



Comic Frames and Conditional Immunity in Indian Stand-Up Comedy

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Abstract

Research into stand-up comedy often veers into an implicit assumption that the joke text forms the central part of the experience; that the form is simply an instance where an appropriate stimulus (joke) leads to a reaction (laughter). While the joke text is the most visible and quotable aspect of the genre, it exists in relation to several factors that function in the background to create an illusion of the seamless, authentically informal comic artist's spontaneous rant about various niche grievances. These factors include the audience, the social placement of the venue, as well as the spatial and sensual factors that hold up the performance, and the material technologies (light-works, sound-system, stage, etc.), the labour from the management and staff of the venue, and of course the comics themselves. Mary Douglas looks at what different spaces do to a body, how certain "space/cultures call upon our bodies to be articulated extremely precisely, while others allow it to relax into relative inarticulate formlessness" (Douglas 361). A dedicated space for stand-up creates a particular frame around the performance and a set of expectations that come with it, which can be antithetical or incompatible with the norm of the world outside this frame. This paper intends to investigate the daily creation of the temporal and highly conditional immunity that is conferred upon comedy clubs and comedians in India. In other words, the paper seeks to understand how the space of stand-up comedy that is often associated with concepts of heterotopia, or parrhesia on the left/liberal side and anti-national and treason on the far right, through the management of the spatiality and the expectations of the audience creates a frame where the unmentionable aspects of

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society are openly talked about. More importantly, the paper seeks to locate the boundary of that comic frame in the Indian context and how the frame is playfully adjusted, stretched, often shrunk, and sometimes shattered. This analysis is based on observation of both live stand-up shows as well as recorded shows available on various online platforms.

Keywords: Comic, Frame, Space, Subversion, Reception

Stand-up comedy, according to Ian Brodie, is “a spoken verbal performance by a sole individual”, “in front of or in collaboration with an audience”, “largely autobiographical or observational” and is “seemingly extemporaneous” (Brodie 14-15). Stand-up comedy, as a subcategory of comedy or as a kind of artistic treatment of any subject matter, is often associated with the idea of the subversive. This subversion is not purely political, though that is a huge part of the image of stand-up in popular conception, and can be related to the concept of incongruity, or in other words, subversion of expectations, that forms a major part of humour theories. In fact, Eagleton sees incongruity as present in all theories that try to explain the working of a joke (Eagleton 73). Unlike the other two major theories, i.e., superiority theory and relief theory, which try to explain why we laugh, incongruity theory tries to answer how we are made to laugh. Terry Eagleton focuses on incongruity, arguing “several of these (humour theories) are really versions of the incongruity theory” as he puts it (Eagleton 67); humour can spring from “a sudden shift of perspective, an unexpected slippage of meaning, an arresting dissonance or discrepancy, a momentary defamiliarising of the familiar” (Eagleton 67), etc. This is not to say that incongruity in its general sense is necessarily comic. Comedic incongruity involves disruption of socially organised and accepted trains of thought or violation of established conventions or laws. In the case of stand-up, additionally, the public dialogue about matters that are spoken only in informal settings within one’s intimate circles, or in

hushed tones, comprises an instance of incongruity, or subversion of the accepted norms of what is mentionable and what is to be kept under wraps. Thus stand-up comedy is a countercurrent to what is to be expected not merely in terms of subverted logical conclusions or politically divergent opinions, but also in terms of normative expectations of what comprises acceptability in social situations. It is noteworthy that while stand-up over the past few decades has amassed a reputation for political commentary, not all stand-up shows are politically charged in terms of targeted critiques of the status quo. A lot of stand-up remains far from any form of politicisation, focusing on observing cultural quirks that do not offend any religious or political hardliners, while a lot of stand-up also focuses on confronting the audience with the base and the profane. Thus due to the nature of the genre which takes on what may seem unsavoury to be mentioned in public, the art form requires to protect itself from backlash during the live iteration as well as the release of the performance recording. This inoculation from attacks from the audience, both live and digital, while talking about sensitive or unsavoury issues, is what I refer to as “conditional immunity”. This immunity is qualified with the term “conditional” as this inoculation is a fragile construction and may be seized and taken down because of a myriad of reasons. This paper seeks to understand the factors that lead to this conditional immunity, which is a tentative temporal acceptance, and in some cases even expectation, of conflicting behaviour and speeches by stand-up comedians. In other words, the paper will look into how the space of stand-up is organised so as to create a frame wherein divergence from norm does not receive the same treatment as it does outside the venue. Additionally, it will highlight the factors that inhibit or enhance comedic gratification in a given comic show, which plays a great role in the reception of the comic routine.

