that there are some worrisome political developments currently happening in India that are also affecting the stand-up comedy scene. The reasons for this are manifold. First of all, the stand-up comedy scene in India has only emerged about one and a half decades ago and the public is only in the course of getting used to this Western genre and its styles of humor. Stand-up comedy is thus prone to be misunderstood and offend inexperienced audiences. Furthermore, despite being a democracy, the country has been experiencing a drastic political shift towards the right in the past 20 years and several democratic rights are increasingly at stake, with particular regard to the freedom of speech and expression. With Narendra Modi and the BJP at the government’s head since 2014, India is led by a prime minister with autocratic traits who prioritizes the enforcement of a right-wing Hindu nationalist agenda that increasingly pits Hindus and non-Hindus against each other. Since its first rise to power in 1998, the BJP has unofficially been trying to push for a mono-nationalism that seeks to exclude non-Hindu influences from the Indian society.

¹ Hindi: “Congress dog”, derogative name for a person who favors the INC over other parties.

Historical narratives that involve achievements of other religious or ethnic groups are increasingly being changed towards a Hindu-nationalist narrative by seeking Hindu origins for them (Pathak). While this political shift also affects the members of the lower castes, it mainly turns against religious minorities with Muslims in particular having to suffer, and the Indo-Pakistani conflict has exacerbated significantly. Perry Anderson argues that even with Gandhi, religion had always played a decisive role in the creation of the post-colonial nation and its democracy but this role was never openly acknowledged or confronted. Accordingly, it was easy for the BJP to finally overtake the other parties as the BJP did not shy away to appeal to the passionate religious feelings that had always been present in the nationalist movements but that had neither been acknowledged nor rejected (Anderson 4-5). Nevertheless, critical voices do exist and there is particularly a number of stand-up comedians who advocate for the use of the stage and the attention to raise awareness of the country's grievances. In modern India, a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country of an immense population that is going through the struggle of finding a balance between its colonial legacy, native traditions, rapid globalization and a neo-fascist political movement, political stand-up comedy seems to be the valve that came to India just in time.

In my thesis, I want to particularly focus on the ways in which Indian stand-up comedy is used as a platform for resistance in times of high political tension. How does stand-up comedy work and what makes it effective as a platform of resistance? How do the comedians use the genre's potential? What do they denounce and why? What characterizes the stand-up scene and what problems does it face? How do the stand-up comedians deal with the societal divide? What potential does the resistance have that they offer in their comedy? Considering that stand-up comedy is a genre that is still fairly new to India, comprehensive academic works written on its particularities in the Indian context do not yet exist. Nevertheless, the works of two scholars in particular have provided helpful, albeit limited insights. A text that offers a general overview about Indian stand-up comedy is the journal article "A new public sphere? English-language stand-up comedy in India" by Subin Paul which deals with the development and the potential of the Indian stand-up scene with particular regard to Anglophone Indian stand-up comedy. While the article offers a good general overview of the subject matter, it does not include content on stand-up comedy within the context of the government's anti-democratic tendencies. The anthology text "Transgressing

Boundaries as the Hybrid Global: Parody and Postcoloniality on Indian Television” by Sangeet Kumar provides deeper insight into political satire and its target groups against the background of the diversely divided Indian society. However, considering that it was published in 2013, the developments after the elections of 2014 and the increasing censorship are not taken into account. Furthermore, the analysis focuses on satirical television shows. The work that has provided the most thorough insight into the problems that Indian stand-up comedy is currently facing is the documentary *I am offended* by Jaideep Varma. Albeit non-academic, the content stands out due to its authenticity. The narrative is uniquely constituted by the statements of both Anglophone and Hindi stand-up comedians, satirists and cartoonists with regard to the diverse hardships in socio-political entertainment. Although the documentary highlights many aspects of satire’s current status quo, it often fails to provide a deeper analysis of these factors. Due to the incompleteness of the theoretical foundation on the topic, many of the findings reflected in this thesis result from a six-week field trip to India where I had the opportunity to gain insight into the Indian society and its stand-up comedy scene through interviews with stand-up comedians, the attendance of live stand-up shows and regular everyday encounters. While I initially wanted to include an analysis of how India’s postcolonial legacy finds expression in stand-up comedy, I ended up finding the current socio-political circumstances to be of an incomparably higher relevance and thus decided to change the focus of my research. Accordingly, in addition to the experiences and insights from the field trip, I will take online newspaper articles into account to back up my analysis with the context of respective political events.

In order to provide a comprehensive approach to my topic, I am first going to take on a theoretical approach to stand-up comedy in chapter two. I will examine the characteristics of stand-up comedy by taking into account both the audience as well as the factors that a stand-up comedian has to consider in order to entertain their audience. This theory constitutes the basis for understanding how the stand-up comedian is able to obtain social agency. I will then investigate the functions of humor in the context of resistance to emphasize why it can be effective despite, or precisely because of its non-violent nature.

In chapter three, I will examine stand-up comedy specifically with regard to the Indian context. Considering that India has a very recent history of stand-up comedy, I

will trace how the beginnings of this genre came about in India and in which ways it has added a new face to the country's entertainment scene. In order to examine the current status of Indian stand-up comedy and the problems that it faces in times of increased socio-political tension, I will furthermore analyze the factors that demarcate stand-up comedy's target group. I will do so by taking into account the language and humor literacy and the internet accessibility among the Indian population while also highlighting the role that the increased censorship plays that is increasingly being imposed by the current government. The complex interplay of history, politics and culture make it hard for political stand-up comedians to extend their potential audience.

Finally, in chapter four, I will analyze videotaped Indian political stand-up bits that can be found on Youtube. I chose Youtube as a source because it constitutes the largest platform for comedians to upload their work. Furthermore, it is easiest accessible to the virtual audience due to the absence of the financial barriers that platforms such as Netflix and Amazon Prime impose. For my analysis I will take up examples of the topics that are most commonly talked about in political stand-up comedy with the aim of examining the approach of the comedians towards the topics: What exactly do they denounce and why? What measures do the stand-up comedians take to escape subsequent censorship and other consequences? What humorous mechanisms do they use to speak truth to power and who is the audience that they appeal to? In order to provide a wholesome understanding of the political grievances, I will furthermore illustrate the respective socio-political context.

Before I proceed, a number of matters must be clarified with regard to the limitations of this thesis. Given that the origins of Indian stand-up comedy lie mainly in the United States as well as Great Britain, the Indian stand-up scene is predominantly English-speaking. Although a Hindi-speaking scene as well as smaller scenes in regional languages have developed in recent years, I will put my focus on the Anglophone scene due to my lack of skills in Hindi and other Indian languages. It must be stressed that Indian stand-up comedy is not necessarily political, although I will mainly take this style of stand-up comedy into account, given the topic of my thesis. Finally, considering that I as the author of this thesis have been socialized in a predominantly White environment with Western ideas and values, my take on Indian political stand-up comedy will inevitably be colored by a Western perspective.

2 A Theoretical Approach to Stand-Up Comedy

Stand-up comedy is only in the course of finding its feet in academic discourse and so far, there are only few works concerning this subject, the most comprehensive one of which possibly being *A Vulgar Art – A New Approach to Stand-Up Comedy* by Ian Brodie, professor of folklore at Cape Breton University. In a folkloristic approach, Brodie defines stand-up comedy as “a form of talk [that] implies a context that allows for reaction, participation, and engagement on the part of those to whom the stand-up comedian is speaking.” Although the stand-up comic is undeniably the center of attention, this talk in form of a dialogue is “performed not to but with an audience” (Brodie 5). More than other scholars, Brodie particularly stresses the intercommunicative aspect of stand-up comedy. According to him, stand-up comedy is always an interplay between two parties that thrive on the actions and reactions of one another. As a result, no show is the same as the other, even if the stand-up comedian and the set are the same. Especially for my paper, it is crucial to consider the dialogic form that characterizes stand-up, because the audience plays a fundamental role when it comes to the creation of resistance. Before examining the potential for resistance that stand-up comedy offers, its workings shall be examined in detail in order to provide an understanding of the genre itself.

2.1 Characteristics of Stand-Up Comedy and Their Functions

According to Brodie, stand-up comedy resembles a face-to-face talk between one comedian and their audience with the comedian primarily leading the conversation. The intimacy of this talk is professionalized through the distance that exists between the comedian (who is typically only equipped with a microphone) and the audience. There are several factors that cause this distance. First of all, there is a spatial distance as the comedian usually stands on stage, or, at least, has an area for themselves that is separated from the area where the audience sits or stands. This distance becomes spatiotemporal if the show is being watched or listened to via a record. Finally, a sociocultural aspect may be added to this distance if the comedian comes from a different social or cultural background than the audience (Brodie 5-6). Moreover, the audience itself is unlikely to be a homogenous group of people. Hence, the first challenge that the comedian has to overcome at the start of every show is to understand the nature of their audience and to

establish a common ground. There are several ways in which this is typically done. First of all, before the show starts, a pre-act, usually a newcomer comedian, will entertain the audience for about five to ten minutes. This allows the main comedian to get an impression of the atmosphere in the audience as well as the topics that tend to generate the most laughs. Secondly, once the main comedian comes on stage, they will then usually ask individual people and the audience as a whole playful questions and slightly tease them. By understanding what kind of topics the audience responds to best, it is easier for the comedian to deploy their repertoire of stories deliberately. Thirdly, it is a typical practice in stand-up comedy to create a shared worldview by building up the stories on a counter-hegemonic discourse (Brodie 15) to create a feeling of “us against the world”. Collective laughter then further reinforces the sense of unity and of a shared worldview among the audience (Mintz 78-79, Brodie 16-17).

The aspect most central to the art of stand-up is humor. According to Brodie, humor emerges through the comedian “grounding [the stories] in an experiential, proto-ethnographic act; reflective, by endeavoring to interpret that experience; perspectival, by taking a particular position for interpretation; critical, by privileging that position; and, above all, vernacular, by locating it in the local rather than the universal.” In order to evoke positive reactions from the audience, the stand-up comedian does not simply tell jokes or imitate funny characters on stage. The set that he or she presents for a show is constituted by an arbitrary amount of stories that typically emerge from the comedian’s own point of view and that are observational and biographical. One of the most important characteristics of these stories is their improvisational nature as this creates the impression that the comedian authentically speaks their mind (Brodie 13-15). Furthermore, the topics that a stand-up comedian talks about have to appear relevant and be relatable to the audience. This relatability significantly depends on the locality of the audience (Brodie 162). A comedian who successfully mocks the particularities of Bangalore in front of a Bangalore audience is unlikely to harvest the same amount of laughter from a Delhi audience, let alone an international audience from outside of India – unless these particularities are put in perspective with the particularities of the respective city or country of performance.

Mary Douglas points out that the perception of an utterance as funny cannot just be ascribed to the utterance itself. The social context as well as the process of the

production of a humorous utterance play a crucial role in the creation of the punch line that makes the story funny (qtd. in Mintz 73). Several humor theorists such as Bergson, Freud and Oring have noted that

the humorous is the revelation of (by the performer) or a reaction to (by audiences) a physical, intellectual, social, moral, or emotional incongruity that could just as easily elicit feelings of terror (...). Both the context and manner in which the humorous observation is made is what differentiates the humorous from the tragic. (qtd. in Brodie 6)

In order for an incongruity to be perceived as humorous instead of eliciting negative feelings, the stories do not only have to be based on topics that are relatable to the audience. The comedian also needs to be in a position where it is legitimate for them to reveal incongruities. They are thus required to convey the impression of having the knowledge and of being in an appropriate position to examine and judge the topics dealt with on stage (Brodie 6). A comedian who mocks a politician based on made up facts will likely not be perceived as funny. Depending on the benevolence of the audience, it is possible that the comedian crosses a border that irreconcilably destroys the balance between distance and intimacy (8). It needs to be stressed that a sociocultural distance and even opposing beliefs between the comedian and the audience do not necessarily constitute a problem (17). Teasing sensibilities and raising feelings of discomfort among the audience are common practices in stand-up comedy, but this can only be successful if the comedian manages to always reestablish the unity between them and the audience after having maxed out the boundaries.

Stand-up comedy's first and foremost purpose is entertainment, and the audience, who has paid money for the show, accordingly expects to be rewarded for the financial effort. It is thus the comedian's aim to evoke positive reactions from the audience as it is the audience's reaction that confirms whether a comedian is successful at establishing a connection and creating intimacy between themselves and the audience. Positive reactions can include nodding in agreement, applause, verbal encouragement (Mintz 79) and, most importantly, laughter. The stand-up act thrives upon the laughter and positive response of the audience and the energy of the comedian and the audience can influence each other in both negative and positive ways. Once the audience has accepted the comedian as their entertainer, they have to reward him with laughter: "the

audience expects to laugh, and the comedian has a professional obligation to effect that laughter. Conversely, if the stand-up comedian is interpreted as funny, he or she has a right to hear laughter in response and the audience has the obligation to laugh (Brodie 217).” However, the laughter of the audience is more than just a mere reward. Douglas notes that in stand-up comedy, the social attitudes and beliefs that the comedian represents are being affirmed and reexamined by the audience (qtd. in Mintz 73). Therefore, laughter can also indicate that the audience agrees with the views of the comedian. It should be stressed here that the content of stand-up comedy, whether political or not, is largely focused on familiar aspects of the everyday life and completely new revelations are rare. The evocation of laughter is thus not only dependent on the ability of the comedian to come up with unexpected topics, but rather on their ability to add unanticipated twists and turns to an anecdote (Brodie 6-7).

