



Only a Joke: Stand-up Comedy and Disability in the Indian Context

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Abstract

Often taking the form of anecdotes and observations, the formal elements of stand-up comedy performances are directed towards a public circulation of knowledge about the nonnormative body. Such knowledge is transacted through the medium of public performances which not only disrupt the social expectations that have come to be centered around non-normativity, but also stretch the boundaries of a political register about identity-based claims and assertions. Thus, humour, with all its bearings of being disruptive, becomes a fertile space where meanings regarding disability can be reinscribed. Taking off from the idea of cultural production as an index of the everyday, this paper would begin with the assertion that the political construction of a disability identity was integrated into the process of artistic production of its many meanings. Following which, this paper would bring together the incidence of disability in the popular arts movement of the early 1990s and establish the ground for an analytical model where the radicalism inherent in dissemination of disability culture comes forward. Theorising on the radical potential of both the content of a disability performance as well as the formal elements of stand-up humour, this paper would finally seek to ground these conceptual ruptures within a normative social space through a study of Indian stand-up comics with disability.

Keywords: Disability, Subversion, Humour, Culture, Experience

Introduction

As ubiquitous as it is in the realm of human experience, recent debates surrounding disability have stretched out its construction beyond the limits of sociological or anthropological analyses to account for its perennial presence within forms of cultural production. Underscoring this cultural value of disability facilitated an interrogation of its predetermined meanings, intercepting the associated networks of power which had come to be premised on the

conceptual axes of normativity at one end and bodily, psychological, and emotional difference on the other. As a discursive object that had been drawn out, molded, and determined to hold in place an unequal and discriminatory social sphere, disability when studied in its cultural formations, brings out the possibility of realizing the framework of difference through which persons with disability have come to be classed in recent history. This in turn leaves open the potential for subverting those meanings which a nondisabled imaginary has hoisted upon them.

By cultural formations, here is meant the proliferation of disability-centric texts, as well as the critical study of those where disability, as a neutral narratological element, is present in some form. The emergence of disability studies as a discipline was fundamental to this discursive shift, thematically aligned as it was with social movements from the late 1970s onwards in both the United States and the United Kingdom for a renewed perspective on disability as a political category. Not only did the literature emerging from this critical juncture rewrite the conceptual paradigms of disability through a revision of its medicalized definitions, but the newer frameworks of the social and the affirmation models paved the way for a reinvigorated emphasis on disability as a way of life which was culturally and aesthetically significant. Take for instance the disability arts movement, which Colin Cameron sees as fundamental to the conceptual emergence of John Swain and Sally French's affirmation model of disability (Swain and French 569). Citing the examples of musicians such as Johnny Crescendo, Ian Stanton, and the Fugertivs, Cameron writes how the disability arts movement had emerged in the 1980s and 1990s since "disabled artists, working within a diverse range of art forms, started to resist mainstream disability discourses and to explore and develop their own life perspectives: to claim and reclaim power and control in their own lives" (Cameron 382). Drawing upon this discursive shift in the political landscape where the person with disability was repositioned to actively participate in the writing of their social narratives, Swain and French's affirmation model underscored the importance of moving away from the tragic and medicalized rationalizations of disability, with a sustained emphasis on the lived experiences of persons with disability, and seeing in this theoretical framework the

possibility of “collective as well as individual” (577) iterations of a political identity.

Rooting the study in the political claim of a disability identity, this paper would try to understand how personal, anecdotal experiences are deployed within a public forum to mediate the ideological grounds of a nondisabled imaginary. Intervening in this process of cultural construction of the person with disability, the stand-up comics discussed here rewrite the degree of active participation that characterizes most objective assessments and assumptions about the lives of disabled persons. Complexly negotiated experiences therefore punctuate the notions of selfhood, identity, autonomy, as well as socio-religious expectations of disability. Thus, this paper would primarily expunge on the performances of Indian stand-up comedians as generating a space where this reconfiguration of meaning is possible, through the intersecting narratives of personal experiences constructing public personas. To this end, it would discuss the conceptual bases of humour, jokes, and comedy as a form of art, as well as the position of disability within them. The comedians discussed conduct their routines in the English language, and despite the localized nature of their narrated experiences, their performances mostly take place in comedy clubs or other metropolitan venues, thus conferring another layer to both the subjectivities they construct as well as the interactions they have with a largely upwardly mobile class of audience. This has a bearing on the reception of their experiences of disability, given how a liberal-progressive stance with respect to bodily, mental, and emotional difference does not operate in the same social circumstances as those which are entrenched in orthodoxies regarding the disabled body.