This study employs a qualitative, observational methodology to analyse these trends in Indian stand-up comedy.

The primary material for this analysis consists of both live performances attended by the researcher and recorded performances accessed through digital platforms, including YouTube and OTT services such as Netflix and Amazon Prime Video. Live shows enabled the observation of performer-audience interaction, spatial dynamics, timing, and improvisation, while recorded performances provided access to a wider range of comedians, venues, and temporal contexts. The analysis is based on close viewing and thematic interpretation of performances, with attention to recurring motifs, narrative strategies, linguistic choices, socio-political references, and performance styles. The study prioritises depth of interpretation and contextual understanding, foregrounding the researcher's situated perspective as an informed audience member. The passages that follow thus seek to locate the performance in a social paradigm, wherein the performer and the audience come to be related by way of a system of meaning-making that is different from that which is operational outside of a comedy venue.

The genre of stand-up is a conversational one, to put it simply, as despite the performer's voice being dominant, the upper hand lies with the audience. The withdrawal of the latter for any reason, be it external to the performance or otherwise, brings the performance to an awkward standstill, remedied only by winning them back or by removing the offender, i.e., the performer from the stage. It has also been described as a genre of intimacy (Brodie 5). This intricate, fragile, intimate relation needs exploration in order to understand stand-up in context, beyond the joke-texts or comic speeches which form only a part of the genre. The essay draws on audience studies to come to an understanding of the genre not simply as a text to be studied in isolation, but as a process involving both the performance and its immediate and cumulative reception from the audience. The audience here is understood not as passive spectators but as active interpreters who must be won over by the performer,

again and again over the course of the performance. Additionally, this “winning over” of the audience, as the paper goes on to show, is a process that is at work long before the performance proper begins. The idea of the frame has been borrowed from Erving Goffman to cordon off the performance event since live stand-up has an effect of being indistinguishable from “real” life because of a combination of its conversational tone, autobiographical nature and un-theatrical setting.

Before venturing into the formation and function of this frame and the conditional immunity it creates, there is a need to look at how the stand-up scene differs from other informal, intimate settings where a similar looseness of regulations may be prevalent. Beyond the commercial nature of the genre, which differentiates stand-up from other joke-scenarios, it also requires a kind of control or authority over the space and the audience. The audience and their reaction or response is not easy to theorise. As theatre critic Dennis Kennedy puts it, despite the “materiality of spectators, comprehending them is a problem in metaphysics” (Kennedy 3). The fact of their corporeal, material presence in the performance and the spectral, ephemeral, deeply personal nature of their reactions and impact on the performance is a curious and slippery phenomenon that equally interests and confounds theorists. Any discussion of the audience runs into certain difficulties owing to their non-homogeneity in terms of their expectations or social groups, etc., or the fact that their reactions to a performance are inevitably “private and internal” (Kennedy 3). And yet they cannot be ignored when talking about any performance since they are indispensable to any performance.