In *Taking Laughter Seriously*, John Morreal elaborates on different theories on the evocation of laughter. The oldest of these is the theory of superiority that assumes that people laugh in derision of the misfortune of others to mark their own superiority (Moreall 4-13). Indeed, it is a common practice for stand-up comics to play with their flaws on stage and to purposefully marginalize themselves. The comedian sometimes actively invites the audience to laugh at him or her in a feeling of superiority because this makes the comedian relatable, especially to those who have similar flaws. Nevertheless, there are instances of humorous laughter that stand in no relation to feelings of superiority (Moreall 4-13). The second theory that Moreall mentions is the theory of incongruity. This theory does not necessarily dismiss that feelings of superiority may be involved with laughter but it rather focuses on the cognitive dimension. According to Morreal, “for the incongruity theory amusement is an intellectual reaction to something that is unexpected, illogical, or inappropriate in some other way” (15). The incongruity theory is the one most referred to by humor theorists. As a third example, Moreall names the theory of relief that assumes that a person laughs in order to release nervous energy that has built up (23-25). It is undeniable that laughter releases tension. However, the reasons of why a person laughs are manifold and nervous energy may not always be the underlying emotion expressed in laughter. Both the first and the second theory focus on the emotional aspect of laughter. Nonetheless, for laughter to be elicited there needs to be a cognitive trigger. Therefore, I believe that the theory of incongruity applies best to the context of stand-up comedy because in this

genre, the trigger, more commonly referred to as the punch line, is an inherent component in the comedian's stories. It should be acknowledged that the reasons as to why incongruity is created vary and can be ascribed to different emotions, several of which may even simultaneously apply to a single act of laughter, with feelings of nervousness or of superiority being only some of them. Especially in stand-up comedy, where the audience usually consists of a large number of people, the impact of group dynamics has a significant impact on the creation of laughter. The emotions that are reflected in the audience's laughter depend on the individual's state of mind as well as the general atmosphere in the audience.

Before proceeding to explain how stand-up comedy can serve as a platform for resistance, it must be cautioned that all of the characteristics that have been mentioned so far cannot claim universality for every given stand-up act. Stand-up comedians all have individual styles of performance and accordingly, the typical characteristics of stand-up comedy may not apply to the same extent for each one of them.

2.2 Stand-Up Comedy as a Tool for Resistance

Concerning the concrete ways in which stand-up comedy can be used to create resistance to oppressive political circumstances two scholars in particular offer theories that allow me to undertake a multifaceted approach. In "Humor as a Serious Strategy of Nonviolent Resistance to Oppression", Majken Jul Sorensen particularly focuses on the workings of humorous resistance with the example of the Otpor activists in Serbia and provides thorough insight into the functions of humor in this regard. However, her work lacks a contextualization of humor within entertainment. In the journal article "The Stand-Up Comedian as Anthropologist: Intentional Cultural Critic", Stephanie Koziski examines the similarities between anthropologists and stand-up comedians and comes to the conclusion that both examine realities and share their views with an audience, with the difference that the comedian does so primarily in order to entertain while the anthropologist's central focus lies on sharing knowledge. Koziski's findings are of particular interest for this chapter because she puts particular focus on the way in which a comedian is able to influence an audience's perception of their environment.

The feeling of “us against the world” that I mentioned in the previous chapter is a major reason why the genre of stand-up comedy is well-suited to offer resistance against the existing societal system out of which the stand-up scene emerges. I argue that there are three elements in stand-up comedy that serve as tools in the creation of humorous resistance. These tools comprise the stage, the audience and humor itself. The stage is not a tool that can be actively employed by the comedian, but it quite literally serves as the ground on which the comedian can build. Its elevated position enables the person who enters it to stand out from the crowd and thus suggests to the people that the person on stage deserves their attention. The role that the stage in stand-up comedy plays grants the comedians a certain amount of freedom to speak their mind and spread their ideas. The stand-up comedian is in a position of power and can initiate processes of reflection among the audience by providing critical observations and revealing contradictions in the society’s status quo. If accepted by the audience, the comedian may even be able to implant his or her own opinions into the audience’s perception of reality (Koziski 65-66).

In order for these ideas to be reexamined and carried on, the audience constitutes another essential element. Political and satirical stand-up comedy has the potential to serve as a valve for anger and despair not only for the stand-up comedian but also for the audience (Koziski 72-73). It can contribute to ensuring the audience’s integrity in an environment that lacks order and that its members feel oppressed in. In a personal interview, stand-up comedian Daniel Fernandes remarks that in order to be entertained by satirical stand-up, one needs to be “in some kind of pain” (Appendix A) meaning that those who consciously take the decision to watch political satire and the like must also be affected by political grievances and seek a way of guided and communal mental processing. Victor Turner and Mary Douglas point out that in stand-up comedy the audience is provoked to challenge and modify old paradigms through the reexamination of beliefs and values, because the subversive tendency of a joke or humorous utterance has the potential to “tear down, distort, misrepresent, and reorder usual patterns of expression and perception” (qtd. in Mintz 73). Through the celebration of communal agreement with laughter, humor can unify and thus strengthen those who are affected by an ambiguous political system (Mintz 73, Weaver 34-35). This is why humor constitutes the third essential element in satirical stand-up comedy.

The remarkable thing about using humor as resistance is that it often comes disguised underneath the smoke screen of banter. There is an innocence to it that stands in contrast to the seriousness of the reality it mocks. Simon Weaver points out that satire, as opposed to direct protest, is a way of protest that has historically been largely without risk of consequences because the humorous utterances are often “too nebulous, too slippery to get one arrested” (Weaver 34). There are two basic requirements for humorous resistance to be effective and these also resemble the characteristics of stand-up comedy. First of all, jokes require incongruity as content (Weaver 35), meaning that there must be a discrepancy between how the ones in power depict reality and what the reality really is. Secondly, humorous resistance thrives upon authenticity. Therefore, observations and criticism about oppressive conditions and the drivers of these conditions must stick to the truth (Sorensen 181).

Sorensen identifies three ways in which humorous resistance can be understood. First of all, as opposed to other forms of resistance, humor attracts people. Humorous resistance thus has the potential to easily mobilize people, especially in situations that are so grave that people lose hope that anything could ever change. Secondly, by sharing the same jokes, for example, humor makes it easier to establish good relations and solidarity within a movement of resistance. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, the experience of shared laughter creates a feeling of unity and of shared identity and this is quite crucial for the political stand-up comedian to encourage the audience’s reflection. Finally, the third function that humor can have in creating resistance is to turn oppression upside down by directly taking on the relation between resistance and oppression: humor has the ability to nonviolently escalate a conflict by provocation through mockery and ridicule, because provocation pressures the oppressor to react. At the same time, humor tends to get the oppressor hoist with their own petard, and therefore, the oppressor’s options for a justifiable reaction are limited. While this does not eradicate the possibility of a violent response, a violent reaction would nevertheless make the oppressor look ridiculous and likely provoke further mockery (Sorensen 175-184). Interestingly, the mockery of things that evoke fear paradoxically reduces the fear, or as Sorensen points out, “[it] is a very simple logic; it is more difficult to be afraid of someone when you laugh at him” (Sorensen 180). It is precisely because resistance and oppression are closely linked to each other that the question as to whether a resistance will be successful or not, largely depends on the oppressor’s reactions. Although

Sorensen analyzes humor against the background of political activism, the theory of how humor can serve as an effective tool for resistance also adapts to the context of stand-up comedy. Humorous resistance in stand-up comedy may not possess the potential to immediately overthrow an oppressive system, but it does have the ability to evoke a mindset of resistance. Humor offers astute, and most importantly, nonviolent ways to set a mark while at the same time reducing the risk of consequences for the comedian by using humor as a protective shield to render their utterances ambiguous.

In this chapter, I examined the general functions of stand-up comedy and the roles of the comedian and the audience as well as the way in which humor can be used in resistance. To sum up both subchapters in one, it can be said that political humor is the main tool for resistance with which the comedian operates, witnessed, supported and potentially spread by the audience, and to which the genre of stand-up comedy with its characteristic setting constitutes the platform. In order to be able to embed the theory into the Indian context, I will proceed by taking a closer look at Indian stand-up comedy and the framework that surrounds it.

3 Stand-Up Comedy and Political Satire in India

Stand-up comedy and political satire both have their unique history in the Indian context and have existed separately until rather recently. The common element that they both build on is humor. Given the history, the genre of stand-up comedy has added a new innovative way for Indian satirists to speak truth to power and has given humorous resistance a new face.

3.1 The History of Indian Stand-Up Comedy

Political commentary and resistance through humor have existed in India long before the genre of stand-up comedy found its feet in the country (Appendix D). Early evidence of the history of humor have been found in the *Natyashastra*, a comprehensive work containing texts about the theory of drama that date back to about 2000 years ago. The *Natyashastra* contains several descriptions of how laughter can be elicited and it continues to serve as inspiration for contemporary Indian theater (Kumar 81). Raja Birbal, a famous courtier of Mughal emperor Akbar in the 16th century, is known up until this day for his ability to solve problems through his wit and sense of humor. He and his tales constitute some of the first prominent examples of resistance through humor in Indian history (Varma 00:10:14-00:10:23; Kumar 81). The documentation of humorous political satire and resistance becomes more comprehensive after the invasion of the British in India. Many Indian newspapers were founded during that time. These newspapers, inter alia, were used to mobilize resistance against the British and the system that they had established. These also did not spare those Indians who were obedient to this system from criticism. Satire and political cartoons thus played a major role in the independence movement (Kumar 81).

Humorous resistance was not only limited to written media. Examples of resistance in Indian theater as Nandi Bhatia has documented in her work *Acts of Authority/ Acts of Resistance – Theater and Politics in Colonial and Postcolonial India* show that political resistance in art and entertainment have had a place on stage long before the emergence of stand-up comedy. Bhatia points out that during the colonial times, theater served as a space to raise awareness for the social and political injustice of the British rule and to mobilize communal action against their oppression. Drama

offered an effective way of spreading oral resistance amongst a mostly illiterate population (Bhatia 1-6). Even after Independence, Indian theater continued to challenge the existing political and societal system by especially targeting religious, gender and caste discrimination, all of which continued to persist despite the mythical claims of national unity in postcolonial India (Bhatia 97-106). But how did stand-up comedy develop in India and how did it change the form of resistance through art and entertainment?

For a long time, it was unthinkable that a single person on a stage making people laugh could constitute a viable genre of entertainment in itself (Varma 00:12:03-00:12:27). While humorous poets have existed in India for a long time (Appendix A), humorous entertainment first became part of the film industry after its potential to attract spectators had been recognized. As a result, mimicry and comic characters became popular props in Indian movies. Comic actors such as Rajendra Nath, Mehmood Ali and Johnny Walker obtained widespread recognition for their comic timing and their ability to improvise instead of sticking to a movie script (00:53:34-00:54:34). The comedy and mimicry in the films soon inspired the first comedy shows on stage, although at first, these only served as break fillers during different kinds of show events. It was not until Johnny Lever entered the stage in the 1980s with his one-hour show *Kabbadi* that Hindi comedy became a form of entertainment that was largely detached from other genres of entertainment (Varma 00:11:00-00:12:00). The emergence of television broadcasting in India allowed for these comedy shows to be received by a significantly larger audience. However, Hindi comedy was still very different from the genre of stand-up comedy, although at present, they have influenced each other to a certain extent. As opposed to stand-up comedy, in Hindi comedy the comedian does not share his or her own stories and ideas but presents slapstick comedy that mainly consists of telling jokes and mimicking characters. Hindi comedy refrains from taking up sociopolitical topics, let alone ideas of resistance, and thus lacks the straightforwardness of stand-up comedy (Varma 00:26:52-00:27:20). It is important to note that although the emergence of Hindi comedy paved the way for humorous entertainment on stage, it nevertheless continues to exist separately from stand-up comedy.

The beginning of the genre of stand-up comedy in India, as it has developed in the West, is generally said to have been marked when Vir Das came to Delhi to perform a show in 2003. Vir Das, a young man with Indian roots, had studied in the US and had

previously started a small career as a stand-up comedian at open-mic nights in Chicago. The success of his show sparked a great enthusiasm for this new genre of comedy and inspired many to pursue a career in the scene themselves. With his shows that were inspired by the rougher and more vulgar American stand-up humor, Das introduced a new kind of humor to the Indian stage comedy scene (Varma 00:12:57-00:16:34) that, at that time, had been dominated by what satirist and author Jug Suraiya refers to as “watching a fat man slip on a banana peel” (01:24:43-01:24:49). In 2005, the video platform YouTube was launched and set a further cornerstone in the spreading of stand-up comedy in India. As a result, video clips of stand-up comedians of the Indian Diaspora such as Indo-Canadian comedian Russell Peters were able to attract further attention in India and caused the demand for Anglophone Western comedy to increase (Paul 122-123; Varma 00:12:27-00:12:55). According to Subin Paul, the global recession in 2008 led to a significant rise in popularity for stand-up comedy after a large number of Non-Resident Indians had returned to India from the West. Meanwhile, the Indian economy was booming, which especially benefitted the middle class (Appendix D). Globalization and the expansion of multi-national companies also led many foreign professionals to move to India. Both of these groups were already familiar with the genre of stand-comedy and brought Western tastes and ideas to India, paired with cultural and economic capital. These factors created a demand that helped establish Indian stand-up comedy as a profitable industry that increasingly attracted more performers and bigger audiences (Paul 123).