Disability as a Cultural Space

Comic performances can be understood as one of the several artistic forms through which a claim for identity-based disability politics can be made. Contextualising ‘culture’ in this case would therefore require looking back at that conceptual turn where it is displaced from its rigid originary framework. Reading culture as “ordinary” (Williams 4) adds to its position as an index of artistic production by not only considering the “inner processes” of its creation but also the

“common meanings” (Williams, *Marxism and Literature* 17) and “general process, specialized to its presumed configurations in ‘whole ways of life’” (17). This mediation between the ordinariness of everyday life and the documentary nature of public artistic expression is what has come to underscore the fluidity of this concept. This space of mediation is constituted by the relations between cultural forms which keep engaging and disengaging with “dominant cultural forms” (Hall 50), but also engender “the ongoing process by which the dominant cultural forms are able to change and adapt to new circumstances precisely by incorporating such residual and emergent forms” (50). In this context, when cultural struggles play out to varyingly engage tradition, they foster a possible shift in the practices and processes deemed to be dominant as well as marginal. In a state of change, culture becomes a site redolent with the scope of rewriting power differentials and this is where the conceptual possibility of disability as subversive can be located. Driven by a nondisabled imaginary which places it at the edges of mainstream cultural production, or in a tokenistic relationship to the formal structure of a text, a renewed emphasis on lived experiences which are circulated through a popular medium, therefore constructs disability as integral to the process of political fashioning.

Comedy as a form of expression has had a turbulent relationship with disability, often eliciting spectatorship at the cost of denigrating nonnormative bodies. Culturally formulated imaginings of the person with disability are centered around a conception of difference, where this perceived lack is embodied through a presumed inability to fit inside a normative ideal. The person with disability, thus, bears a currency of difference, through which a hegemony of socio-cultural inadequacy is established and rationalized through a curious blend of narratives. Cornering the person with disability because of this presumed and deflected difference has a long history, such as in the instance of freakshows in late nineteenth century America (Thomson), and its gradual formalization in instances such as the trope of the sexually belligerent as well as the desexualized person with disability (Wendell 43), or the inspiring ‘supercrip’ (Mitchell and Snyder 59) whose identity is subsumed behind a narrative of overcoming adversities (19). This “ideology of ability” (Siebers 8) coalesces around the various cultural-historical afterlives of disability

by generating a profusion of narratives which seek to justify the seemingly normative dictums that push the experience of disability to the margins. Thus, as a process imbued with the potential for overturning the ideological rootedness of a nondisabled world, performative comedy provides a significant intervention.

Reading Comedy Through Disability

The critical literature on humour makes note of three primary conceptual frameworks through which it can be analytically grasped. These are the superiority theory, the relief theory, and the incongruity theory. Humour exists, in each of these frameworks, as the direct result of certain degrees of engagement with difference. For instance, the superiority paradigm recognises humour as resulting out of conflicting power differentials where the object of humour is deemed to be of an inferior value. The relief theory, on the other hand, traces its conceptual origin to psychoanalysis, where humour is posited as resulting from the release of nervous energies. The framework for incongruity, placed as it is at a relatively recent historical juncture as compared to the previous two, places the burden of humour on discontinuous expectations and unexpected patterns which bear an element of surprise for the receiving audience. Thinking of humour through the analytical lens of disability, therefore, requires the recognition of both the superiority framework as well as the incongruity theory as fundamental to the circulation of ideas about disability, despite the negotiations of each being starkly different from the other. Superiority theory, Shawn Bingham and Sara Green note,

generally focuses on individuals; it positions the source of blame or liability at the personal level, rather than blaming broader ideals and norms. It often does so with a specific set of evaluative standards or criteria that relate to both moral and physical attributes of the joke's target—thereby putting the target in his or her place while also reinforcing norms and assuring the audience that they, unlike the target, uphold these norms. (Bingham and Green 96)