It has been highlighted that there are no words in most European languages to assimilate the two senses which are involved in experiencing a performance: sight and aurality (Kennedy 5). The primacy of the former produces the “spectators” (those who look/see) and the latter produces the

“audience” (those who hear). Kennedy also notes the elevation of “hearing the word” over the spectacle both in Biblical terms as well as in the Aristotelian understanding of the spectacle or “opsis” as the least important of the six artistic elements after plot, character, thought, diction and music. However, as Kennedy shows, several artists and philosophers from Aristophanes to Bertolt Brecht saw spectacle as instrumental to the narrative. Although there are situations where we are mainly listeners, as in the case of listening to a radio show, or mainly viewers, as in the case of watching a silent film or a mime show, the usual mode of experiencing a performance involves the use of both the senses.

So then what distinguishes a spectator, and constitutes their membership in an audience? Certain thinkers theorise the audience as those who, while acting as a witness to a performance, seek to decode the message of a performance ‘correctly’ (Elsaesser 12). While others see “subjectivity” in a performance or a piece of media as something inscribed into the performance or medium itself. For instance Laura Mulvey argues that there has been an exclusion of female spectators in Hollywood films because the media tradition in Hollywood constructed narratives with male subjectivity as the spectatorial position (Mulvey 11). Such views often take the discourse into the realm of an “ideal spectator”, and end up giving primacy to the film/performance over individual agency of the spectator. This leads to the supposition that the audienceship is an exercise in comprehension of the message inscribed in the performance or any particular piece of media. Historically, however, this “reading” of the message is not the main concern of audiences, and people have been observed to have attended theatrical events to “ogle an actress or another spectator, arrange an assignation, be with friends, create a ruckus, be noted at the event, watch a new scenic device, or for the sake of companionship, or simply because they were given a free ticket” (Kennedy 12). There are spectators who are dragged to a sporting event they have little

interest in, and in turn drag another to a film that the other finds dull or overstimulating and thus something to be cognitively detached from, and yet they all form part of the audience. Thus, as Kennedy puts it, “spectation is about more than reception”, and “cooperative attendance” is identified by Kennedy as the constituent factor in audienceship (Kennedy 13). Heim also sees the audience in the simplest of terms to be “a group of individuals gathered together to watch a performance” (Heim 5).

During live stand-up shows, there are countless instances of the audience members becoming verbally unruly, or not being “warmed up” which impact on the efficacy of the stand-up routines. This is most palpable in the case of new or amateur performers. Though the duration of the sets pertaining to newcomers in the field are minuscule, the new comic artist standing apart in the spotlight, being the focal point of the audience who are doused in half-darkness, feels the pressure of establishing and subsequently maintaining comic authority. Often, the little stage-time given to an amateur comic passes very slowly, as they struggle to keep the audience amused throughout their set. This struggle for maintaining comic authority is not exclusive to the amateur artists. Established artists too must maintain it through various devices. The following passages draw the various accounts of stand-up comedy by critics and practitioners, as well as personal fieldwork experience undertaken for the purpose of this project. When one thinks of a stand-up show, one may fall into the misconception of putting the onus of success or failure, that is, laughter or monstrous silence, on the comedian(s) performing on a particular night in a particular venue. But as Dan O’Shannon points out in his incisive work on the “comedic event”, there are certain what he refers to as, “baseline reception factors” that remain in the background of the shows but influence to a great extent the direction that the show takes (O’Shannon 28). It is obvious that no one who comes to a show, comic or otherwise, is a blank slate. The preferences and experiences one has prior

to coming to a comic show colour the way they view the events that are to be unfolded before them. This is the “pre-joke reception factors” or “baseline reception factors”. These factors are one’s age, gender, language, educational and employment background, their preference in comedy, etc. This forms the reality of the audience outside of, or external to, the show. Further reception factors accumulate when one takes their seat in the venue. Are they sitting alone or in a group? Are they with friends or with family?

