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**Birth of the Cool: Global Flows and the Growth of English Language
Stand-up Comedy in Mumbai**

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**Birth of the Cool: Global Flows and the Growth of English Language
Stand-up Comedy in Mumbai**

**by
Vijay Parthasarathy**

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Dedication

For Vanisha and Zadie.

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I understand now what it means to birth a dissertation, and I appreciate my mother's labor pains so much more. My father has grown more ebullient since retirement; his curiosity about my work burns bright. I wish to express my deepest thanks to my parents for having let me rebel — mostly sensibly — every single day of my life.

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Birth of the Cool: Global Flows and the Growth of English Language Stand-up Comedy in Mumbai

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2017

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"Birth of the Cool: Global Flows and the Rise of English Language Stand-up Comedy in Mumbai" investigates how English language stand-up is rearticulating the meaning of 'cool' in Mumbai. The dissertation aims to study how this global format, tweaked to simultaneously suit and challenge local bourgeois tastes, has transitioned from subcultural phenomenon to mainstream entertainment product. I examine the Hindi film and television industry's role in bringing stand-up to prominence and how this relationship has grown into a symbiotic one. I situate all of this in the context of Westernization, increased access to the Internet and other competing media, and draw attention to an intertextual field that is continuously negotiating modernity.

I do a close analysis of online satirical videos such as 'All India Bakchod Knockout' and 'Rape: It's Your Fault' to demonstrate how stand-up culture becomes 'cool' and earns significant mainstream media attention; and how it uses this cachet to propagate a forward-thinking, progressive agenda. I link expressions of modernity to a circuit of 'cool,' whose constituent elements interact in a highly articulated manner to make meanings, both permanent and temporary, in different moments. I record the

tensions between present and past, the global and the local, and use media ethnography and textual analysis techniques to capture the rich texture of Mumbai's English language stand-up comedy scene, which is distinct from Hindi and regional language comedy performances.

In India, English language stand-up comedy has grown in relevance by heavily engaging with contemporary cultural politics and discursively defining the parameters of 'cool.' But this has masked the reluctance to make similar interventions in electoral politics. I argue that stand-up has chosen to evolve thus because morally compelling social issues such as women's rights and the elimination of corruption generate less controversy than the polarizing act of confronting political parties with the power to regulate the scene. My study contributes to different debates and bodies of scholarship, ranging from globalization and performance culture to gender studies and cultural anthropology, by showing how producers, consumers and regulators of Mumbai's English language stand-up scene come together to ultimately re-imagine Indian modernity.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The title of my dissertation draws from Miles Davis's seminal 1957 album 'Birth of the Cool,' which sought to slow down the pace of jazz and offered a more detached counterpoint to the dazzling, yet needy, virtuosity of bebop. The allusion signifies my intention to map out a transition in modern India, from the kind of laugh-track enabled comedy encountered in pre-2000s popular culture to the more ironic, contemporaneously focused voice of English language stand-up. Further, my title links to Foucault's 'Discipline and Punish: the birth of the prison' (1977) and 'The birth of the clinic: An archaeology of medical perception' (1975) (especially through the regulatory aspects, which I will discuss in multiple chapters), and also to Tony Bennett's 'The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics' (1995) which employs the lens of power relations in offering a Foucauldian analysis of an emergent phenomenon in 20th century North America, England and Australia. My study will discursively connect these to Stuart Hall's theories and also du Gay et al's Circuit of Culture.

Stand-up comedy as a cultural practice has grown entrenched in India over the past three or four years. In urban cities like Mumbai and Delhi, it has become one of the many major, regularly available entertainment options for the burgeoning middle class. Mumbai today is such a major node for stand-up that several internationally-known acts ranging from Russell Peters to Bill Burr have performed there. What makes stand-up comedy in Mumbai an especially interesting subject of analysis is that it has a vast reach among urban Indian middle class audiences (numbering potentially in the near future in the hundreds of millions), who view it as 'cool' for a variety of reasons. From what I have

observed, for one, stand-up in India has a freshness to it because indigenous stand-up comedy in English is a relatively new practice. Secondly, large swathes of urban Indian audiences, with cosmopolitan, Westernized habits or aspirational desires to participate in an English-dominant landscape, are looking to constantly reinforce their complex hybrid identity through experiencing the latest cultural practices. Thirdly, stand-up offers a dynamic way for content producers and audiences to engage with cultural politics of the present day. Fourthly, it does this by challenging heteronormative ideologies often in an explosively rebellious manner, violently dispelling or validating the cultural biases of a middle class that has far greater access to trends in global thought thanks to the Internet and modern technology. And because it's seen as 'cool,' 'hip,' and 'trendy' (all descriptions offered by my interview subjects), stand-up comedians are uniquely positioned as Gramscian organic intellectuals of a kind to shape opinion through discursive interventions in the public sphere.