According to Vir Das, by now, stand-up comedy is “finally a viable entertainment option to live music, or going out clubbing, or [going out to see a] movie. It’s worth your Friday night’s cash” (Varma 00:16:54-00:17:01). At the same time, Indian humor has evolved and the boundaries to which humor and jokes can go are starting to become more flexible. Thanks to the work of Indian stand-up pioneers such as Vir Das and Papa CJ, whose styles are largely influenced by British and American stand-up humor, sarcasm, satire, vulgarity and an overall darker humor are in the course of finding their feet in India, especially among the younger generation (00:56:02-00:56:06). However, despite the growth of stand-up comedy, mimicry and slapstick comedy still remain the most popular forms of comedy among the Indian masses and elements of these have even found their way into stand-up comedy. Thus, Indian stand-up comedy at its present state is not merely an unfiltered product of globalization. India’s stand-up scene is creative and innovative precisely because Indian stand-up

comics have discovered their own country and environment as a source for inspiration and observation (00:22:54-00:23:04) and have recognized the genre's potential to raise awareness for sociopolitical issues. In recent years, stand-up comedy in Hindi and other Indian languages has become popular and regional scenes are in the course of development and have a high future potential (Appendix A; B; C). It should be noted that regardless of whether a stand-up comedian speaks English or Hindi on stage, both are typically mixed with words and phrases of the other language. This language mixture is also referred to as *Hinglish*. The code-switching has several purposes. In predominantly English stand-up comedy, the punch line of a story is often presented in Hindi because in this way, the joke is easier to understand and becomes more relatable to an audience whose mother tongue or second language, in most cases, is Hindi. At the same time, it facilitates the comic timing for the comedian themselves. Considering that the comedian observes and reflects an Indian reality, many utterances are only authentic when expressed in the according language (Appendix B; C). This is supported by the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis that argues that a language influences the conceptualizations with which a linguistic community makes sense of their environment (Munday 60). English and Hindi both comprise expressions and utterances whose connotations are inextricably tied to the respective language. Hindi in particular is regarded as less suitable in stand-up comedy for vulgar topics and swearing (Appendix E). In these cases, code-switching can avoid for an utterance to be misinterpreted.

Especially in thriving and modern cities with large populations such as Mumbai, Delhi and Bengaluru, the demand for stand-up comedy by far exceeds the supply. According to Nishant Tanwar, currently in India, "comedians are like rock stars" (Appendix B), which shows that people by now consider stand-up comedians as fully adequate entertainers and look up to them. This is quite essential especially with regard to the potential of stand-up comedy to serve as a platform for resistance. Youtube in particular has played a crucial role in the popularization of stand-up comedy in India. Especially the new generation of stand-up comedians that has been entering the stage since around 2012 has largely grown famous through publications of sketches and comedy videos on Youtube. Almost every stand-up comedian has a channel on this platform and many of the famous ones have records of their shows that can be watched on Netflix and Amazon Prime in India. Many stand-up comedians use their popularity not only to spread stand-up comedy. A number of them have furthermore united to form satirical comedy groups that go on tour together with various shows and have

established their own Youtube channels where they post video clips. The most popular associations on the more satirical spectrum are All India Bakchod, East India Comedy and Aisi Taisi Democracy². Apart from creating content with satirical denouncements of Indian politicians and the government, many of their videos are skits or songs that have educational purpose. The stand-up comedians' involvement in these projects shows their effort to create resistance through enlightenment. However, even the political stand-up scene cannot free itself from the grievances of the societal structures. As a matter of fact, the scene is clearly male-dominated and female stand-up comedians who can make a living off of stand-up comedy are scarce. Out of the round about 70 English and Hindi stand-up comedians in the scene, there are only about eight active female stand-up comedians and their amount of content on Youtube is low compared to that of their male colleagues. The first female-only stand-up comedy casting show *Queens of Comedy*, which was launched in 2017, seeks to encourage more women to enter the stand-up scene ("TLC"). However, this show only casts English-speaking female comedians.

So far in this chapter, the multi-faceted heterogeneity of the Indian society that is inevitably mirrored in and by Indian stand-up comedy has not been examined in depth. I have mentioned the difference between Hindi comedy and Anglophone stand-up comedy. This raises the question what exactly constitutes this difference other than the different styles of humor. Indeed, there is a correlation between several factors whose complexity requires closer examination because they are crucial to a more wholesome understanding of the potential impact of humorous resistance in India.

3.2 Political Stand-Up Comedy's Target Group and the Rural-Urban Divide

I have mentioned before that the audience has an important part in the process of spreading subversive political humor as the effect of the thoughts and ideas presented on stage are received and potentially carried on by them. However, the target group constituting this audience is relatively fixed due to a number of multifaceted and interrelated factors that hinder satirical stand-up comedy from delivering its full

² Hindi: Democracy Be Damned (Pandey).

potential. The way in which the Indian society is structured constitutes a major reason in this regard. There is a complex divide that is reflected in the different statuses of English and Hindi, the unequal access to the internet and even differing humor literacies that complicate the broad accessibility of critical, straightforward political satire. However, the question must be raised to what extent the stand-up comedy scene itself has an active part in serving the creation and maintenance of their target group and whether there is the initiative to break up the boundaries.

3.2.1 The Language of Stand-Up Comedy

Considering that I am focusing particularly on Anglophone Indian stand-up comedy, the status of English in India requires examination. Although there are 22 officially recognized languages in India, only English and Hindi are used for official purposes (“The Official”). There are several conflicts about the statuses of Hindi and English with the central issue currently being whether Hindi should replace English. The South and North-East Indians favor English over Hindi because the monopoly position of Hindi leads to unequal prerequisites for non-native Hindi speakers to learn the language. The northern regions, on the other hand, favor Hindi because they view English as a left-over from the British rule and as “a vehicle through which the English-educated elite perpetuate [the rule of the northern parties]” (Kumar 87; Hays). Furthermore, although reliable numbers do not exist, estimations suggest that, in relative numbers, it is only a privileged minority that speaks English fluently. The conflicts about Hindi and English that derive from both sides claiming to be threatened by cultural imperialism, have been further fueled by Hindu nationalist movements and the rise of the BJP, as they have been putting particular effort into the promotion of the use of Hindi in recent years (Hays).

The roots of the language conflict can be found in the colonial era during which the British had forced the English language and the Western ideals attached to it on the Indian people (Krishnaswamy & Krishnaswamy 40). 1835 was the year when the British colonial administration passed the English Education Act, inspired by Macaulay’s “Minute on Education”, that sought to make English the language of the upper-class Indian elite. This plan had two major aims: first of all, the British wanted to establish an administrative class to assist them. Secondly, by converting the elite, the

colonialists hoped that a new Anglophone Indian elite that would be English in their views and opinions would then educate the masses so that English and European ideas would gradually become entrenched in the Indian culture. At the same time, Hindi and the native cultures were propagated to be primitive and deficient to render Indians self-conscious of their own culture (Krishnaswamy & Krishnaswamy 30-38). However, the new education system was flawed in several ways. Most importantly, it favored the Brahmins over the other castes by giving them stipends for Sanskrit colleges that were reserved exclusively for them. Moreover, its costliness led only the upper classes to be able to afford a comprehensive English education. Finally, the best Anglophone universities were located in Bombay, Madras and Calcutta which led for an intellectual class to build up predominantly around urban areas. As a consequence, instead of becoming a language of the masses, English became the language of an urban upper class and upper caste minority. Its association with power and prestige, paired with the deprecation of the diverse native values, led English education to be favored over a native education (Viswanathan 147-153). This has had long-lasting effects on the Indian society as it encouraged the divide of the classes and castes and the urban and the rural population. Even after independence in 1947, when Hindi was established as the first official language in India to help shape an anti-colonial national identity, the English education system remained and the popularity of English continued to grow as the language especially of higher education remained exclusively English. The consequences of globalization and the linguistic and cultural dominance of the US have only further intensified this effect (Paul 124). More than half a century after independence from the British, English remains the language of higher education and continues to be associated with prestige while Hindi and other native Indian languages tend to be regarded as less valuable (Hays). It is thus not surprising that a Western and, in the Indian context, particularly Anglophone genre of entertainment has mainly inspired an English-speaking scene with its members stemming predominantly from educated, upper/middle class backgrounds. Only recently have there been initiatives concerning the promotion of Hindi and other native languages, inter alia, by establishing study programs in Hindi and native languages in Indian universities (Appendix D).

The competition of Hindi and English has caused a multifaceted demographic split: on the one hand, there is a divide between regional populations, on the other hand, there is a divide between the highly educated English-speaking upper and middle class

and the lower class that does not have access to the costly, exclusively Anglophone higher education. Not being able to speak English is looked down upon because it has become equivalent to poor or no education. The English-language Indian stand-up scene can be considered a reflection of this linguistic divide. Anglophone stand-up comedy is linguistically inaccessible to the majority of the Indian population and is thus an entertainment form reserved for those who can afford a comprehensive English education. As a result, regardless of whether the content builds on political topics, an Anglophone Indian stand-up comedian who chooses English as their language of performance is inevitably political for excluding the masses from witnessing their content (although it must be stressed that the absolute number of Anglophone Indians is considerable (Appendix A)). The typically high admission fees to the shows reinforce the exclusive character of English stand-up comedy. On top of that, for a comedian to present witty anecdotes and jokes, they are required to flawlessly master the English language. This means that the comedian themselves quite certainly belongs to an upper or middle class family that was able to afford higher education.

Although the Indian stand-up scene was exclusively Anglophone after Vir Das had first introduced the genre to India, by now, Hindi stand-up comedy (not to be confused with Hindi comedy) has emerged and is rapidly increasing in popularity. According to Nishant Tanwar and Daniel Fernandes, Indians are starting to feel more self-confident about India's most-spoken language (Appendix A; B). Tanwar, who started his career with English stand-up comedy, later switched to performing in Hindi after having recognized the immense demand. He points out that due to the immense size of the Hindi-speaking population that also includes the Indian Diaspora, the chances of making a good living off of Hindi stand-up are considerably better (Appendix B). It should be stressed here that most of those who speak English also speak Hindi and/or other native languages. This shows that English is not necessarily required anymore to grant success in the Indian stand-up scene and leaves for the assumption that it is rather a matter of prestige.

Although Hindi stand-up comedy has a larger audience amongst Indians and a more diverse target group, it is not yet an entertainment for the masses. Language literacy alone is no guarantee for the literacy required to understand the art form of stand-up, let alone be interested or able to relate to the Western style of stand-up

comedy. Even Hindi stand-up comedy comes from and tends to be centered around metropolitan urban areas, although the art is also starting to expand to smaller cities (Appendix A). The rural areas, however, have remained largely untouched by stand-up comedy and the life there has little in common with the middle and upper class oriented topics that are typically dealt with in satirical stand-up comedy (Appendix B; Kumar 84-85). A topic commonly referred to, for example, is the comparison between train and airplane rides. Most Indians, however, have never taken an airplane before (“Only 2 or 3%”; Appendix B). Furthermore, the style of humor is not appealing to the rural, often more conservative population. The sarcasm, irony and cynicism that are inherent to stand-up comedy were traditionally not part of the Indian repertoire of humor until globalization made Western entertainment popular amongst Indians (Bajaj; Appendix A). However, in order to understand the punch lines in stand-up comedy, a literacy of this kind of humor is required. This literacy, in turn, can only be acquired if one is frequently exposed to it – an exposition that does not take place among the rural population for reasons that I will examine in the next chapter.

3.2.2 Censorship and Internet Access

Apart from the inaccessibility of stand-up comedy on several levels, a major factor that has lately been further reinforcing this inaccessibility is increasing censorship in the past years. This censorship is effected both through official as well as unofficial instances, which makes it complicated to estimate its impact on the spreading of political satire. Especially with regard to political stand-up comedy, television censorship has a significant impact on the maintenance of the genre’s target group.

Censorship is not a phenomenon that is uniquely limited to authoritarian regimes. In fact, it constitutes a common practice in most democracies across the world. Leonard Freedman argues that political satire is a reminder that all democratic systems are flawed due to their often uninformed actors who, as a result, provide grounds for political wit. He furthermore points out that “in democracies, satirists need not bow down before the principle of ‘lèse majesté’, for they can aim at the highest levels of political power: presidents and prime ministers” (Freedman 97-98). However, many Indian journalists have argued that it is precisely this principle that has appeared to be at stake lately and threatens the integrity of the Indian democracy. Although the right to freedom of expression of its citizens is rooted in the democratic Indian constitution

(“Article 19”, Appendix D), the risk of censorship is a problem that many of those who actively participate in the public (pop-) cultural sphere are affected by (Appendix D). Rajeev Nigam notes that censorship did not exist to this extent about two decades ago (Varma 01:01:10-01:01:33) before the BJP and their right-wing Hindu nationalist agenda first came to power in 1998. Although Devang Pathak points out that the UPA government with the Indian National Congress at its head equally failed at ensuring freedom of expression during their reign from 2004 to 2014, he argues that the increase in revisionism and censorship under the BJP reign is different due to their agenda of attempting to create a Hindu nationalist country. Not only are they trying to prohibit criticism of the government, its actors and Prime Minister Narendra Modi in particular, but they also aim at changing the nation’s history towards a Hindu narrative that seeks to brush over any non-Hindu influences (Pathak 2015; Appendix C).