Here, an understanding of what O’Shannon calls the “vehicle” of comedy is important, which is defined as “a man-made creative construct in which a joke(s) may appear” (O’Shannon 43). This is different from the “device” of comedy which refers to the physical contraption in which the comedy may appear. To exemplify this distinction, the device in a stand-up show would be the venue itself, the physical stage and all that makes up the physical dimension of the show, while the idea of the show itself is the vehicle through which the jokes will be delivered. A literary instantiation of this would be that a Kindle reader is the device and Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22* is the vehicle. As O’Shannon puts it, the device is the physical container in which or through which the vehicle, that is the creative container, comes into being for it to be experienced. The idea of the vehicle, and its related concepts are important to gain an incisive understanding of stand-up comedy since the presence or absence of a vehicle affects the reception of a series of jokes. For instance, O’Shannon talks about how a person, say an average office-goer, who is lauded in their workplace for their sense of humour, hilarious rants and witty banter, will struggle immensely when convinced to go on a stage and deliver the jokes that have been undoubtedly successful in the workplace. What changes in these two situations, joking in the workplace and performing onstage in a comedy club, is the change of

medium of delivery from non-vehicular to vehicular. Vehicular performance comes with a set of expectations that do not form a part of non-vehicular joking sessions. The latter is a setting meant for work; in the din of the quotidian frustrations of the workplace, humour delivered by a co-worker may be a brief welcome reprieve from the routine of the job. The former however is a specialised space dedicated to comedy (though the venue on rare occasions features spoken word poetry sessions as well). A person who has come to attend one of these shows will have bought a ticket, travelled to the venue dealing with traffic by road or the crowded metro, struggled to find a parking space, and (as often happens in stand-up shows) waited quite a while in the dark for the show to start. The stand-up show, which is a vehicular comedy, comes with a set of expectations that must be surmounted to a certain degree in order for a performer to do well. Anything that affects any of the coordinates of this performance ecosystem will create ripples in the experience of the whole performance. In this context, the concept of inhibitors/enhancers is significant to understand how the impact of reception factors are managed (O'Shannon 15). The comedian has to have a tight grip of the intellectual and emotional make-up of the audience in order to draw them into his narrative and create laughter. The transition from one comedic event to another in a given comic speech has to be done carefully without "losing" the audience or "cooling down" the room. Inhibitors are not always in the hands of the performer. As discussed above, in the section on baseline factors of reception, the audience comes with their own set of experiences, expectations, preferences and social dispositions which the comedian can only hope to not clash with his set or with the required behaviour in the comedy room. The elimination of inhibitors is a major task that goes on in the background mostly before the performances start. Such tasks of elimination of inhibitory elements are left to the managers and organisers of an event, who more often than not

are themselves comedians. The construction of the room itself is done in such a way that the room becomes a self-contained aural unit whose sounds stay within the room and which does not let external sound penetrate into the space. Such a construction is unique to comedy clubs and auditoriums, but the cafes, bars and nightclubs that often host comedians every week have an abundant supply of these inhibitors. In my experience of bar and night-club gigs, despite the huge turnout (these spaces are located in very affluent neighbourhoods and the crowd pays significant cover-charges or ticket prices) the aural distractions are too overwhelming for comedy. Since these spaces are not dedicated to comedy specifically (comedy nights take place usually once a week, like poetry nights), and more to live music which happens throughout the week, the acoustics are designed for the latter, and not for a conversational genre which requires one to speak at a normal register. The host of the show as well as the multiple announcements also attempt to establish a zone free of distractions by asking the audience to put their phones on silent, and to not do any videography. Interestingly the host often points out people in the audience who sit with their arms crossed and ridicule them, insisting on a more relaxed posture that will help them laugh and applaud openly. It has been a common complaint among the comedians that when a large group is in the audience, there are often distracting conversations or loud comments which count as heckling that emanates from the groups.