The way I define 'cool' above in the context of Mumbai's stand-up scene overlaps with general academic framings of 'cool,' even if it is more tailored to a very specific context. Joel Dinerstein (2017) defines cool in the context of postwar America as an "embodied philosophy" anchored in generational circumstance, and connects 'cool' to figures as varied as Humphrey Bogart, Audrey Hepburn and the French existentialist writer Albert Camus. David Brooks (2017) connects 'cool' to the more contemporary of 'wokeness;' an African-American term signifying a state of altered, heightened consciousness, that has entered the popular lexicon through the Black Lives Matters cultural-political movement.

This idea of 'cool' is arguably universal and a mark of distinction — Thorsten Botz-Bornstein (2010), for example, draws a line between the Greek version of cool — stoicism — and hip-hop. What differs is interpretations of cool in various cultures. Whether that is indigenous or foreign is up for debate. Kabita Chakraborty (2016) argues that Indian youth want to participate in a 'cool culture' of their choice: be it Bollywood or something different, although she observes that the once-famous practice of Rabindra Sangeet, the traditional Bengali folk song popularized by the Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore, might no longer in vogue even in the state of Bengal where it originated because youth desire a more cosmopolitan engagement with dynamic Western formats.

For my dissertation I propose to conduct a media ethnography of Mumbai's English language stand-up comedy scene and examine how it contributes toward rearticulating the meaning of 'cool' in the city, the kinds of ideology it empowers, and how that has greatly enhanced middle class engagement with the Indian public sphere.

In this chapter I will set up my argument and framework by showing how stand-up made the transition from subcultural phenomenon to mainstream industry. I will supply a justification for my study by demonstrating Mumbai's English language stand-up comedy's relevance to the cultural sphere and its implications for the country's middle class. The next segment outlines my literature review, for which I survey three bodies of scholarship: the Indian entertainment scene as it relates to globalization; media ethnographies that have studied the transformation of identity in which I will locate my work; and a summary of academic work on stand-up comedy's role in shaping cultural

politics in different environments. I will expand on the 'Circuit of Cool' framework that I adopt in analyzing the Mumbai stand-up scene's impact on the Indian public sphere. I clarify my methodological approach; I discuss why I chose to do a media ethnography of Mumbai's stand-up scene. To conclude this introduction, I will supply a chapter outline for my dissertation.

1.1 ARGUMENT

My dissertation collects and presents ethnographic and textual evidence for three main lines of argument:

1) English language stand-up comedy in India, I assert, went mainstream after the release of three milestone videos, all made by the increasingly influential, Mumbai-based comedy collective, All India Bakchod. Those videos in chronological order are: the September 2013 "It's Your Fault" video, the Alia Bhatt 'Genius of the year' video from August 2014 and 'The Comedy Roast of Ranvir Singh and Arjun Kapoor' — the last, a live performance that went up on YouTube in January 2015; the edited video received eight million hits on that website and encountered an unprecedented level of controversy by the standards of English language Indian comedy.

2) These viral videos drew on the cultural power of the Hindi film industry, either through using an indie actress like Kalki Koechlin, or riding on the name recognition of a rising young mainstream star like Alia Bhatt, or as, in the third case, two of Bollywood's biggest rising male stars. Bollywood, by turn, an industry in the midst of its own

reinvention, sees an opportunity to appeal to a new generation of fans. The relationship between stand-up comedy and the Hindi film industry is evolving into a symbiotic one.