In *Censorship in South Asia – Cultural Regulation from Sedition to Seduction*, Raminder Kaur and William Mazzarella state that singular centralized censorship authorities by the government are increasingly being supplemented by independent organizations that, sometimes even violently, act upon public complaints. Although the government officially condones violent acts, it often does not act upon them as it may secretly even stand in solidarity with these organizations (Kaur & Mazzarella 6-7). Accordingly, censorship not only limits the freedom of expression under the supposed pretext of public interest, but can in the worst case even harm the integrity of the censored person or group, as the example of Kunal Kamra that was mentioned in the introduction, shows. Stand-up comedian Gursimran Khamba points out that “the State never directly physically assaults you. The State will find people through which it will assault you” (Varma 00:04:54-00:04:58). Because of its unpredictability, unofficial censorship has resulted into a diffuse fear of consequences (Appendix C) and has led to a further form of censorship that could be referred to as ‘self-censorship’.

Concerning stand-up comedy, self-censorship especially constitutes a problem on television. Although political satire is not fundamentally banned and satire shows such as *Gusthaki Maaf* (Hindi: Excuse the Transgression) continue to be aired on television (Kumar 82), strict limits have been imposed regarding the topics that can be joked about (Pathak). Especially satirical stand-up comedy seems to be prone to censorship and has been affected by various limitations. Several stand-up comedians

have reported being specifically told by their employer not to take up certain topics during their televised shows. Especially political topics and the mockery of politicians constitute a taboo (Varma 01:01:30-01:02:10; “TV Channel’s”). Thus, unless “the approving authority is good” (Varma 01:03:25-01:03:30), the comedians have to play by the rules and focus on rather superficial topics that are deemed suitable for the masses in order for their shows to persist on TV. However, it is precisely the idea of the subordination to anti-democratic rules that especially those comedians who do stand-up primarily to raise awareness of socio-political grievances reject. Accordingly, truly caustic satire will only be found on the internet, where stand-up comedians so far have remained free at least from censorship by official authorities. Although censorship is also sought to be exercised on the internet, it is impossible for the authorities to keep up (Appendix D). Nevertheless, even on the internet, stand-up comedians like these are rather scarce. Many comedians prefer to stay away from controversial topics altogether to avoid public outrage and risk being harmed by unofficial instances. This has led to quarrels in the scene as some comedians accuse their colleagues of playing into the government’s agenda through their passivity concerning political topics (Varma 00:51:37-00:51:53).

The censorship on television would possibly not be so momentous if everyone had equal access to the internet. Currently, about 64% of the Indian population have access to a television at home (Laghate) and an even higher number has access to one via relatives and public spaces. In comparison, only 34% of Indians currently have regular access to the internet (Bhawan). Consequentially, the target group for stand-up comedy experiences a further limitation, constituted by the interrelation of TV censorship and a relatively low rate of internet users. Again, the rural-urban divide becomes evident in the percentage distribution of internet access: while about 77% of the population has access to the internet in urban areas, only roughly 15% of the rural population has regular access to the internet (Bhawan 2018). This shows that there is another factor that limits the target group of stand-up comedy. Thus, despite carrying the advantage of freedom of art and expression, the use of the internet causes political stand-up comedy in particular to have a limited potential audience especially in rural areas, where many cannot afford the devices and fees required for internet access. At the same time, while potentially reaching a larger number of people due to the better accessibility of television, it is predominantly slapstick comedy with its mass sustainable, g-rated humor that is broadcasted through this medium. Nevertheless, while

the number of 34% of internet users in 2017 is still relatively low, its development should be acknowledged. In 2014, only about 21% of Indians in total with 45.33% of the urban and 10.66% of the rural population had access to the internet (Bhawan 2015). While this number has especially increased for the urban population, there has at least been some development in the rural areas. The numbers go in accord with the rising popularity of stand-up comedy that has significantly increased and expanded to smaller urban areas within this time span. Hence, there is reason to assume that the growth will continue and may eventually even reach rural areas (Appendix A). Until then, due to problems of accessibility and relatability, the rural population will predominantly remain a target of Hindi comedy on television that relies on mostly traditional Indian humor and topics.

It becomes obvious that there is a significant divide between the Anglophone, middle to upper class, westernized and predominantly secular urban population and the Hindi and local languages speaking, lower class, traditional and religious rural population that is caused and maintained by a number of interrelated complex vicious circles. The unequal access to broadcasting media as well as the increasing censorship of the freedom of expression of art on television in particular further intensifies the societal gap. Kumar argues that this divide has resulted into two different Indias of which the Anglophone, liberal India that views itself as a missionary of modernity has spun a well connected network that stands at discursive odds with the traditional and religious-minded India (Kumar 85). The comedians, most of which are from educated upper or middle class backgrounds themselves, have established a followership of people around them that share similar demographic characteristics and consequently have easy access to the prerequisites needed to be receptive to stand-up comedy. Especially those comedians who do non-political stand-up comedy in English give in to elitism and thus indirectly contribute to the societal gap.

For political English stand-up comedy, however, this is different. First of all, by being inevitably pushed into the sphere of the internet, the stand-up comedians themselves are powerless with regard to the rural population's accessibility to political stand-up comedy. And although the spreading of their ideas of resistance is limited due to the language barrier that significantly reduces the potential audience, English has a decisive advantage: the exclusive character of the language also serves as a protective

shield. Because of its inaccessibility for majority of Indians, English political stand-up comedians pose less of a threat and thus have a lower risk of being censored or banned in their expression (Appendix A). Political stand-up comedians who perform in Hindi, on the other hand, are at a higher risk of having to face consequences as they could potentially inspire the masses with their ideas, which makes them a bigger threat to the government's agenda. The censorship on TV thus results in an unasserted double censorship of political stand-up comedians. This explains why the number of comedians who provide caustic political satire is higher in the English stand-up scene than in the Hindi stand-up scene – despite the overall number being quite low to begin with. Either way, it would be false to attempt to locate the culprit for these circumstances among the stand-up comedians alone – finally, the way in which stand-up comedy has established itself in India is only a symptom of a society that has been divided through class and caste for a long time, a division that has significantly been reinforced by the policies of the colonial rule and that has provided grounds for instrumentalization among diverse political groups. Due to increased risk of censorship in India at present, all hope continues to lie in the internet, even though no stand-up comedian who dares to test the limits of the government and the public is safe from censorship and other consequences.

4 Analysis of Resistance in Political Indian Stand-Up Comedy

In search of material for my analysis of political stand-up comedy, I watched roughly 230 videos of stand-up comedy performances by 72 Indian comedians on Youtube, dating from 2013 up to present. 26 of the comedians performed predominantly in Hindi while the other 46 had chosen English as their predominant language for stand-up shows. All of these comedians have their own style and voice that distinguish them from their colleagues. The range of styles include more superficial banter comedy, comedy that plays with taboos, satirical comedy, dark comedy, social and political comedy and many more. Judging from the content that I saw, about 20 of the comedians included socio-political topics in their stand-up comedy, ranging from occasional remarks and bits to comprehensive sets of sharp political satire. While my Hindi skills are limited, out of these I could clearly identify six Hindi stand-up comedians who take stands on socio-political topics, namely Zakir Khan, Kunal Kamra, Varun Grover, Sanjay Rajoura, Abijit Ganguly and Vipul Goyal. Sanjay Rajoura in particular sticks out from the others. Being one of the only comedians who do not stem from an urban area, he openly denounces the elitist and ignorant behavior of the urban middle class and attaches particular importance to making his content relatable to a rural audience (Varma 00:34:48-00:35:50). Out of the bits that were presented in Hindi, I only took those videos into account for my analysis that either had English subtitles or that contained unequivocal English utterances.

The majority of Indian stand-up comedians refrain from taking up topics that might result in negative consequences for them. The topics that were most frequently joked about in the videos were rather unpolitical as they included family relations, love and marriage, Bollywood and stereotypes about the different Indian states and cities. Overall, these are mostly uncomplicated topics that almost every upper or middle class Indian can relate to. The topics are usually examined with regard to the particularities of middle and upper middle class life with stories about plane rides and traveling abroad being quite common. Subtle displays of status, class or caste by the comedian are not seldom woven into the stories as well. Although I am going to focus on political stand-up comedians, topics like the ones mentioned above are also taken up by them. According to Kunal Kamra, joking about trivial subjects is a mechanism to get the audience to agree with the comedian once he or she starts talking about society and politics. “[T]hat’s when it gets exciting, purposeful, with the intention of drawing

laughs from an audience that otherwise wouldn't agree with you" (Kamra). Interestingly, all of the stand-up videos that deal with the government's anti-democratic tendencies stem from the time of 2015 up to the present, which suggests that the government change in 2014 has brought about particular concern in this regard. These include the reexamination of various bans, the particularities of politicians in the parliament as well as matters of public safety and justice. I want to note here that the female stand-up comics that I found on Youtube hardly ever considered this matter in their stand-up shows. This, however, does not mean that they do not convey resistance in their stand-up comedy – the contrary is the case. While the mere act of doing stand-up comedy as a woman in a sexist society can be regarded as an act of resistance in itself, the comediennes especially take up topics aimed particularly at female empowerment. Overall it can be said that regardless of how the comedians deal with a topic, the sole act of taking on political topics can be interpreted as a claim of the democratic rights to freedom of speech and expression. At the same time, the fear of censorship and backlash by the public leads to creative ways of mocking those who censor, as will be shown in chapter 4.3. Finally it should be noted that it is in fact a good sign if a video gets a lot of criticism, because not only does it show that the content apparently hit a nerve, but it also makes it relevant to public discourse.

The bits that I am going to analyze in the following chapter have all been taken from the stand-up clips I was able to find on Youtube, with some of them being excerpts from the documentary *I am offended*. It is important to note that many of these clips are made up from different excerpts from different shows that have been cut and edited together to create the ideal version of the comedian's show program. Accordingly, they do not necessarily convey the authenticity of a live show. My goal is to interpret and contextualize the stories in order to find out how they constitute resistance and what this resistance is directed against. For this, I will not only analyze the comedian's stories, but also take the audience's reactions into consideration if they add to the message that is being conveyed. In order to reflect the performance as well as the audience's reactions as well as possible, I transcribed the video-taped bits that I am going to analyze. The letters in parentheses following the comedians' utterances designate the audience's reaction. The "l" stands for rather little laughter and the "L" designates loud laughter from the entire audience. "A" symbolizes a high amount of applause while "a" stands for minor applause. This style of transcription has been inspired by the style that

Michael Held-Hernandez uses in his Master thesis *Black Atlantic Comedy* (cf. Appendix F).

4.1 Bills and Bans

After the election of Narendra Modi and the BJP in 2014, a number of bans were passed within a short time that put India in a state of turmoil. These include the beef ban, the (attempted) porn ban, the demonetization of the 1000 and 500 rupee notes and the ban of Pakistani actors. The second ban that had been put into force after the elections was the ban of Pakistani actors, singers and film technicians from Bollywood and it was passed as a response to the killing of 19 Indian soldiers in Kashmir by Pakistani militants (Safi). Rahul Subramanian takes up the topic in a bit at the Canvas Laugh Club from July 2016 where he talks about the conflicted Indian-Pakistani relationship.

But I'm like surprised now with all this tension
 it's great that we're like fighting back, the surgical strikes happened
 but I didn't understand this one more thing happening
 you know, great move, let's send the Pakistanis back
 {makes wild gestures} (Hindi) send them back... send them back... just send
 them and see (1)
 it will send a strong message
 and what is the message, I was just thinking?
 (Hinglish) At Nawaz Sharif's office "Sir, India has sent a very strong message"
 {imitates Sharif} "What is that message?"
 "Atif...Fawad...Ali Fazal"
 {imitates Sharif} "But isn't Ali Fazal Indian?"
 "Ya, they don't understand that" (L, A) (Subramanian "India" 00:00:56-00:01:35)

Although Subramanian finds the surgical strikes to be a justified measure to fight back against Pakistan, he sarcastically denounces the futility of the ban, considering that the Pakistani actors had nothing to do with the attacks. The ban had been passed by the IMPPA (Indian Motion Pictures Producers' Association) in summer of 2016. This ban prohibits Pakistani actors, singers and film technicians from any contribution to the Indian film industry as long as the Indian-Pakistani conflict is not resolved. His sarcastic and illustrative imitation of how the actors Atif Aslam, Fawad

Khan and Ali Fazal arrive at the office of Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif mocks the absurdity of the situation that reaches its peak in the ban of Ali Fazal who, although being Muslim, has actually been born and raised in India. Although the ban of Fazal is fictitious in this story and solely serves the generation of laughter because he himself has reported being frequently mistaken for Pakistani actor and singer Ali Zafar (Mathur), it is true that a number of Muslim actors were denied contracts despite being Indian (Safi). By proving his point on the basis of the fictitious example of Ali Fazal, Subramanian creates a win-win situation for himself as a comedian: not only does he swiftly avoid the trouble that he might have had to face had he taken an actual example, but he also elicits laughter precisely because the audience recognizes the potential accuracy of the fictitious example. The evocation of laughter raises the probability of the audience agreeing with Subramanian on the absurdity of the ban. By mocking the apparent assumption of the authorities involved in the ban that being Indian *and* Muslim is a contradiction, Subramanian exposes their ignorance. According to him, the "strong message" that this ban is supposed to convey ends up backfiring at India itself, rendering the ban ridiculous. It is a symptom of a diffuse hate that finds expression in the general categorization of Muslims as the enemy. Although the Indian government was not directly involved in the ban, the BJP and other right-wing extremist parties and organizations have been continuously fueling this hate for numerous decades. Considering that the ban continues to be effective ("Pakistan"), the silence on the part of the government reinforces the impression that they welcome the ban as it goes in accord with their Hindu nationalist agenda. With sarcasm, Subramanian manages to share his own point of view with the audience without making any direct accusations.