While superiority as an enhancer is based on a kind of recognition of difference (from the performer who is narrating some embarrassing memories or from those that connect the punchline with the set-up too late to laugh along with the group), identification can also be a huge enhancer. When comedians talk about issues that resonate most with a large part of the audience, they relate with the character and are roped in on the narrative

more effectively. Though the action described in the narrative may be exaggerated and ridiculous, the audience relates to the motivations, the embarrassment, the desires, etc., of the performer and goes along with the narrative despite its blown-up proportions. Beyond this, the performer tries to localise and vernacularise their sets to maximise immediate contextual cognition. A comedian whose cultural background is completely alien to the audience will not be able to readily create identification with the crowd; the comedian must have in their possession the particulars of the local and vernacular knowledge. This can be as major as cutting out entire joke scenarios from their routine like one comedian, Siddharth Sudhakar, a Delhi-based comedian reveals in an interview. He talks about how he prefers to perform in big cities, rather than any tier-two city, because of the nature of his content which talks about relationships in modernised spaces like Delhi or Mumbai or Bangalore where cheating on one's partner, though looked down upon, is not shockingly offensive to the audience. He chooses to cut off such jokes entirely from his comic repertoire when he goes to, say, Raipur or Indore for a performance. Such edits can be minor as Kishore Dayani, the owner of a small comedy club in Hauz Khas village states, like replacing one locality for another when one is performing in a different city. A joke where he talks about the noisy Karol Bagh of Delhi, becomes Sant Nagar when performing in Jaipur in order to have the audience catch on to the logic of the joke.

Mary Douglas looks at what different spaces do to a body, how certain "space/cultures call upon our bodies to be articulated extremely precisely, while others allow it to relax into relative inarticulate formlessness" (Douglas 361). A dedicated space for stand-up as described above creates a different set of expectations altogether, which can be antithetical or incompatible with the norm of the world outside this frame.

The term frame is used here, in a limited sense, in the vein of Goffman (Zerubavel 528). His interaction order entails a fragile consensus, an unwritten set of agreements among the social participants. This consensus, as Persson describes it, is a balancing act between two “forces”; ritualisation, the coded norms or accepted behaviour or set of expectations, and vulnerability of such actions, which are on the brink of breakdown needing further ritualised ways of mending the situation. It has to be clarified why Goffman’s dramaturgical theory of social interaction is important in the context of stand-up, which is an artistic performance, and not a social performance of ritualised behaviour. This is where Brodie’s work on stand-up that characterised the form as a genre of intimacy or professionalized intimate talk becomes important. As shown earlier, stand-up mimics an informal social setting, while inhibiting the setting to become truly informally social (where the audience shares an equal opportunity to speak up) rather than a bracketed performance through formalized strategies involving the lighting, and the “take-down” of hecklers. The stand-up artist must keep the balance from tipping over, through take-downs, filler jokes, jokes about when jokes do not work, etc., while the audience often indulges in unruly verbal comments that sometimes are meant to intentionally derail a comic speech, ruin a punchline, in order to get the room’s attention. In such situations, the comics resort to and are even encouraged to be as harshly witty as possible to shut down the offensive troll. Additionally, though, there is something to be said about certain elements or jokes in a comic set which can be unacceptably offensive especially when it comes to certain marginalised groups, it can be argued that even in the absence of such “punching down”, the stand-up stage hosts subject matters which perhaps can only be whispered amongst a group of friends or informal acquaintances or spoken of in one’s private quarters. This license to stand-up, it must be clarified, is more pronounced

in live shows, with a spatio-temporally co-present audience, rather than YouTube or short clips on social media sites.