By reducing the joke directly to the fact of bodily nonnormativity, this framework carries over several points of continuity with the medical model of disability, which is premised on the arbitrary reduction of the lived experience of the person with disability to the biological fact of their impairment. Cultural precepts of disability which immediately simplify the complexities of their worlds to their impairment status, thus, foster an ideology rooted on the acknowledgement of ability as a marker of socio-cultural value. The difference, which had been presumed to begin with, keeps deepening a rift which postulates social inferiority on one side, and acceptance on the other. This conduit transpires into a space where jokes can play off against normative presumptions about the body which, as Alison Wilde notes, “lends itself well to understanding humour used in the service of the torment, or condemnation, of others” (Wilde 32).

Perhaps some form of radicalism fits into the formal elements which make up the performative practice of stand-up comedy. Premised as it mostly on the idea of incongruity, surprises, and unexpected responses, the structures of stand-up routines facilitate a space where a surprising retort can edge into the comfort of anticipation. Through the structure of a punchline to alter the political valence of a joke, stand-up performances make a strong case for this kind of radicalism to take effect. As Bingham and Green note,

Through the lens of incongruity and the analytic frames it offers, comedians can traverse areas of ambivalence and uncertainty, and even the taboo. Drawing on the element of surprise and the incongruous, they are able to navigate a fine line between audience comfort and discomfort within the short distance of a sentence or two (Bingham and Green 112).

Yet, the incongruity inherent in stand-up routines does not presuppose an ahistorical, fixed reception within the duration of the performance. John Morreall writes about how stand-up jokes usually consists of a “cognitive shift”, that is, “a background pattern of thoughts” (Morreall 50) called the setup, and “the punch, which causes our thoughts and attitudes to change quickly” (50). The concept of incongruity is, likewise, structured to elicit a response

from its unexpected, unpredictable change in thought and structure. This inscribes a space for the tacit reversal of norms and conventions, which becomes significant in performances by persons with disabilities. Moreover, Bingham and Green also note how

Incongruous humour can, however, also serve the opposite function as a mirror to reflect and invert traditional norms and values and as a form of resistance. In this sense, incongruous humour is still used as a social corrective, but in ways that challenge the values of the dominant group, while giving voice and even power to the subordinated through incongruity” (Bingham and Green 110).

However, for its thematic and ethical constituents to breach its designated limits, the incongruity must spill over into the receiving audience in a fluid, collaborative process. It is only when this incongruity has been recognised, and acknowledged or denied, that the political prowess of the joke in tackling the ideological presumptions of the audience is realised (Brodie 155). Moreover, Brodie writes that

the stand-up is in a position of re-affirming her right to be the one to reveal this incongruity: that she is not making an outsider’s pronouncement and judgment but knows whereof she speaks as a member of this particular folk group. (Brodie 155)

Brodie’s assertion is similar to what Lockyer also postulates regarding the movement of narratives between the performer and the audience. Calling it “interactional power” (Lockyer 1402), Lockyer specifies how through her ethnographic findings she had come to conceive of this flow as primary to the self-identification and realising of dignity on the part of the disabled comic (1403). Both authors therefore, confer a centrality to the person with disability with respect to how they deploy their experiential narratives, by underscoring the active role that the responding audience plays in this performative setup. This confers a sense of control upon the disabled comic, who may negotiate with the formal features of the joke to suit their ends. Hence, positing the stand-up performer as the primary mediator of their lived experience carries the potential to mediate

culturally prescribed notions of disability. In fact, this aspect of stand-up comedy can be read in the terms of a performance that entails the everyday experience of persons with disabilities. In the introductory chapter to *Bodies in Commotion*, Carrie Sandahl and Philip Auslander write about the social interactions of persons with disabilities, who they note “perform their identities in explicitly self-conscious and theatrical terms” (Sandahl and Auslander 2), with the purpose of becoming “an active maker of meaning, rather than a passive specimen on display” (Sandahl and Auslander 3). Substantiating this claim, the authors write how

As in traditional representation, disability inaugurates the act of interpretation in representation in daily life. In daily life, disabled people can be considered performers, and passersby, the audience. Without the distancing effects of a proscenium frame and the actor's distinctness from his or her character, disability becomes one of the most radical forms of performance art, "invisible theatre" at its extremes (Sandahl and Auslander 2).