3) Mumbai's stand-up comedy scene participates in the rearticulation of the meaning of what is considered 'cool' in urban culture and Mumbai culture in a very relational manner with cultural and electoral politics, and that has helped encourage the middle class' engagement with the Indian public sphere in ways previously never encountered. Stand-up comedy makes it 'cool' for audiences to engage positively with the public sphere when citizens from previous generations felt thoroughly disconnected. But while the stand-up scene has found great success in challenging normative ways of thinking about issues like women's rights, it has taken a more cautious route when it comes to satirizing Indian politics.

“Rape — It’s Your Fault,” (All-India Bakchod, 2013) is an effective response to the 'Nirbhaya' Delhi rape and murder case of December 2012, which sparked protests and brought responses of India's traditional patriarchy to gender inequalities into sharp focus, especially after the Indian government chose to ban a 2015 BBC documentary, India's Daughter, based on the tragedy, from airing in the country. The ironic, chilling tone of 'Rape — It's Your Fault' takes the debate on women's rights by the scruff of the neck and characterizes the conclusion as so obvious that it is reduced to a non-debate. The video, among other things, visits violence committed against women, both outside of and within marriages, and the absurd idea that screaming out, “Bhaiyya!” or ‘brother,’ would have the effect of preventing sexual assault – as if this could inspire guilt in the perpetrator. The video drives home the point that it is ludicrous for politicians or anybody else to

accuse women of inviting violence upon themselves by simply by dressing ‘provocatively.’

The ‘Genius of the Year’ video (All-India Bakchod, 2014), which has received over fifteen million hits on YouTube (the highest for the three videos I discuss here), humorously reverses the young actress Alia Bhatt’s reputation as an intellectual lightweight.

The final step in taking Mumbai's stand-up comedy scene to a whole new level of popularity was the live Roast show featuring Bollywood actors Ranveer Singh and Arjun Kapoor. The show was hosted by the well-known director, Karan Johar, featured members of All India Bakchod and other guest comedians, and generated a buzz of scandal with its brand of humor that wildly exceeded in vulgarity anything that Mumbai's stand-up comics have performed. It's safe to say that never before in Indian entertainment history have audiences encountered anyone hurling invectives at big ticket Bollywood names with such glee.

“There’s a simple reason why AIB successfully transformed itself from producers of humble podcasts to YouTube sensations: Indians actually like to watch its brand of irreverential humour that isn’t afraid to poke fun at the rich and famous,” observes one commentator (Walia, 2015). I argue that controversies like the Roast are only helping Mumbai’s stand-up comedy scene establish itself as a territory of ‘cool’, a sanctuary against a repressive culture that is attempting to curb freedom of thought. The attempts made to censor the Comedy Roast video and censure the participants led to public protests both in defense and against vulgarity, which in turn led to greater exposure of the

art form. If any publicity is good publicity, this was the best possible advertisement for English comedy in India.

In my dissertation I will showcase this highly articulated circuit of 'cool' through an analysis of five texts. These include the three I've briefly discussed above, and two more: one a documentary on the state of the Indian stand-up scene and the other, an All India Bakchod video that examines Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal's reputation in the media as a 'cool' and unpredictable anarchist politician. I will show that the linkages between stand-up and cultural politics along various axes are very evident.

The formation of such linkages is an ongoing process. For instance, the stand-up comics themselves are in the midst of developing their brand, and they've chosen to build ties with the larger entertainment circus that is the Hindi film industry. Bollywood, as the Hindi film industry is popularly referred to, is located in Mumbai, which makes it logistically easier for the two entertainment fields to build links. Similarly, during my investigation which took the path of over forty detailed conversations with comedians, audience members and producers, I found that Mumbai's stand-up comedians, in rebelling against long-held dogmas, have had some say in influencing the reception of gender and political narratives.

Such articulations of identity and representation in different moments have positively impacted the way audiences view and participate in the larger circuit of cultural and countercultural conversations. Stand-up comedy makes it 'cool' to engage with the public sphere, especially in the arena of politics, when citizens from previous generations felt thoroughly disconnected.