Framing can be seen as “placing information in a unique context so that certain elements of the issue get a greater allocation of an individual’s cognitive resources” (Pan and Kosicki 57). The domain within which a stand-up routine takes place operates with shared beliefs about the society at large; in the case of Indian variety of the genre some instances of this will be along the lines of “engineers are single and socially awkward”, “South Delhi/South Mumbai people are ignorant about the social reality”, etc. In light of such shared beliefs or knowledge, a comedian builds their set based on (a) established ideas about joke writing/delivery, while minding the (b) constraints of the society at large, and the specific space of performance in particular, and (c) the anticipated response from the audience. Instead of seeing the comic text as a “psychological stimuli with objectively identifiable meaning”, an analysis of the frame is to look at the organization of the symbolic devices “that will interact with the individual agents’ memory for meaning construction” (Pan and Kosicki 58). The primary framing in a stand-up show, before the syntactical, thematic, lexical, and rhetorical frames and devices come to dominate the performance, starts to take effect long before the show itself takes place. To refer back to the section about the reception factors, from the moment a stand-up show is announced, by way of a poster circulated on social media by the respective club, or by way of a “story” on a platform like Instagram which is used by the comic artists to promote and publicise their shows. These platforms provide the primary framework, distinguishing the show from other formats, and creating a set of expectations. This can be instantiated by looking at how the artists, as well as the organisers choose to publicise their show:



Fig. 1. Poster by Happy High Club, Shahpur Jat, Delhi. Used for illustrative and academic purposes. All rights remain with the original creators (@happyhigh).

The image above from the same club shows self-deprecation, at a collective level encompassing the performers as well as the managers of the club, while simultaneously announcing the dates of the show.



Fig. 2. Event poster from Habitat, Khar West, Mumbai. Reproduced for commentary and scholarly reference. Rights belong to the original owner (@thehabitat).

The image above is more interesting in that it talks about the comedy club's attitude as a venue to art forms other than comedy. This picture has been taken from the Instagram page of the very popular comedy club in Mumbai, The Habitat. As a broad cultural performance venue, wherein the club hosts spoken word poetry events, and musical events, it is aware of its base following, which entails stand-up comedy. Hence, the notifications and publicisation of even the non-comedy events takes on a comedic element when it comes to the publicising of the event details on social media.

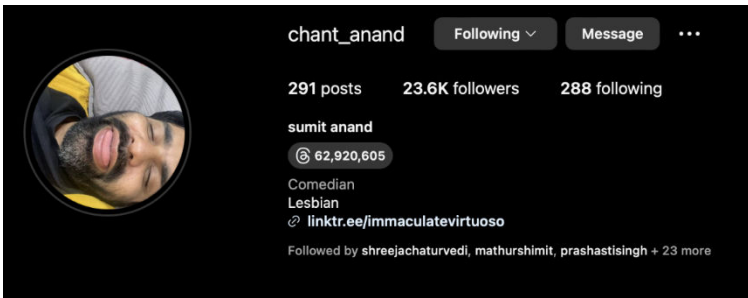


Fig. 3. Screenshot of Instagram profile (@chant_anand). Used under fair use for analysis. Copyright remains with the respective account holder.

In addition to the image of the club that forms a set of expectations, the artists too more often than not maintain a proximity to absurdity, infantility, and “offensive” content. Sumit Anand, a Delhi- based comedian, as pictured above, is representative of a similar vein of frame-setting, absurdly describing himself as a “lesbian”.

These images are intended to demonstrate why a reading of stand-up without taking into account these factors may lead to an incomplete understanding of the content itself. These factors contribute to the creation of what can be called the “comic frame”; the components of this frame go beyond the physical dimensions and incorporate such instances of digital media use as pointed out above. These instances are the equivalent of the

markers or cues that precede a joke or a riddle, or anything that stands outside the serious business of life; “A – walks into a bar and...”, “Knock, knock,”, “Have you heard the one about...” etc., are essentially signals of suspension of regular rules for at least the duration of the joke. This is not to deny the often problematic nature of stand-up in particular, and comedy in general; the aspect of whether comedy is meant to punch up or down is beyond the scope of this paper, but will be investigated at a later stage. What is made clear through an analysis of this background is that the joke-texts, that form the main content, the shareable chunk of the show, which gets retweeted or shared on other social media, are embedded firmly within a system of meaning-making, which if divorced from the joke-text runs the risk of the comic speech being interpreted as offensive without considering the whole context. When we add to this mix, the baseline reception factors we discussed earlier, which form the factors internal to the show but external to the comic set proper, a fuller picture emerges of the performance.