In his bit from November 2017 Atul Khatri takes up another issue that constitutes a ban in the broadest sense and that followed only months later. On the occasion of the one-year anniversary, he reexamines the demonetization that had spontaneously come into force upon the initiative of Modi on November 8th in 2016. Although his take on the issue is distinctly lighthearted, his sarcastic remark about calling this day the Anti Black Money Day instead of "Chootya Banaaya Bada Mazza Aaya Day³" because the latter would be "too long", reveals his own opinion on the matter. He proceeds to talk about the day of the demonetization in an almost reminiscent manner.

³ Hindi: "We Had Fun While We Were Making a Fool of You Day".

And overnight you had to think of ways to get rid of those old notes
 next morning, my wife joined salsa classes (I)
 just because they were accepting old notes (L)
 the problem is all the other dancers came with the same intention (I)
 no one wanted to learn salsa
 someone was doing Garba, Bhangra, Hip Hop, Freestyle (I)
 whatever they wanted (I)
 another place if you guys remember
 one place that we could use our old notes for some time was petrol pumps, you
 guys remember? (Yes)
 see, we have a 8-year old Maruti Ritz (I)
 that car in its entire history had never seen petrol beyond one notch (L)
 9th November she said {imitates wife}(Hindi) “Fill the tank” (L)
 (Hindi) after that even if it fell one notch she would top it up
 even the car started wondering {mimics car speaking}(Hindi) “What are they
 doing? Are they going to slit my throat? Am I the sacrificial goat? (L,a) (Khatri
 00:03:58-00:04:48)

Khatri provides a humorous description of the chaos that Indians went through following the hours after Modi’s announcement while at the same time showing his own flaws by revealing that his family did indeed keep a considerable amount of black money at home. As a matter of fact, by demonetizing the 1000 and 500 rupee notes, Modi’s objective had been to “eliminate fake Indian currency notes, curb terrorism, and force out stashed cash people had hidden to avoid paying taxes (Dutt D’Cunha)”. Khatri constructs the bit like a conversation between him and the audience and repeatedly encourages the audience’s participation. The response from the audience shows that he has managed to establish a feeling of commonality among them. By mentioning his old, small car for which he had apparently never been able to afford a full tank of petrol, he distances himself and his family from the upper class and seemingly puts himself on a level with those who were seriously affected by the consequences of demonetization. Nevertheless, his ability to reexamine a moment that had severe consequences for many Indians without openly revealing feelings of anger leaves room for the assumption that he as well as his audience do not belong to the class of people most affected by the demonetization. His humorous portrayal of the circumstances stands in distinct contrast to the reality of that time: photos taken in the days following Modi’s declaration show seemingly endless lines of people trying to exchange the demonetized notes in front of overcrowded banks and several newspapers reported on a wave of suicides in the weeks that followed and that was especially affecting the less wealthy (Sen). Although the demonetization has in fact led to a rise of income tax returns by 25% in the first year,

there have been a number of detriments that especially the rural and less wealthy population has had to deal with. Among these are cash shortages and collapsing prices in the agricultural sector, job losses as well as a rise in debts among the more cash-reliant rural economy (Dutt D’Cunha). It is thus clear that although Khatri indirectly denounces Modi’s decision to demonetize the 1000 and 500 rupee notes by ridiculing its inutility, he does not give a voice to those whose existence has been seriously threatened by the long-term consequences that the demonetization has had.

Another ban that is not particularly new to the country but that has been brought up again by the national government is the so-called beef ban. Although this ban had already been in effect in 18 of the Indian states, in May 2017, Modi declared the ban to apply to the whole nation. The ban prohibited the trade of cows, bulls, bullocks, steers, buffaloes, heifers, calves and camels at animal markets and fairs for the purpose of slaughter and religious sacrifice. The government’s official reason for this ban was to end the unregulated trade of animals. However, sheep and goats are not included in the ban that affects not only religious minorities such as Muslims and Christians but even Dalits. Critical voices ascribe the unofficial reason for the beef ban to the Hindu nationalist ideology of the BJP (Mangaldas; Mohan). Against the background of the series of bans that had been issued before, Sorabh Pant is not afraid to directly take on the government in this regard in his show “The Rant of the Pant” from summer 2017.

Let’s talk about something more fun {more quietly} and silly
 let’s talk about the Indian government (L)
 dude I love Indian governments, man
 Indian governments just love banning stuff they get so much joy like
 BJP is on another level right now (L)
 they wake up in the morning like {imitates BJP politicians}(in Hindi) “Ah! (L)
 Such a nice wind – what to ban today?
 Your underwear – banned!”(L,a) (Pant “Beef” 00:00:06-00:00:31))

In his opening story for the topic of bans, Pant mocks the government by pretend appeasement which he already quietly reverses the appeasement in the same line by calling the government “silly”. He then mocks the arbitrary bans that the BJP had been creating at that time by figuratively implying that if the BJP politicians just wake up in the morning and immediately come up with a new ban, the actual bans that the BJP create are a symbol of arbitrarily employed power. Pant specifically takes up the topic of the latest beef ban on a more serious note where he stresses the diversity of the Indian

society and the according need for the people to be tolerant towards each other's traditions.

And we just need to respect the fact
 that two traditions exist in India simultaneously, right?
 and I'll tell you a quick story about the other thing that they usually say
 with regards to this whole beef ban
 the second point they usually make is that, you know what
 in Saudi Arabia
 Saudi Arabia they have banned pork
 I'm like wait
 if you begin any argument (l)
 by saying Saudi Arabia does it (l)
 you probably lost the argument (L, a)
 and by the way, India is not a particular religion's country
 we are not, we are not
 and Islamic countries that ban pork are also xenophobic and intolerant
 it's a fact (Pant "Beef" 00:07:51-00:08:34)

In this bit, Pant refers to two traditions that exist in India with regard to the beef ban. On the one side, there are those who eat beef and on the other side there are those who refrain from eating beef. He chooses to not mention religion in this context, because the consumption of beef is not only a matter of religious affiliation as statistics suggest (Bansal). By depicting the beef ban supporters as using Saudi Arabia with its authoritarian dictatorship as a point of reference to justify the beef ban, he unmaskes them as proponents of this kind of regime while at the same time exposing them as ignorant. Pant reveals the anti-democratic character of the beef ban that seeks to interfere with the peoples' personal lifestyle choices and stands in contradiction to India's official secularism. With his story he directly calls for more tolerance and in contrast to Subramanian's and Khatri's take on the bans, his own opinion does not remain hidden behind humorous layers. The way in which Pant uses the stage and the attention of the audience to spread his thoughts and ideas illustrates why stand-up comedy is at such a high risk of censorship: as opposed to satire shows and skits where actors play certain characters, political stand-up comedians can single-handedly become actual opinion leaders (cf. Beppe Grillo) and thus constitute a potential threat to a government's agenda.

Pant is not only critical towards the BJP. In his opening story that I already mentioned, Pant speaks of the Indian government in the plural form, implying that it is

not only the current government led by the BJP that seems to pass arbitrary bans. He proceeds by putting further light on the controversies of beef bans and it becomes obvious that even Congress, which openly declares to stand for democratic and secular values (“Democracy”), cannot free itself from having met equal measures.

Every single political party in India has been involved in banning beef
 And none of them ever admit it, nobody accepts it
 The Congress has been involved, NCP has been involved, Shiv Sena has been involved, I’m shocked (l) and uh {laughs}
 No, the Congress has been involved as well and yet they pretend like {imitates Congress politicians} (Hindi) “We are bathed in milk, we did nothing. And the milk, not the cow’s, ok? It’s buffalo’s (L) (Pant “Beef” 00:02:37-00:02:57)

Pant claims that, in fact, all parties have been involved in the ban. His expression of shock at the Shiv Sena’s involvement in the beef ban is sarcastic, as the Shiv Sena is infamous for its radical Hindu-nationalist ideologies. The pretend mimicked statement of the Indian National Congress (INC) “We are bathed in milk” has an ironic double meaning. On the one hand, it serves as a metaphor for being innocent, while on the other hand, the statement can be considered in its literal sense: the INC pretends to not pay any mind to using the cow as livestock for dairy products and meat. However, by not failing to stress that the milk that the INC bathes in is buffalo and not cow milk, Pant demasks the party and reveals its true ideology. With this punch line, Pant denounces the hypocrisy of the Congress who, on the surface, seeks to present itself as a secular, democratic party that stands against casteism and aims for equality for all people in India, but in practice does not differ much from the other parties. Finally, the majority of members of all parties in the Indian parliament are members of the Hindu upper castes and although the Indian nation was once founded under the premise of secularism, religion and the supposed superiority of Hinduism in particular have always played an underlying role in the governance of India (Anderson 5).

Finally, another ban that the government tried to pass was the porn ban. Although this ban was already created in November 2014 and thus constitutes the very first ban that was passed under the new government, I decided to examine it at the end of this chapter as it differs from the other bans in many ways. It is important to note here that porn constitutes one of the only easily accessible and anonymous sources for most Indians to get sexual knowledge, considering that sex itself poses an absolute

taboo topic in the Indian society and sex education in school is rare (Sood & Suman 2). Again, Pant provides a sharp observation of the circumstances surrounding this ban by also putting it in context with the other bans.

And our response to them banning stuff tells us more about us as a nation, right?
 because they went out there, they banned the 1000 rupees note, India was divided
 they banned beef, India was divided
 they banned Pakistani actors, India was divided.
 they tried to ban porn (L)
 India was united as one nation! (L,A) We were together! (L,A)
 (...)
 our attitude is literally like
 you can take our money
 you can take our food
 you can take our entertainment
but you will not take away my Mia Khalifa, how dare you! (L) (Pant “Beef”
 00:00:42-00:01:34)

Pant puts emphasis on the way in which the Indian people reacted towards the Pakistani actor ban, the demonetization and the beef ban and puts in into contrast with the way in which Indians reacted towards the attempt of the government to ban porn. What all of the first three bans have in common is that they are largely to the disadvantage of minority groups as well as those groups whose voices are not listened to due to their lack of influence. These include the non-Hindu population and Muslims in particular as they constitute the largest religious minority with 14 %, but they also include the members of the lower castes and the less wealthy, rural population. This is different for the ban of porn. Considering that access to the internet constitutes the basic requirement in order to have access to porn, the population group that was predominantly affected by the ban was the wealthy urban population, according to the percentages that I already mentioned in chapter three. Moreover, while there are no clear reports on who protested against the ban, there is reason to assume that the protest was rather male-dominated, considering that about 70% of porn consumers in India are men (Barrow). Accordingly, when Pant speaks of the sudden unity of “the” Indian nation, he really only talks about a predominantly wealthy male urban minority that has the network and the influence necessary to suspend the ban. Indeed, the ban was reported as having caused an immense public outcry and was lifted again only a few weeks later due to the nationwide public pressure (Khomami). Although stand-up comedy should not be considered with too much severity, Pant’s humorous depiction of the Indian people as a whole as indifferent towards what happens with their food,

money and entertainment is simplified. Much rather, it seems to be a matter of what the well-networked upper and middle class feel concerned about – and since the majority of those who belong to the upper and middle class are Hindu, vegetarian (Bansal) and wealthy, it seems logical that an impactful movement of resistance failed to materialize after the demonetization, beef ban and Pakistani actor ban.

4.2 Safety and Justice

Kenny Sebastian is among the most popular stand-up comedians in India at the moment. I had initially not planned to include his comedy in my analysis as his humor generally leaves political topics untouched. However, he recently released a new show that includes a bit that was uploaded on Youtube and is called “Why I don’t do jokes on politics”. The brilliance lies in the fact that in this bit, he does nothing but talk about politics for about twelve minutes, with particular concern for Indians’ public safety.