1.2 JUSTIFICATION OF THE STUDY

Roughly since the start of 2015, Mumbai's stand-up comedy has attained critical mass in terms of media presence and public perception after a flurry of viral videos released by comedy groups such as All India Bakchod, The Viral Fever and East India Comedy. It is extremely interesting to note that comics have featured far more regularly in the most prestigious Indian mainstream print media outlets and on television channels, than American and British comics seem to do so in their own countries. In America for instance, the media seems filled with other competing voices and talking heads, whereas in India, comics are gaining tremendous media exposure at a critical point of the evolution of Mumbai's stand-up scene. Hundreds of articles, many of which I will cite in this dissertation, have been written on the phenomenon. Many Mumbai comics like All India Bakchod's Gursimran Khamba and Ashish Shakyra, and also female comedians like Aditi Mittal write regular columns and articles in newspapers and magazines.

Today, the comedy scene owes its visibility largely to the intervention of younger Bollywood actors such as Alia Bhatt, Ranvir Singh and Arjun Kapoor, who, by participating in satirical online videos and performances like the Comedy Roast have managed to make Bollywood relevant, edgy and 'cool' to newer generations of film fans. Also, the film director and talk show host Karan Johar's impact on the comedy scene cannot be underestimated. Johar is both a director and a chatty TV show host with a range of contacts who has helped cement ties between All India Bakchod and the film industry when he hosted the Comedy Roast. As I will discuss in my chapter on stand-up

comedy and the film industry, stand-up seems to divide Bollywood by age group and / or attitude, creating a further distinction between the brands of actors like Shah Rukh Khan and Aamir Khan. And just as the comedy scene has had a chance to ride on the coattails of its cultural big brother, so to speak, some of its sheen, some of its 'cool' quotient, has rubbed off on Bollywood.

Stand-up is different in Mumbai than it is in the West, where the scene has developed more organically from a grungy art form into a theater-filling spectacle. Stand-up in Mumbai by contrast emerged almost fully formed, after the first dedicated comedy club was set up as a joint partnership between an Indian partner and London's Comedy Store, with the British parent firm bringing in their own manager, the vastly experienced Tom Course, who took responsibility for critical aspects ranging from organizing the sound system to tightening performers' material. The Comedy Store flew in comics from England and these dominated the Mumbai scene for the first several months even as Indian comics practiced the art and found their feet. Although The Comedy Store's physical space has changed hands and Course himself subsequently left his position with The Comedy Club's successor, The Canvas Laugh Club, it is an undeniable fact that Mumbai's comedy scene owes much to all three of these entities. Thanks to them, stand-up in Mumbai has grown into a concrete entertainment option.

Western culture has historically been perceived as a mark of distinction by English-speaking, upper class Indian audiences. There was a period in the 1990s after the liberalization of the Indian economy when the middle class grew even more enchanted than before with Western culture and cultural products because of easy access (Kapur,

2012). But now alongside music and cinema, stand-up is helping positively brand indigenous projects.

Mumbai's stand-up scene has certainly benefited from having culturally proximate performers such as Russell Peters, the Canadian son of Indian immigrants, give Indian culture international legitimacy over the past decade simply by discussing strange Indian stereotypes on stage. It's immaterial whether one finds the quality of his performances good or bad, or whether they are too simplistic; the fact that he is so hugely popular attests to the truth that his caricatures resonate widely. Mumbai's stand-up scene seeks to complicate, challenge, co-opt and supplement — yet, not merely react to — the work of international superstar comedians of Indian origin like Peters, Aziz Ansari and Hasan Minhaj. Over the past year, Netflix and Amazon have commissioned specials from top Indian comics, giving these performers an unprecedented global stage and allowing a form of Indian entertainment quite distinct from Bollywood to flex its muscles.

While *prima facie* it would appear that the West has successfully exported stand-up as a format to India, there is a lot more going on under the surface. My dissertation will show that globalization debates have grown more complex since Schiller (1991) argued that media-cultural imperialism exerts soft power to achieve homogeneity, and cautioned us against believing we lived in a post-imperialist era.

Comedy has a rich tradition in India, going all the way back to ancient times when the theory of drama incorporated the 'hasya rasa' or the trope of laughter (Kumar S. , 2012). But standup comedy in both English and Hindi has grown popular among young urban middle-class Indians only over the past decade. The format of stand-up itself was

borrowed from America, and Hindi television programs like *The Great Indian Laughter Challenge* along the lines of the American talent hunt show, *Last Comic Standing*, have aired during primetime slots on Indian cable networks like Star One. They have created mainstream celebrities out of comedians like the Hindi language comics, Raju Srivastava and Kapil Sharma, whose audiences comprise of a complex middle class that has exploded far beyond the English-educated professional class. "You can't compare the English language stand-up scene with Hindi," All India Bakchod's co-founder, Gursimran Khamba, told me. "Those guys can fill an entire stadium... forty thousand people. Sometimes we can't even fill a mid-sized auditorium."