During my fieldwork I came across some notable instances of breakdown of the intended process of decoding owing to the combination of (a) the sensitive nature of the content/theme of a comic speech/set, and (b) the unembedded relating or narrating of the joke text devoid of the broader frame within which the offending joke was originally delivered. One such instance was a set by comedian Gursimran Khamba, in Habitat, Mumbai, in the winter of 2022. Khamba, who was the last act of the show that evening, came to a room as a climax to several hilarious acts. His set incorporated a rant, delivered between sniggers, about how the tragic death by suicide of a popular actor in 2020 must have driven down the price of that sea-view property. In ordinary circumstances, especially one about a public figure who had garnered an extraordinary, almost mythic fame posthumously, and whose death was followed by trolling, abusing and threatening of the “suspects”, such a joke is a recipe for disaster. To my surprise, the audience erupted with laughter

at every joke, albeit with some audible gasps of disbelief which were muffled by the uncontrollable laughter that followed. When later after the show I narrated the incident to two others who were not a part of the audience, regarding the content of Khamba's routine, I was met with stony faces of disapproval. It was clear that despite the massive success of the set at the venue, it could not be translated into other frames to the same effect. A comedy club, and a willing audience for the comedy shows create a certain frame which allows such transgressions to be not only tolerated, but perhaps even encouraged. This is achieved through a combination of the genre's nature as a "professionalised intimate talk" as if among friends, the semi-darkness in which one feels more at ease laughing freely at what ordinarily outside the context of the club would be intolerable or a hushed snigger, the alcohol based drinks which lend an even extra layer of informality and a certain level of suspension of ordinary morality. The stand-up audience, and this is true especially of the ticketed public shows, choose to come to such venues with the express intention of experiencing what stand-up as a genre has to offer, and are further eased into the much contested and debated domain of laughter through the comedy club's design of the space, and manner of publicisation of their shows. When this network of meaning-making is left incomplete or interrupted by someone who watches a clip on social media, it may lead to a very different understanding of the genre/artist in terms of their sensitivity towards volatile subjects. One such interruption in this highly-managed chain of meaning-making is the entry of the stand-up bits or shows online. As we discussed earlier, there are various modes of audienceship, and the reception of a set or a show changes with a change in this mode. To speak about the audience, one must account for theatrical pleasure, the pleasure of the narrative, and the scaled-down model of human life. The pleasure of theatre is in the community, the gathering; it is not a solitary pleasure; rather "it is reflected on and reverberates through others" (Ubersfeld 128).

It is inherently and historically a communal experience. When a stand-up set enters the digital landscape thus, the show presented in front of a “simple”, that is spatio-temporally co present audience, assumes a different character vis-à-vis the audience reception altogether despite the content remaining fundamentally unchanged, barring possible stripping away of gaps or interruptions in the narrative. This is why many artists face a lot of trolling, “cancellation”, and heat in general when they upload a set online. This is not simply with regards to anti-establishmentarianism in stand-up but can be noticed in even very non-incendiary non-divisive content. There is no shortage of one particular comment that is often left under many videos (on YouTube or Instagram alike): “Hasna tha kya?” (Were we expected to laugh?). This same content however, as opposed to what many comments suggest, “killed” in the live show. This is because there are ways to gauge the expectations and limitations of acceptance among the limited and clearly defined audience in the live-shows. The online landscape offers no such avenues, nor does it create the communal nature of the live shows where spectators reverberate off of each other in terms of responses. The online audience, in that sense, is less forgiving, made further uninhibited by the relative anonymity of the Web. It is in this context that the comic frame, the comic immunity created through spatial management adjusts, stretches, often shrinks, and sometimes shatters. It can be argued that such an understanding may not be reflective of the genre or any artist, since a certain level of offensiveness is the *modus operandi* of the genre itself, where shock and subversion of expectations is the order of the day. That being said, it has to be added that comic artists and their routines are not exempted from criticism for the simple reason that the genre is based on the objectionable and the offensive. Rather, the critique of such works be aware of the embedded nature of the joke-texts, which may not always be illustrative of the beliefs of the individual.