Why I don’t do jokes on politics?
 because our government is super chill! (L, A)
 {puts thumbs up, waves his hand around} Yaaaaaaay (L, A)
 super chill our government is
 our government is so bipolar, it’s not even funny (l)
 if I dated someone like the government I would break up on the first day (l)
 our government is insane
 like, rapes are happening, people are getting murdered and shit
 journalists are getting shot in the head and our government is like {whistles
 carelessly} (L,a) (Sebastian 00:04:44-00:05:18)

Sebastian answers a question that he has often been asked by his fans with an ironic comment about the government being so great that there is no need to do jokes about them. This comment immediately evokes a big wave of laughter and applause, signaling that the audience has perceived the incongruence between his statement and the reality. Sebastian then lifts his thumb and waves it around while crying out with pretend enthusiasm to jokingly underline and stress his comment again, only to suddenly turn more serious. The sudden shift of mood is still met with laughter, but then Sebastian proceeds on an unironic note and the audience turns quiet. He clearly positions himself towards the government and India’s current grievances. By whistling carelessly to signal the government’s reaction to these events, he reveals a layered

meaning that remains somewhat unresolved: more obviously, the whistling points towards the lethargy of the government towards these grievances. However, the whistling could also imply that the government itself is involved in raping and killing, but tries to act innocent. In fact, 34% of the members of the parliament faced criminal charges filed as of 2014, with one fifth of them being accused of crimes such as theft, intimidation and worse (Vaishnav). By whistling instead of verbally describing the government's reaction, Sebastian manages to get the message across to the audience while making it so slippery that it cannot be held against him. Sebastian uses a similar technique in the following bit:

Why I don't do jokes on politics is 'cause I'm scared (l). That's why.
 that's why, it's not like I can't get punch lines on political jokes
 I don't want to get punched on my face (L) That's why!
 and people are like {imitates fan} 'Kenny, you're scared, really bro?
 You are protected, you are in Mumbai. You are the 1%, you know, you're
 privileged class, you know, how can you be scared?'
 no, I'm feeling scared
 it's sad, 'cause (inaudible) when you're in a democracy and you feel scared, it's
 sad, you know
 you don't believe me, right?
 ok, go to a movie theater and don't stand for the national anthem (l)
oh shit (inaudible)! (L,a) (Sebastian 00:05:33-00:06:10)

When Sebastian reveals that he is scared of getting hurt for doing political jokes, he does not explicitly mention *who* could hurt him. While it is probably clear to the audience that he is talking about the indirect ways that the government uses to intimidate people, it could just as well be fans or normal citizens who get offended by his political opinions. Again, Sebastian leaves his message ambiguous, assuming that those 'who know', will understand him. By revealing his awareness of the privileges of the class he belongs to, he admits that he is in a special position and that there are nevertheless the other 99% that do not share his privileges and are thus potentially worse off than him, although even he is not spared a feeling of diffuse fear. In *I am offended*, Gursimran Khamba finds clear words that underline Sebastian's message. Khamba describes the current status quo of Indian stand-up comedy and the role that class and caste play in this:

I do see stand-up as continuing to be a force of resistance, but I also see it only being that simply because the government is not going to give it that much importance. If we were Dalit stand-up comics going from village to village

talking against the Brahmins, we would have been shot or killed or been under arrest. Let's be honest about it. We are upper middle class people with cultural capital. (Varma 00:07:09-00:07:41)

In his statement, Khamba puts emphasis on the societal gap that leads to a stark inequality of rights that differ depending on one's status in society. He implies that India is a democracy only for those who are educated and occupy a high rank within the societal hierarchy. By expressing his regret about living in a democracy where even he has to feel scared, Sebastian indirectly challenges the authenticity of the Indian democracy as it apparently cannot grant its members the freedom of speech and expression at the current state. He becomes clearer by giving the example of not standing for the national anthem at the cinema. This example is not only a reference to the rule that was passed by the Supreme Court in November of 2016. This rule orders the Indian national anthem to be played before any official movie screening and commands everyone present to stand up for it. The example may also include a subtle hint at the incident from September of 2017, where a wheelchair-bound Muslim man had been beaten up at the movie theater for not standing up for the national anthem ("Disabled Man"). Sebastian clarifies that the freedom of expression is evidently in the course of making space for nationalism, which is a clear sign for an erroneous democracy. His point is further proven when he talks about the goons that the government and politically motivated organizations unofficially send out to assault people that act or speak against their agenda.

Bank employees hate their jobs. Goons love their jobs.
and rightfully so, ok? Goons are super nice and productive.
they are over productive, actually.
like sometimes they'll ruin more than is required
{imitates goons}(Hindi) Boss, we didn't know who to kill
so we killed the whole family (L)
so on the way there was a bus, sir, the bus didn't let us (inaudible), so we burned the bus
also, sir, as a practice. We had to practice (L, a)
and goons are so health-conscious
all goons are like fit and like they're buff, they're huge, got chest and biceps, {flexes
muscles} chest and biceps (l)
I don't know why they wear such tight t-shirts, though (l)
all goons will go to the store like 'I'll have a shirt' 'Sir, what's your size, 45?'
'No no no, 12' (L,a) (Sebastian 00:07:51-00:08:35)

The goons that Sebastian refers to can be best described as unofficial, self-proclaimed vigilante groups that practice self-administered justice in the form of threats and violence whenever they, or their contractor respectively, deem it justified. While the government has never openly declared that they employ goons, as this would go against the democratic constitution of India, it is an open secret that goons are also associated with different Indian parties and organizations. They become active whenever a powerful and influential person or group has taken offense at something, and accordingly, they are largely unpredictable. This makes for a diffuse underlying fear for those who openly speak out against or joke about organizations, politicians, specific groups of people and the like. Because the severity of the subject matter can only be rendered bearable through humor, Sebastian parodies them by sarcastically pretending to sympathize with them and making being a goon look like a fun job with a number of advantages that other jobs don't have – note the side blow to the bad working conditions and poor or delayed payment that many employees face, which can, again, be read as a critique of the current politics in India. Nonetheless, he does not refrain from more direct mockery of the goons by ridiculing their too small T-shirts and thus making fun of their idea of masculinity. Sebastian does not clarify what goons exactly he is referring to, nor does he provide examples of concrete actions that goons have undertaken. However, the fact that he remains so unspecific shows that he assumes that the audience knows what he is talking about. He does not seek to reveal new insights but bases his stories on common knowledge while at the same time giving his own personal opinion. This allows him to reexamine and raise awareness without making it too risky for himself, considering that he uploaded the bit on Youtube and thus made it publicly accessible. Considering that Kenny Sebastian has a larger amount of followers than most of the political Indian stand-up comedians and furthermore attracts a rather young, albeit upper and middle class audience, the impact that his decision to do jokes on politics could have is not neglectable. Moreover, his decision to reveal his own opinion on the current political situation may inspire other stand-up comedians who usually refrain from socio-political comments to do the same.

While Kenny Sebastian gives a general overview over the risks that particularly stand-up comics and opinion leaders are currently facing because of goons, the following bit by Pant puts further emphasis on the arbitrary objectives of the goons on the particular occasion of Valentine's Day, where several right-wing organizations

specifically go out all over India to violently keep couples from publicly displaying their affection. Although Pant also refrains from naming any particular organizations or incidences, it is clear that he denounces the actions of goons in general.

How can it be conceptually alright in India that kissing people is illegal but slapping people is not? (I)

(...)

Girls, this is a message I am going to give out to you, ok?

If you're out there with your boyfriend in public, kiss him that's absolutely fine, it's great

PDA is good, express your love

I'll watch, and... (L)

No, just kiss your boyfriend in public, that's absolutely fine

If you see one of these guys approaching, just slap him (your boyfriend)

Just slap him, then kiss him again, then slap him, then kiss him again

They'll get so confused, they'll be like

{imitates goons}(in Hindi) "Is she doing our work or her work? Can't understand!" (Pant "Air" 00:05:37-00:06:14)

The paradox that shows in the actions of the goons that try to fight love with violence justifies to Pant to judge them as mentally dull. He further ridicules their ignorance by sarcastically pointing out how easy it is to confuse and outsmart them. By making the goons look ridiculous, he is able to take away the fear that is caused by their incalculability and thus takes a similar approach as Sebastian. He furthermore openly encourages couples to assert their own right of freedom of expression through public displays of affection and particularly attempts to encourage women to be more confident in this regard by "explaining" how easy it is to win against the goons. Pant's story stresses the mental superiority of the potential victims and sets mental superiority on an equal level with moral superiority. The audience laughs despite being aware of the arbitrariness and unpredictability of the goons who manage to keep people from going about their personal choices out of fear, regardless of the rules of the democratic constitution. In the context of Valentine's Day in February of 2018, India Today reported about several events organized by militant right-wing organizations such as the Bajrang Dal that were taking place across India. The organization aimed to intimidate young couples with the intention of keeping them from going out to celebrate, inter alia by threatening to get them married. The motive behind these protests was the attempt to "protect" Indian culture from Western influences – considering that Valentine's Day is a celebration whose traditions do not originate in India ("How's Your"). With this bit, Pant especially appeals to an audience whose members are opposed to the traditional

model of relationship between man and woman and prefer an individualist over a communal lifestyle in this regard. Accordingly, it is presumably again an urban, more westernized target group that is met by this content.

While the bits analyzed so far in this chapter have specifically taken on the general feelings of fear that are caused by political goons, the following bits by Aditi Mittal, and Sorabh Pant illustrate which members of the population are particularly affected by the structural injustice of the current system. In an excerpt from the documentary *I am offended*, female comedian Aditi Mittal takes up the government's hypocrisy when it comes to the safety of women. She does not specify on any particular members of the parliament that have been accused of rape in this excerpt, but I am unable to judge the entire bit, as the excerpt does not provide any more context.

Who better to comment on rape
 than a government that has 366 MLAs
 who have been accused of rape (l)
 It's like I have been there, done that (L) (Varma 00:03:19-00:03:30)

Mittal exposes the clear inability of the government to condemn acts of rape by commenting on some of the members' blatant hypocrisy with a sarcastic rhetorical question. The expression "I have been there, done that" is a typically used to underline the authenticity of a person's experience and the consequential legitimacy to judge a subject matter. In this context, however, the expression can be taken in its full sense. The members of the Legislative Assembly have experience with rape because they have literally "done that". Although I could not find statistics that supported the number of *accused* MLAs that Mittal named, there are indeed 51 members of the Parliament and the Legislative Assembly who have been charged with cases of crimes against women, as recent statistics suggest ("BJP Has Highest"). Not only do the politicians of the current government play into the patriarchal system but some of them even actively participate in taking the most basic rights away from women. The fact that men who are accused of rape or against whom cases have been filed can remain undisturbed in their position shows that the integrity of women does not seem to be of primary concern to the government. The seeming lethargy towards women's rights shows the sexist and anti-democratic climate that emanates from the government. With this bit, Mittal raises awareness of the structural injustice that women face due to a dysfunctional legislative and judiciary system.

Sorabh Pant furthermore highlights the role of money and status in front of the court in another bit from his show “The Rant of the Pant”. He talks about his surprise about the conviction of Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh, a singer, actor, spiritual leader and the head of the social organization DSS (“Indian Guru”) who was listed among the Top 100 most influential people in India (“Indian Express”).

Because in India the way law works is that
 you are guilty until proven rich (A,I)
 it’s proven repeatedly, right?
 Sanjay Dutt was guilty, yes, but he was also not doing well at that time (I)
 he got convicted.
 Subrata Roy, the government seized his assets, they’re like (Hindi) Go to Jail (I).
 Salman was chilled. No Problem
 nothing happened, like that car, nobody died. It was like chilled out.
 the car was a hover craft (I)
 it just hovered over those people
 they got a heart attack, they were like
 {imitates victims} (Hindi)‘what a sexy car!’ (L)
 this guy (Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh) got convicted despite being rich, man
 so he is definitely, definitely guilty (Pant “Gurmeet” 00:02:16-00:02:55)

Pant lists several examples where public figures in India were charged with crimes and draws a direct connection between their financial status at the time of trial and the outcome of the court proceedings. He claims that Dutt and Roy were only jailed because of their lack of money and influence at the time of trial. Salman Khan however, who is one of India’s most famous actors, was bailed out of jail despite having been sentenced to five years (“As It Happened”) for having killed one and injured four in a hit-and-run car accident in 2002. By giving a sarcastic impression of what actually happened that day, he likely refers to the absurd justifications given by Khan after the incident, who denied being culpable in any way despite witnesses’ testimonies (“Salman Khan”). Following the logic of the causal relations that Pant sarcastically draws, he illustrates “how guilty” Singh must be, considering his wealth and influence. In fact, newspaper reports suggest that Singh was accused of murder and rape in several cases (“India Guru”). According to these examples, it takes a highly criminal person for the ones in charge to look past money and influence. Pant’s and Mittal’s stories can both be regarded as satirist critiques of the corrupt Indian judicial system as well as the reigning powers that signal that the amount of safety that a person enjoys largely depends on his or her status and economic capital. It also becomes clear in their bits that their primary

aim does not just seem to be entertainment but enlightenment. Pant's bits in particular tend to take on a quite educational focus.

The stand-up comedians clearly position themselves towards the ambiguity that the current circumstances yield despite being themselves fearful of the unpredictability of the initiatives that the government or non-governmental organizations take to silence a person. They seem to be aware that they are only able to do so due to their own status as members of the educated upper middle class and they know that it is only this status as well as their publicity that keeps them from possibly becoming a target of goons. Nevertheless, it becomes obvious that they try to not be too specific, as the public accusation of an influential person or group could nevertheless get them into trouble – if the court has not met a decision as it is the case with Singh. It has to be noted, however, that especially in the past year, the number of stand-up comedians who caustically mock politicians and Modi in particular and do so even in Hindi seems to have risen. All of the bits that I am going to analyze in the next chapter have been uploaded between May of 2017 and July 2018 and thus all date back to the time following Kunal Kamra's controversial bit where he mocked the government and its hypocritical patriotism.

4.3 The Mockery of Politicians

No comedian has yet dared to joke about Indians' patriotism apart from Kamra, but politicians seem to have become a popular target of mockery in recent times. It is particularly interesting to see how Prime Minister Modi is made a topic of mockery without the comedians ever using his full name. Although I did not come across any reports of Modi himself prohibiting jokes about him, the evidence and context that have been analyzed so far leave for comprehensible reasons as to why the stand-up comedians prefer to reduce additional risks. Much effort seems to be put into the attempt not to offend and there are several precautions that many comedians take, even with regard to unpolitical topics. One popular strategy that I often observed particularly in stand-up bits directed at influential politicians or groups is the habit of more or less obvious pretend appeasement by the comedian before the revelation of their actual opinion. In a video uploaded in August of 2017, Vipul Goyal presents a bit at the Canvas Laugh Club in Mumbai where he talks about the raise of the Goods and

Services Tax that has been gradually occurring over the past three years of Modi's reign. He offers a quite critical approach to the manipulative ways in which Modi attempts to distract the public from the problems that have been occurring under his reign. He introduces the topic as follows:

So I'm a big big fan of Modiji, how many Modiji fans in the audience?
 make some noise, all the Modiji... (Cheering)
 But my problem is... (1) (Goyal 00:00:10-00:00:17)

Goyal makes an effort to emphasize his general sympathy for Modi to appease the audience and all potential future recipients of the recorded bit that identify as passionate Modi supporters. He does so by adding *-ji* to Modi's name, which is a suffix used in Hindi to pay respect and acknowledge the authority of a person. In this part it is irrelevant whether or not his sympathy is real, as the primary function of Goyal's introducing lines seems to be appeasement. Only once he as well as the audience has agreed that Modi is a good prime minister does he deem it appropriate to deal out criticism on him. In order to further reduce the probability of backlash against the video, two disclaimers in the beginning of the clip with the first one reminding the viewer that the utterances in the video are not to be taken seriously as they uniquely serve the purpose of entertainment. The second disclaimer particularly concerns the topic of the bit and once more stresses that it only constitutes a "*light hearted take*" on the tax raise. Disclaimers like these have equally become a popular measure taken for uploaded videos of stand-up bits as a direct reminder for the audience not to take offense about the jokes.