Kaushik Basu (2017) writes, "A disproportionate amount of global news and writings on India is now related to cow slaughter, gau rakshaks, anti-romeo squads, banning momos, religious intolerance." By making highly resonant videos that critique racist attitudes and patriarchal violence against women, Mumbai's stand-up comedy scene offers a discursive counterpoint and powerfully highlights the need to transform India's international reputation as a patriarchal, racist society. Furthermore, it puts pressure on civil society and frames the need for change as central to the legacy of the modern, millennial Indian population.

Mumbai's English language stand-up comedians today have great power in setting the tone of the larger cultural conversation in India. There are clear limits to this line of thinking however. I do not mean to suggest that stand-up is the prime instigator of social change. Lawyers and activists remain at the forefront of fighting important battles interrogating cultural boundaries and regulations. Stand-up acts as a powerful catalyst to

assist those whose long standing contributions to make headway in these matters are now coming to fruition.

It can be argued that comedians' views are hyped in the media because it suits the latter to construct an English language comic as a new kind of celebrity to reach out to a certain segment of its audience that would like to hear such liberal, progressive views. Nonetheless, such favorable coverage invites and invents new audiences for Mumbai's stand-up scene who grow curious about the kind of ideologies this "cool" new medium sells. While only a few people whom I interviewed said they watched stand-up shows more than one or two shows a month, even the presence of a transient tertiary and shifting audience reinforces Mumbai's stand-up culture and makes it worthy of study.

This surge to prominence of Mumbai's stand-up comedy scene has occurred in an era when Indian audiences have a much larger bouquet of entertainment options to choose from. Globalization has exerted its charm on the Indian middle class, which — my interviews with dozens of subjects from different linguistic backgrounds uniformly appeared to confirm — has grown more comfortable over time with code-switching between entertainment options in several languages.

The on-demand entertainment provider Netflix established operations in India in January 2016 and currently offers a bouquet of popular American movies and television shows, alongside a selection of Hindi and other regional films (Dhapola, 2016). As the contrast between "cool" indie Bollywood and "uncool" 1980s style generic Hindi action flicks increasingly grows clear, Netflix is making a direct appeal to those with disposable incomes to open up their pockets.

It seems likely that Netflix will use its considerable resources to find a foothold in countries like India, after meeting with such success in America. One of its strategies might be to tweak the content made available to local users. An Indian news website, The Wire, commented (Srivivas, 2016): "In India, comedy groups such as All India Bakchod have started venturing into full-scale local content production: the troupe recently signed a deal with television network Star World to produce and air a comedic news show that tackles issues of national and local interest. This is exactly the type of content that Netflix should seek to fund and produce in India as a means of giving the highest bang for the buck for its Indian users."

This is an innovative idea that would reshape the contours of Indian entertainment. Corporates are seeing the opportunity to fill a vacuum. Netflix has commissioned several stand-up specials in America, and in September 2016, announced that it was commissioning a special from Vir Das, which came out in May 2017 (Bacle, 2017). Amazon responded in January 2017 by signing on several of the country's top comics to produce comedy specials that will be available to Amazon Prime subscribers globally from May 2017 (Karnik, 2017). This competition to capture the market could take Mumbai's stand-up scene to a new plane, helping it to vault over Bollywood as a symbol of 'cool,' by locating Indian comedy in a trendy media climate and providing an opportunity for Mumbai's English language comedy scene to become its own genre on online platforms, accessible not only to Indian audiences but transnational ones.

1.3 LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this section I survey three bodies of scholarship: 1) debates surrounding cultural globalization as pertaining to Mumbai's stand-up comedy scene 2) media ethnographies that have studied the transformation of identity to which my work will make a small contribution, and 3) a summary of academic work on stand-up comedy's role in rearticulating cultural politics in different environments.