Douglas' idea of screening out is significant in this context. Though the non-verbal elements of communication form a large part of the interpretation of any enunciation, a certain screening out, especially of the involuntary reactions of the body to some sort of stimuli, is necessary for the meaning-making process to succeed. Based on the scenario at hand, the body's reactions can either be ignored, or seen to be constituent of an array of signs. Douglas gives the example of a funeral, or a first date, etc., as situations wherein the "threshold" of what constitutes as the array of signs is turned low (Douglas 388); hence every movement, every yawn, throat-clearing, are significant contributors to meaning-making. This is contrasted with sitting in a bar with a drink or enjoying a walk on the beach; the threshold here is high, and the small movements of the body can be safely ignored. The comedy club forms a space somewhere between these two extremes; in it, the audience is at once relaxed and on the qui vive, lest they stick out from the crowd too much. On the other hand, the comedians cannot be in the relaxed zone of "inarticulate formlessness"; their gestures, facial expressions, voice modulations, are all intentional, and vastly contribute to the meaning-making process. However the comic speech and the corroborating bodily reactions are meant to be taken seriously insofar as the jokes get comprehended, not to the extent that they are seen as reflective of the comedian's worldview.

To speak of the comic frame and how it functions to accommodate the base, the vulgar, the coarse, in short the abject side of society, is however not to assert that it provides a kind of immunity to the performers. In addition to displaying the uglier, less than desirable side of the human experience, the genre has often ridiculed the state, poked fun at its incompetence, hypocrisy and corruption. The frame in which stand-up operates has its limitations, and does not always stretch to lend protection to such performers who publicly go against the grain. This limitation affects the genre both on the side of the establishment, or the powers that be, and also on the liberal side of society

whose expectations of comedy are clearly drawn out; that of punching up and of showing truth to power. In the case of the former, there is no lack of examples regarding what politically vocal comics have undergone at the hands of the establishment in India. The most notable of these cases are Munawar Faruqui, Kunal Kamra, the AIB, etc. However, these cases are very different in nature and cannot be pigeonholed under the exact same category. While the FIRs against Kamra derailed and endangered his career and personal safety, the case of Faruqui is even more curious since he was arrested for jokes he did not even perform (Singh). In case of AIB (before the allegations of sexual harassment led to the dilution of the group, the FIRs and trolling they received were the aftermath of their sets/skits. Faruqui's subjectivity, not only as a Muslim, but as a survivor of the 2002 Godhra riots, made him a more vulnerable figure. This highlights the inconsistency in the treatment meted out to the artists based on their background. Similarly, comic sets or routines that end up, one way or another, in reinforcing the status quo or punching down on the marginalised face heat from the liberal end of the political spectrum. In one notable instance in a Blue Material show at the Delhi comedy club Happy High, one of the comedians made a quip about Mayavati which immediately after the show led to much outrage on (then) Twitter. It is important to note that the people that formed the audience on that particular evening were students from Jawaharlal Nehru University and Indian Institute of Technology Delhi, instead of the usual composition of mixed subjectivities. The students, almost all of whom were of leftist-liberal inclination, were disappointed in the dig at one of the only influential Dalit woman political leaders. These instances question the location of loyalty of the genre; does it lie on the side of power? Or on the side of the vulnerable? This is beyond the scope of this paper, but it demonstrates the limitations/failure of the comic frame. It can be said, however, that the fragility of the frame and the danger it brings to the comedian, whether of

incarceration or of social castigation and disenfranchisement, is both a function of the genre itself that deals with incendiary and offensive matters, as well as a somewhat desirable regulatory mechanism that holds the artist accountable for their speeches which cannot be given uncritical support.

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