It is at this critical point where the experiential complexity of disabled livelihood comes to negotiate its public presence through the form of stand-up comedy. If one of the conceptual possibilities of culture is realising the constant flux between dominant and marginal forms, as well as interiorised and public expressions of life, can the public performance of comedy be considered as one of those vital spaces where a culture of disability persists? Lockyer relates the foregrounding of disability experiences within comic routines as related to Swain and French's affirmative model of disability, where moments of cultural assertion rise in the richness of everyday negotiations with disability (Lockyer 1405). Therefore, the push and pull of power which determines what meanings are ascribed to which social subjects could qualify stand-up performances as a point where the potential for disability's reinscription exists. Discussing how disabled comics manage their material, Lockyer further notes through her findings that

Stand-up comedy thus offers a socially accessible space for disabled comedians who can control their participation in this particular social environment. Such responses are united

in the way in which they recognise the positive benefits of self-definition and self-authorship in comic performance (Lockyer 1402).

Moving from superiority paradigm of humour to the incongruity theory, therefore, shifts the focus of power towards the person with disability, who now has an active role in its mobilisation. Bingham and Green use the terms ‘disabled humour’ and ‘disability humour’ to flag this shift in autonomy of the disabled subject. According to them,

Disabled humour ... denigrates people with disabilities by making them targets of derisive jokes, and disability humour ... enlightens others about the disability experience, affirms the humanity of individuals with impairments, counters the widespread view that disability is a tragedy, and challenges stereotypes (Bingham and Green 4).

Taking root in the formalistic device of incongruent punch-lines while imbibing the personal experience of the performer within its fabric, the act of disability comedy therefore clears out a cultural space where notions of identity, autonomy, and selfhood of the person with disability are asserted. Not only that, the dialectical process of performance and reception contests certain ideologically prescribed ideas of normative social behaviour, especially in the context of South Asia where disability is not constructed in terms similar to specificities in the West.

Stand-up comedy by persons with disabilities in India

Despite the richly documented literature on cultural interpretations of disability in the context of India (Anand 36) (Anand 25) (Miles “Glimpses of Disability in the Literature and Cultures of East Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa”), there has been a general ambivalence in representations of disability in media such as cinema and television. Anita Ghai writes in the context of the Bollywood film how disability “in most Indian films is used as a meta-narrative, thus allocating the viewer to create meaning within the larger, scattered, melodramatic filmic space” (Ghai 280). When not being reduced to caricatures to serve the purposes of comic relief, characters with disabilities in mainstream Hindi films bear a shadow of reluctant

political engagement that does not intervene within a majorly nondisabled cinematic world. That is to say, certain hauntings of normativity continue to fold the person with disability back into a largely accepting nondisabled, yet liberalised sphere. Despite a gradual turn in mainstream cultural representation through several instances of empowering portrayals (Pal 128), the radical possibilities of disability are subsumed as part of a “non-threatening” (Friedner 10) and “feel good diversity” (10) in the public sphere. Such constructions are reinforced through cultural conduits such as Hindi reality television, or the state’s controversial normalisation of *divyangjan* as an identifying term for persons with disabilities (Karmakar, “‘Divyangjan’ is a Controversial Word Similar to ‘Mentally Ill’, says U.N. Body”).