I will discuss in detail du Gay et al's Circuit of Culture (Du Gay, Hall, Janes, McKay, & Negus, 1997) — which I employ as the overarching theoretical framework to guide this dissertation — and modify it to create what I call a Circuit of 'Cool.' Through this lens, I propose to analyze three of the viral videos I've referenced in this chapter with a view to demonstrating how Mumbai's stand-up comedy scene participates in the dramatically shifting cultural landscape.

1.3.1 The globalization debate

From an academic standpoint, scholars like Radhika Parameswaran have repeatedly pointed out the importance of studying the consumption of Western pop culture in India, explaining that such entertainment was growing in popularity. I anticipate that Mumbai's hybrid stand-up culture will slowly begin reaching a wider secondary audience through television. All India Bakchod's Star TV show, 'On Air With AIB,' is a strong beginning.

With respect to South Asia, where India is the dominant cultural producer, Kumar (2005) refers to translocal flows set up via transnational signals that target middle-class people, many of whom have had access to cable channels since the government opened up the airwaves in 1991. Since then Zee TV has used regional satellite platforms to

transmit national or local-language programming into India (Sinclair, 2005). The prime movers behind translocal television are both national-level and regional-level entrepreneurs who run companies like Sun TV (the most dominant Tamil network), Eenadu (the regional Telegu network) and most notably the Zee network, which promotes entertainment in Hindi, English and the hybrid language of Hinglish that mixes Hindi and English in a completely naturalized way (Kumar, 2005). Zee TV has expanded in recent years to target a transnational diaspora of South Asians based in North America, Europe and the Middle East and Africa. And now, with popular shows like Star TV India's Koffee with Karan (featuring Karan Johar who was Roastmaster at the infamous All India Bakchod interaction with Bollywood stars) forging strong ties with younger players in the entertainment industry, stand-up will no doubt look to utilize such networks.

It is imperative to simultaneously observe Mumbai's stand-up culture through the refracted lens of the Anglo-American comedy scene, and to recognize it as a complex hybrid Indian art form constantly negotiating the channels of cultural power. The tension between the local and the global is more and more an inescapable preoccupation of global media ethnographies that seek to reconcile cultural behavior at the local level with the effects of globalization. Here I summarize some of the aspects of recent debates in cultural globalization that underpin my own work on standup comedy.

Appadurai (1996) is skeptical of the idea that globalization necessarily implies a global cultural homogenization. Robertson (1995) holds that we are witnessing a replication of ideas on a global scale and there are models in place that train people to

articulate local identity; that culture is increasingly *glocal*, containing local elements within global formats or other similar combinations of the local and the global. 'Glocalization' is a central theoretical pillar for my dissertation. Culture is by definition particularistic (Wallerstein, 1991) but Robertson (1991) claims that we are witness to – and participants in – a complex two-fold process, involving “the interpenetration of the universalization of particularism and the particularization of universalism.” According to him the consumerist global capitalism of our time is “wrapped in increasingly thematized particular-universalistic supply, and local, particularistic demand; the contemporary market involves an increasing interpenetration of culture and economy.” This would speak to the seemingly incongruous trend of expressing local identity through an imported genre, such as how American standup comedy competitions on TV have been transformed over the past decade into its equivalent Hindi format for Indian television.

Hall (1991) would however counter that by asserting that global mass culture remains centered in the West and that this form speaks English as an international language. Taking a stance that is less totalizing than Schiller's (1991) pessimistic idea — almost Adornian in its scope — that cultural imperialism was far from finished, Hall makes the case that this global mass culture is a homogenizing form of cultural representation, “enormously absorptive of things,” yet the homogenization is never complete and that global mass culture seeks to recognize and absorb differences in the larger framework of what is essentially an American conception of the world (p. 28). I would more or less agree with that stance as applicable to Mumbai's stand-up scene,

although India's complex colonial history automatically demands that we take into consideration British influence.

As Appadurai (1990, p. 5) puts it, the central problem of today's global interactions lies in the tension between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization; the central feature of global culture today is "the politics of the mutual effort of sameness and difference to cannibalize one another and thus to proclaim their successful hijacking of the twin Enlightenment ideas of the triumphantly universal and resiliently particular" (p. 17).