A similar approach, albeit more sarcastic, is taken by Abijit Ganguly for an uploaded bit from September of 2017 at the Canvas Laugh Club in Mumbai where he compares the arbitrary way in which Modi keeps changing his policies to the TV show *Big Boss*, which is similar to *Big Brother* in its format. He misleadingly named the Youtube clip *Modi Ji is Big Boss* and wrote a description that says "Stand-up bit about Modi Ji and how awesome he is" (Ganguly). Depending on the recipient's ability to detect the irony in these utterances, they may not serve as an effective tool for appeasement, but they humorously depict the common habit in stand-up comedy of trying to avoid harsh backlash. The brilliance of this appeasement is that it becomes difficult to turn what is being said against the comedian and thus reduces the risk for

them to face consequences by those who do not understand the concept of stand-up. Considering that the (pretend) pandering has become so common in recent years, it could be interpreted as an unofficial compromise: although the appeasement may go against the comic's own principles, it grants them a certain amount of artistic freedom. Accordingly, the comedian tries to encourage the audience to reflect on the current political status quo with whatever means required. It should be noted that a comic does not necessarily have to be opposed to a group or politician to joke about them. Furthermore, the city in which a show takes place as well as the audience and whether or not a show is recorded may have an influence on the content that a comic is going to present. It thus seems logical that Goyal and Ganguly as well as many other comedians choose stand-up-experienced cities such as Mumbai to do shows on political topics. It must be noted, however, that the target audience of these two bits differ from the other bits analyzed so far. Considering that Goyal and Ganguly do stand-up comedy in Hindi, the requirement for knowledge of the English language does not constitute a barrier. Furthermore, by comparing Modi's reign to the Hindi TV show *Big Boss*, Ganguly refers to a format that is widely accessible due to the broadcasting medium as well as the language. Nevertheless, considering that both shows were held in Mumbai and are now only accessible via the internet, their target audience seems to remain predominantly urban.

Apart from the precautions that are taken before controversial politicians and political groups are being subjected to criticism, there are further measures taken by the comedians particularly with regard to mockery to keep the subject of their target as ambivalent and slippery as possible. The following examples show that creative ideas have been found in this concern. In a stand-up video from May 2017, comedian Amar explains that he does not like to reveal his surname nor where he is from because he feels that stereotypes are inevitably ascribed to him. He then pretends to reveal his identity, but fools his audience by revealing lie after lie.

Ya, so I don't tell people I am a Gujarati
 My full name is Amar Patel, ok
 But I don't tell people
 because people start attaching stereotypes to that as well
 people are like what are Gujaratis famous for?
 Gujaratis are famous for their love of Muslims (L)
 Like Gujaratis love Muslims to pieces (L, a)
 So I don't tell people I'm a Gujarati, it's difficult

But I'm lying, I'm not a Gujarati either (l)
 I am actually a Muslim (L) (Amar 00:05:25-00:05:59)

Amar makes use of a topic that is very frequently employed by stand-up comedians to poke fun at the characteristics of people from certain regions but manages to attach a more profound message to it. He reflects on the assumptions that are attached to Indian family names as these often indicate the caste as well as the region from which a person stems. While doing so, he adds another meta level to his story by including, inter alia, a very subtle but caustic critique of Narendra Modi. His remark about Gujaratis' "love of Muslims" is sarcastic and the following figure of speech "love somebody to pieces" that typically indicates a deep fondness of something or someone, can be taken in its literal sense. Amar is referring to the Gujarat Carnage of 2002, a systematic riot that left more than 1000 people dead, out of which the large majority were Muslims. Modi, who was Chief Minister of the state government of Gujarat at that time, was reported by several sources to have been indirectly involved in the execution of the carnage and was sharply criticized for the overall handling of the situation ("Gujarat Riot"). Although Amar does not give any clear hint indicating a particular reference to Modi, given that he was in charge of the state at the time of the incident, the remark is inevitably also directed at him. Amar's hidden message about the Gujarat Carnage invites the audience to further reflect on his observations especially against the background that Modi was able to become Prime Minister of India despite being accused of being indirectly responsible for the riot ("Gujarat Riot").

While Amar's approach to mocking Modi is a rather inductive approach, Sorabh Pant offers a more deductive approach to mocking the most powerful Indian politicians. In his latest Youtube upload on Indian college rules, Pant mocks Narendra Modi and Amit Shah, the current president of the BJP, when he pokes fun at the guards that have recently been employed in an engineering institute in Vellore, Tamil Nadu, to prevent men and women from any physical interaction that goes beyond handshakes. He then proceeds to ridicule the guards for not understanding the concept of homosexuality.

These colleges would be like completely unnerved by a gay couple (l)
 that's the loophole, if you're gay you'll have a ball (l)
 because these guys can't comprehend straight relationships
 like girl on girl or guy on guy
 they're like {imitates guards} (Hindi) What is this? What is happening? (l)
 they won't even understand

they're like {imitates guards} (Hindi) these two kids are very close no? (L,a)
 yesterday I saw them wrestling
 it was a weird kind of wrestling
 our students Amit and Narendra (l, L, A)
 Amitesh and Narendranath, full name (L,A) (Pant "Indian" 00:03:40-00:05:25)

Pant's mockery that is quite openly directed at the guards suddenly takes an unexpected turn by making Modi and Shah the focus, but only refers to them by their first names. Due to the directness of the prior mockery, the audience does not catch the subtle reference to Modi and Shah right away, but the dramatic pause by Pant conveys the underlying hint to them. Just when the audience has caught up on his reference, Pant quickly pretends to complete his prior statement by giving the "full names" of the students he mentioned, making it impossible for the joke to be held against him, although to the audience, his pretend correction only further reinforces the assumption that it was indeed Narendra Modi and Amit Shah that Pant referred to. The depiction of Modi and Shah as a gay couple is not only ironic because the BJP openly positions itself against homosexuality ("BJP Will Not"), but furthermore makes fun of the close political relationship that has connected Modi and Shah since their very beginnings in the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and has played a major role in the election wins of the BJP (Mahurkar). While Pant has an intelligent way of setting up the story, by talking about circumstances that concern sphere of upper education, his comedy again remains rather exclusive by targeting particularly an educated audience that can relate to the college life.

So far, Modi has been the main target of ridicule but he is not the only high-rank politician who gets mocked. The following bit is from Rahul Subramanian's show "Kal Main Udega"⁴ from 2017, where he talks about the Indian political spectrum and seems to put Rahul Gandhi into the focus of his mockery. He dives right into the topic with his opening line:

My name is Rahul and I am not a Gandhi (l)
 my jokes are intentional (L) (Subramanian "Indian" 00:00:03-00:00:12)

Subramanian is referring to his namesake Rahul Gandhi, the president of the Indian National Congress Party (Prabhu) and Narendra Modi's former opponent in the 2014 elections (Blume), who has been a target of ridicule in the past years due to

⁴ Hindi: Tomorrow I'll be flying high.

repeated confusing and thoughtless comments and actions – video platforms are brimming with clips of his awkward speeches. Subramanian jokingly sets himself off from Gandhi by stressing that he would never say the things that Gandhi says. At the same time, however, he praises Gandhi’s ability to not take offense:

No one gets offended
 And I think that’s a sign of a true politician who can take jokes on himself
 he might not be the greatest when it comes to {points finger at own head} but (l)
 that’s great
 because look at the other... at the other guy (l)
 he who must not be named (L) (Subramanian “Indian” 00:01:01-00:01:20)

Subramanian puts Gandhi and Modi in relation with each other and by this points out who is a “true” politician and who is not. As opposed to Gandhi, Modi does not tolerate ridicule, and ironically so little in fact, that Subramanian deems it safer to not say his name. He elicits laughter from the audience when he refers to Modi as “he who must not be named”, which can be interpreted as a reference to Lord Voldemort in Harry Potter, who is the representation of evil in the story. Mentioning him by his name enables Voldemort to locate and kill the person who said his name. Subramanian indirectly puts Modi on a level with Voldemort, which not only shows his negative opinion of him but can also be interpreted as implying the consequences that he may have to face if he mentions Modi by his name. He furthermore refers to Modi as “56-inches chest clash” (Subramanian “Indian” 00:01:30-00:01:34), a reference frequently used by Modi himself in the course of his pre-electoral campaigns to indicate that it needed a strong man like him to take care of India’s current problems (Srivastava). It is clear that he prefers Gandhi over Modi, but yet, he points towards Gandhi’s own incompetence as a political leader by making the ability to take a joke the criterion for a “true” politician, implying that because one cannot make jokes about Modi, he is not a “true” politician. The way in which Subramanian mocks Gandhi in this bit is significantly more explicit and direct than the way in which he mocks Modi that is full of hidden meanings. By employing Gandhi as the point of departure for his humorous comparison, the deficiencies that he mocks in Modi can be derived from Modi constituting the “other” to Rahul Gandhi. The humor largely derives from the forced effort of Subramanian to avoid saying Modi’s name that leads him to joke about not being able to joke about him. The strategy that he employs to avoid potentially momentous backlash from Modi supporters is the use of substitute names that, to the audience, nevertheless clearly demarcate Modi as the person he is referring to.

Several other comedians have made fun of Rahul Gandhi and it is obvious that the takes on Gandhi are significantly more direct than for Modi and leave little to no room for interpretation. A blunt example of this can be found in a bit by Radhika Vaz from 2017 where she explains why she finds children to be overrated. Inter alia, she justifies her opinion by pointing out that children rarely turn out smart:

In all likelihood, you are going to end up with the next Rahul Gandhi (L, a)
 An average, talentless mouth breather, alright (l)
 and you're gonna have to love it (l) (Vaz 00:03:03-00:03:20)

The straightforwardness with which Vaz ridicules, or rather, insults Gandhi goes in accord with the argument of Nitin Mandal who says that, as opposed to Modi and the BJP, there is no risk in making fun of Rahul Gandhi (Appendix C). It becomes obvious that those stand-up comedians who do decide to take up political topics have very different ways of doing so. While there are very few comedians such as Kunal Kamra who dare risk their own well-being for the sake of voicing their opinion on stage, there is a slightly bigger number of comedians who deal with the topic of politics after having met certain precautions. The measures that they take show the creativity and dynamism of the stand-up comedians to take a stand and criticize contemporary political movements in times of increasing anti-democratic tendencies. The rising number of stand-up comedians who dare to make fun of Modi and the BJP give hope that other stand-up comedians will also get on board in the quest for creating resistance through humor and satire. Especially the Hindi-speaking comedians carry a big potential in this quest because their comedy targets a broader group than is the case for Anglophone Indian stand-up comedy. But most importantly, the political stand-up comedians raise awareness and encourage a culture of critical reflection of the society in its current state on the side of the audience. They serve as examples that can inspire to develop the peoples' own assertion of the democratic rights that they possess.

Considering all of the phenomena that have been examined in the stand-up bits analyzed in chapter four, it can be concluded for the moment that the stand-up comics denounce the discriminatory and corrupt judiciary system. They furthermore decry the Hindu-nationalist and anti-Muslim tendencies of Modi and the BJP while at the same time also lamenting the hypocrisy of Rahul Gandhi and the INC, who claim to be

secular and socialist while their actions say otherwise. Most of all, and this becomes evident again and again without the comedians explicitly naming it, there seems to be significant concern about the compliance with democratic rights, most prominently so the freedom of speech and artistic expression.

5 Conclusion

Stand-up comedy is an art that finds expression in a dialogic form that involves the comedian and the audience. The comedian can take on the function of an initiator of a shared both reexamination and revelation that encourages the audience to reflect on the state of its society and to question long-held beliefs and ideologies. Their content always constitutes a reflection of a society's current social, cultural and political happenings and humor serves as the mediator in this process. Particularly with regard to political stand-up comedy, humor takes on several functions that render thoughts of resistance effective but at the same time ambiguous enough for the observations not to be turned against the comedian – given that they actually seek to convey the stand-point through humor. With regard to the Indian context, stand-up comedy withholds a considerable potential that is yet in the course of being discovered. As opposed to the countries from which Indian stand-up comedy derived, stand-up comedy in India is still new and exciting and to a certain extent, revolutionizing the Indian entertainment scene as it offers a humorous valve both to the young generation that is frustrated about the current circumstances as well as the political comedians. The genre offers them a platform to make their voices heard and to represent those who share their opinions. However, due to the censorship of their freedom of speech, paired with the unequal access of the population to the internet as well as the ambivalent status of the different languages in India, the comedians face complex limitations with regard to their target audience. Although I did not specifically analyze Indian stand-up comedy with regard to their postcolonial legacy, it becomes clear that left-overs of British rule still linger in the society and have caused numerous conflicts of which even political stand-up comedy, whose aim is to raise awareness for societal grievances, cannot rid itself of.