Therefore, one constitutive element in the routines of disabled comics from India is this suspension of socio-cultural normativity by reiterating anecdotal events where difference continues to colour their construction of identity. Sweta Mantrii, who was born with spina bifida, relates an incident at a family gathering where an uncle of hers had come up to ask her whereabouts (“Hear These Funny, Differently-Abled Women Joke About Uncles & Sex,” 00:00:57-00:01:26). Having enquired if things were okay, he goes on to ask her if she could manage to do things by herself. She had answered that she could. Following which, the person had asked her if she could take a shower by herself. To this, Sweta had replied that she could not, but she knew a boy in her neighbourhood who comes by her place in the morning and they take a shower together. The response had scandalised the man so much, that he would go on to avoid holding any conversation with her at subsequent encounters. Sweta’s anecdotal frame brings the audience inside a circle of intimacy, with a familiar theme of paternalism setting up the incongruity in the punchline. Further, Sweta’s joke also edges past the presumed inadequacy attested to persons with disabilities, with the breadth of her identity reduced to a lack of functionality, which in any case is rebuffed by the punchline of the joke.

Similar themes of contesting paternalism and shock are also evident in other comic acts. Nidhi Goyal, an activist-comedian, talks about an incident that had occurred to her on a matrimonial website (“Bad Girls with Aditi Mittal| Ep 1| Nidhi Goyal,” 00:04:00-

00:04:58). She had received a call from a man who was interested in finding a match for his son. The man had heaped praises on her online profile, saying how he was very impressed with her education, career, and so on, and he would have liked her to meet his son. Nidhi, however, reminded him that she had also written about her blindness on her profile. The man appeared shocked, and at a loss for words, hung up the phone. The punchline, however, extended beyond this anecdote to her saying how upon hearing about her visual impairment, the man became “speech impaired”. Nidhi’s account, while rooted in the same experiential framework as Sweta’s, centers around a different affectation. In her case, the profile, despite its redolent qualities, was reduced to a blind woman’s profile, which could only produce disbelief and shock on the part of the caller who is suddenly rendered unfamiliar to the person with disability.

In his comedy special titled *Thank You, I’m Sorry*, Sundeep Rao, a partially sighted comedian from Bangalore, relates an incident when he had received a phone call asking him to come to a college as a guest because he was deemed an ‘inspiration’. Rao’s initial response, before ending the joke in a tone of self-deprecation is to retort “how about you develop your own disability and come and inspire me” (“Sundeep Rao on Inspiration and Political Correctness,” 00:00:05-00:00:27). Further, he goes on to say, with a similar note of irony, that if nondisabled people end up failing in life, they maybe called failures but if he fails in life, he will still be an inspiration (“Thank You I’m Sorry,” 00:43:54-00:44:04). Quips against this bracketing of persons with disability where they are reduced to a story of inspiration, is also reiterated by Sweta Mantri. She insists that administering this label on her will never make her feel equal (“Hear These Funny, Differently-Abled Women Joke About Uncles & Sex,” 00:00:42-00:00:52). Aligning persons with disability to this cultural narrative of inspiration, thus, carefully maintains and normalises the fact of difference which keeps drawing from a position of condescension and paternalism. Thus, a subversion of the mandated meanings of the disabled subject occurs through the consolidation of a political identity that opposes the cultural prevalence of reductive categorisation of disability.

Conclusion

This paper had argued for the construction of a political identity for persons with disabilities through the public medium of stand-up comedy in India. Locating the emergence of a disability culture at the historical juncture where the question of a disability identity and disability rights was a focal narrative, this paper had also tried to trace the concept of cultural struggles as imbued with the intersecting forces of everyday, ordinary experience as well as traditional aesthetic forms. This mediation between lived experiences and public facing art forms the fundamental basis of stand-up comedy, especially when comedic outputs have historically circulated an objective, reductive, and often discriminatory notion of disability. Stand-up comedy, therefore, serves as a site for the reinscription of ideologically provisioned ideas related to the disabled body. Given its formal structure of observational, experiential humour which uses an incongruous turn to subvert constructions rooted in a nondisabled imaginary, stand-up comedy by persons with disabilities provides a space where expressions of political intent, assertions of selfhood, and claims of autonomy can be made. In the context of India, stand-up comedy provides a radically inclined conduit for the expression of a lived experience of disability which interrogates the liberal-progressive put out to assimilate the person with disability into a largely nondisabled national imaginary.

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