The overall grievance that seems to be of most concern to the political stand-up comedians is the dysfunctionality of the Indian democracy, as they increasingly have to fight for their right of freedom of speech and expression. They problematize the arbitrary decisions of the government and the discrimination of minorities with particular regard to Muslims. Some of them are even daring enough to directly mock the ones who are in power within this system, with particular regard to the current Prime Minister Modi. However, almost all of them take precautions in order to prevent anyone influential from getting offended and acting against them. Considering the amount of uploads of videos in the past four years that deal with political topics, it can be said that

the Indian stand-up comedy scene is increasingly becoming political, despite the overall numbers still being low. The majority seems to prefer to not take any major risks and there seems to be a split between those comedians who do stand-up comedy with the primary goal of entertaining the audience and those who put the main focus on educating and raising awareness among their audience. However, the case of Kenny Sebastian shows that even those comedians who have so far refrained from dealing with politics are increasingly becoming aware of their reach and the responsibility that comes with it and many of them want to assert the rights that the Indian constitution should grant them. and there seems to be a split between those comedians who do stand-up comedy with the primary goal of entertaining the audience and those who put the main focus on educating and raising awareness among their audience.

With regard to Anglophone Indian stand-up comedy, even in their criticism of Indian circumstances, the comedians often take on approaches that are based on their experiences as members of the upper middle class, which are unrelatable to those who are not part of that class. This cannot necessarily be held against them – after all, in order to be authentic, they can only rely on what they live themselves. However, while they criticize the government for their decisions, they rarely ever question the way in which the Indian society is constructed or analyze the historical and political roots of the social divide. On the one hand, this can be ascribed to the fact that they lack the experiences needed to represent the truly disadvantaged. On the other hand, this is likely due to the fact that they are members of the classes that profit from the privileges attached to these classes. Stand-up comedy at its current state still predominantly relies on a discourse that remains in the more privileged middle and upper classes and that excludes the interests of a significant number of people: those who do not have access to internet, those who cannot afford to go to the shows and those who simply do not get the humor because the content on which it relies is too far away from their own reality. Especially considering the circumstance that the Indian stand-up scene is still predominantly English-speaking and largely based in India's metropolitan areas, the topics as well as the language constitute barriers in the equal spread of recognition of the genre across all classes, castes and religious groups. While the predominantly Anglophone stand-up comedy scene is a symptom of the societal division, it also indirectly plays into the divide. However, it cannot be stand-up comedy's task to single-handedly unify India – this is an issue that only the government can take on.

On the one hand, those stand-up comedians whose prior goal it is to profit from the scene that has by now become a beneficial industry will continue to grow in all likelihood. At the same time, political stand-up comedy as well will continue to thrive as long as there is no clear improvement of the political situation. While Anglophone political stand-up comedy will remain largely reserved for the urban, English-speaking class, the true potential for resistance possibly remains among the political Hindi and local languages stand-up comic scenes, because only they are able to break up the boundaries that restrict the masses from becoming a target. Thus, the only solution to breaking up the interrelation of English-speaking, urban upper/middle class comedians who equally attract an English-speaking urban upper/middle class audience is to bring more diversity into the scene. The increasing rise in number of Hindi stand-up comedians as well as comedians who speak other regional Indian languages and the rising popularity and acceptance of these languages are a step into this direction and give cause for hope in this concern. Hindi Stand-Up comedians such as Sanjay Rajoura who take a stand on the political situation but at the same time aim at targeting non-elitist audiences and Kunal Kamra who is not afraid of overstepping boundaries with his content are the ones who might truly be able to change the face of the Indian stand-up scene. However, although the scene is becoming more open towards diverse Indian languages, it is unlikely that members of discriminated communities will be allowed by the public to share political stand-up comedy based on their experiences – after all, those in power have no interest in large-scale resistance from the classes that they oppress and therefore, censorship and other measures will be likely to keep them silent.

Future approaches to the topic of Indian stand-up comedy as resistance should take the Hindi stand-up scene as well as the scenes of other native Indian languages into account. It could be particularly interesting to examine whether and in which way Hindi stand-up comedians create political resistance through their comedy and what measures they take to escape consequences – considering that they potential constitute a much higher threat to the current government than their English-speaking colleagues. Furthermore, since female comic resistance in India has fallen rather short in this paper due to the complexity of the topic, future research should also focus on the female stand-up comedy scene and their way to deal with the society's and the scene's gender-based discrimination of women.

Appendix

Appendix A: Personal Interview With Daniel Fernandes in Jaipur, 25

February 2018

(Anglophone Stand-Up Comedian Based in Mumbai)

What do you think is the significance or the status of stand-up comedy in India at the moment?

Fernandes: (...) We are a very young industry but at the same time we are growing very fast through the internet. (...) It's still fairly new, so we still have a lot of people who are only discovering the scene (...) But the regional comedy scene has only just started to evolve. When we started, it was predominantly in English, but now Hindi is growing very popular (...) and we foresee that the regional scene will become very big in the next years.

That is interesting. I thought it was the other way round, that Comedy used to be only in Hindi.

Fernandes: Comedy has existed in India in many forms. (...) You would have like three or four guys sitting down and recite limericks (...). What is happening with this movement is for the first time India is seeing comedy where comedians are talking about the stuff that is happening in our country, talking about politics, talking about religion in a way that it's never been done before.

Would you say that talking about politics is still a taboo topic in stand-up comedy?

Fernandes: (...) Yes it is still a little taboo, but keep in mind that my comedy is in English predominantly. My colleagues who do political comedy in Hindi have to deal with a lot more heat from the right-wing because Hindi is the language of the masses, plus, my jokes are a little more layered so it's hard to get mad at that. So far, I have not gotten in any major trouble, but there is a Facebook page called "Humans of Hindutva" that does good political satire. It got people so pissed off that they started threatening him, so he went off, then came back on again and so on. So there is a certain amount of resistance that comes with political humor, I think we as a country have not learned to laugh at ourselves just yet, because for the longest time, slapstick was just laughing at

somebody else whereas observational humor or political humor is about laughing at ourselves. (...)

What would you say, where do the people in your audience come from? What backgrounds do they have?

Fernandes: In India, the audience is predominantly urban, they are very privileged. English stand-up comedy in India is an elitist art form, so it's not for the masses, they will never come for a show like this. So it's people who have a really nice job, they drive two or three cars. They are all people from places of privilege. We are slowly starting to go to tier II or tier III cities, so Jaipur for example is a tier II city, it's not a metropolitan city like Bombay or Delhi. So you saw like 60 people here, in Bombay I have had shows in front of 400 people, so it's only slowly picking up here. But predominantly the elite class. Not super rich, though, because when you are that rich, you're not gonna watch a comedy show, your life is already perfect, you know, you need to have a certain amount of pain in your life to go watch a comedy gig like this.

(...)

And of course, not everybody in India speaks English so fluently that they can follow English comedy...

Fernandes: ...exactly, but inspite of this, because the population is so large, even the niche is a lot of people, so India has one of the largest English-speaking populations of the world. (...)

Appendix B: Personal Interview With Nishant Tanwar in Delhi, 3 March 2018

(Hindi Stand-Up Comedian based in Delhi)

How did you decide to do stand-up comedy?

Tanwar: (...) In the first two years that I was doing comedy, it was purely for the love of comedy. Only in 2011, money started coming out of it (...) We are very fortunate that in India, we can make money from this now.

And how come you are getting so much money from it now?

Tanwar: Demand and supply! There are very few comedians and right now, comedy is the in-thing. Right now, in India, comedians are like rock stars. (...)

You said before that you did stand-up comedy in English. What is speaking Hindi to you in stand-up versus speaking English?

Tanwar: Differences are, when I started in 2009, the scene it was in English. So you really had to struggle if you were a Hindi comic and being Indian, where I come from, my first thought process is in Hindi. If I perform in English, I have to convert my entire thought process to English and then release it, so it's not the same, the effect is not the same, the relatability is not the same. And some of the punches are absolutely not the same. If I throw a punch in Hindi which is very specific to the Hindi language, if I convert it to [English] and do the same punch, it won't work at all, because slangs and everything. So when I started performing in Hindi, my online thing blew up, honestly nobody knew me until like 2015. When I started performing in Hindi in 2016, suddenly my videos went viral, they got like three million views (...). I have a few videos still in English, they have like 30,000 views. And Indians are everywhere, from US to UK to Africa. (...) I think we have now also realized that India has the world's second biggest population, so we don't need to look outside of India, we can still cater to our people everywhere and will be able to survive from that. I have switched from English to Hindi, people have switched from English to Hindi to regional languages. People are now performing in Gujarati, so that's even a smaller subset, because even that community is so big, they don't need to cater to other people. (...)

And what do you think your audience is made of? I talked to Daniel Fernandes before who performs in English and he said that his audience comes from very privileged backgrounds. How is this for you, since you are performing in Hindi?

Tanwar: English is for the elite. When you perform in Hindi, it's for the rest of the people who are maybe not that well educated or don't understand English that well, but the elite are also part of my audience, because they as well understand Hindi. So it is not the case that I walked from one audience to the other. So this was already my audience, the elite, but Hindi has become cool. Now people are accepted. It's not something that people look down upon. Now it's cool to be yourself and many people have joined [Hindi stand-up comedy]. (...) In India, there's a stand-up comedy scene which is on the Internet, online, which is Youtube, Facebook, etc. and then there's a stand-up comedy scene which is on television and these two are very different. Because on television, in India, you cannot do politically incorrect jokes or even intelligent jokes. I've been uploading videos on the internet for the longest time. Last year, I got an offer to perform on television. They asked me to work on my set and remove subtle jokes and intelligent jokes. Because you know, the television audience is very widespread and they come from different backgrounds (...) On the internet you have to search. The television you just switch it on and you don't know what will be on that day. So that was the first time I reached to so many people. Like suddenly, I got messages from the smallest villages and towns that said they saw me on TV. And they did not know about my existence before they saw me on TV. (...) A lot of the jokes they don't get. So I have a set about travelling on planes vs. travelling on trains. So a lot of Indians have still not flown, they've never sat in a plane, so they won't know what's so funny about it. (...) In India there is a social divide. If you don't speak English, you are looked down upon. Because in India, if you're not educated, that's the only reason you won't speak English. English is part of our education. Everything is taught to us in English. There are very few schools who teach in Hindi, because if you are taught in Hindi, you might be very intelligent, you may end up becoming a rocket scientist, but it's a lot tougher if you haven't studied in English.

Appendix C: Personal Interview With Nitin Mandal in Delhi, 1 March 2018

(Open-Mic Host and Hindi Stand-Up Comedian Based in Delhi)

How did English and then Hindi stand-up comedy come about?

Mandal: (...) Hindi stand-up comedy only recently started to get validation, like 2, 3 years back, there is a comedian called Zakir Khan, he actually kicked off the Hindi stand-up comedy scene. So there is a bigger demand for Hindi stand-up comedy now (...) And when you abuse, we say fuck or we say chootya (Hindi: fool), but chootya sends a bigger impact because it's our language (...)

Do you talk about political topics in your stand-up comedy?

Mandal: So you see, what is happening right now, we have many different parties, we have Congress, we have BJP, we have many more. So if I make a joke about Rahul Gandhi, everybody will be very happy. But if I make a joke about Modi, his followers will get very angry, they will go on Youtube and send out threats. So these are the things happening in India so we are a little scared. It's not a problem to talk about current circumstances in India, but we are not allowed to call names and talk about the BJP, the ruling party, because his followers are very heated, they will come and beat you.

(...)

What would you say is the difference between English and Hindi in stand-up comedy?

Mandal: (...) English stand-up comedians have a bigger authority. It is considered an upper class language, few people can speak English. People automatically believe that a comedian who is speaking in English has a better idea of things. (...)

Appendix D: Notes From Meeting With Prof. Shaswati Mazumdar at the University of Delhi, 8 March 2018

- There is a long history of joking about the government in India
- The Indian government tries to censor satire but they cannot keep up, especially with censorship on the internet
- There are fines and bans for people that attack the government, although it is against the rule of the constitution
- The government is taking the law in their own hands and are particularly targeting Muslims and the members of the lower castes
- Lots of inequalities between rich and poor, these have gotten worse during globalization and the white masters have been replaced by brown masters
- There has been an economic boom in the past 15 - 20 years that has benefitted many but not all, especially the middle class
- In the last 15 - 20 years there has been a shift towards Hindi even in universities

Appendix E: Notes From Conversations With Open-Mic Comedians at Akshara Theater, Delhi, 1 March 2018

On the question of why they decided to do stand-up comedy in Hindi instead of English

- The jokes come more natural in Hindi, but some jokes also come easier in English, depending on the topic
- You cannot talk about dark topics or make jokes about vulgar things in Hindi
- Talking about sex is more acceptable in English while in Hindi, almost anything you say about sex is offensive
- “you look like a dick” -> acceptable in English, the equivalent in Hindi would be incredibly offensive

Appendix F: Example of Stand-Up Bit Transcription by Michael Held-
Hernandez in *Black Atlantic Comedy*

Barack Obama [A, C]

Barack Obama

Barack Obama, yes

a black man

with a black name [C]

{in Johannesburg} I know that ain't that black here

but in America that's about as black as a name could get [L]

Barack Obama

that's right next to Dikembe Mutombo [L]

that's right, Barack, man

he don't let his blackness sneak up on you [I]

you know

if his name was Bob Jones or something

it might take you two or three weeks to realize he black [I]

but as soon as you hear 'Barack Obama'

you expect to see a brother with a spear [L, w, a]

just standin' on top of a dead lion [L]

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