Wallerstein (1991) makes a more fundamental point: can there be such a thing as global culture? To him, defining a culture is a question of defining boundaries that are political; not all members of the designated group hold its presumed values or share its presumed practices. He concludes: "The history of the world has been the very opposite of a trend towards cultural homogenization; it has rather been a trend towards cultural differentiation, or cultural elaboration or cultural complexity" (1991, p. 94). The Mumbai stand-up scene's relentless engagement with local flavor in their material would speak to this kind of emphasis on geographical peculiarities.

Even if there does exist a global village, Hannerz maintains it is not an egalitarian one. He writes: "What we now see is quite firmly structured as an asymmetry of center and periphery. With regard to cultural flow, the periphery, out there in a distant territory, is more the taker than the giver of meaning and meaningful form" (Hannerz, 1991, p. 107).

Cultural hybridization remains the most important and comprehensive theoretical formulation of globalization since cultural imperialism. It refers to the idea that notwithstanding global patterns and the competition posed by dominant foreign cultural products, national cultures tend to value their own cultural material and the result is often a localized or hybridized variation of some global pattern (Kraidy 2005). Among other things these may affect value systems, languages, racial and ethnic groups, social classes. Nederveen Pieterse (2004) and Kraidy (2005) argue that in the long run globalization *is* hybridity, and hybridization is the essential mechanism of cultural globalization, in which pre-existing local forces come together with new global ones and what emerges from this interaction is neither global homogenization nor a local culture that remains untouched by outside influence but a complex hybrid product embedded with multiple layers of culture where traditional practices flourish, or at least co-exist, with newer ones. This notion powerfully underpins Mumbai's stand-up comedy scene, which deals in fluid ideas and multiple languages that should not, and cannot, be neatly segregated along the divide of a native or international culture.

Stand-up is arguably a modern, global linguistic rhetorical practice. In the present day, globalization is often too easily conflated with modernity but this in effect amounts to a theory of Westernization, which is arguably “geographically narrow and historically shallow” (Pieterse, 2004, p. 4). Iwabuchi (2002), for instance, consciously views the Japanese experience of globalization as de-Westernized modernization. In all of these power struggles America’s role (and also Great Britain’s and other former colonial powers’ roles to a lesser degree) is a central aspect of debates on globalization.

At a cultural level, hybridity can be regarded as intrinsically historical (Canclini, 1995) or an assimilation (Straubhaar, 2007) borne out of conquest (as in the case of Singapore), or even a sophisticated form of subaltern resistance (1999) that helps retain indigenous culture while preserving a mask of superficial hybridity. Bhabha's (1994) work focuses on post-colonial migration patterns. Canclini (1997) points out that Bhabha's observations often do not apply to colonial-era hybridization in Latin America. Straubhaar (2007) regards hybridity as manifesting in two primary forms: as a new mixture and as relations between multiple layers of culture (as in the case of indigenous cultures thriving in the face of colonial oppression). He also draws a distinction between emergent change which may be cyclical or permanent after a cataclysmic episode and a more complex hybridization stemming from migration, transnational media and economic globalization.

All of these debates are relevant to my project because stand-up is simultaneously a clearly foreign commodity and one that has been successfully adapted for Indian audiences. This fits well with Straubhaar's (1991) and De Sola Pool's (1977) research on cultural proximity, which indicates a tendency of populations to prefer media products from one's own culture or the most similar possible culture. Such adaptations of Western formats involve a constant negotiation between structure and culture (Straubhaar, 2007).

In summation, hybridity and 'glocalization' will underpin my investigation into the mix of English and Hindi, local and Westernized elements in Mumbai's stand-up comedy scene. I will demonstrate that cultural proximity has contributed to the resounding

success and captivating relevance of the local stand-up culture, and show how it has helped shape middle class engagement with the public sphere.

1.3.2 Media ethnographies and the transformation of identity

Ethnography in the classic sense is occupied with the assembly of what Geertz (1983) calls ‘local knowledge.’ I have chosen to conduct a media ethnography because I find it is the most effective way of capturing the texture of Mumbai's vibrant stand-up comedy scene.

As a native ethnographer who grew up in Mumbai, I possess the obvious advantage of cultural familiarity; nevertheless I must be careful to acknowledge the fact that I haven't properly lived in Mumbai (except for visits not extending past six months at a time, even during the data collection phase) for more than a decade. I claim insider-outsider status. I must also take into account the impact of factors such as translocal migration, ethnicity, class and gender on my subjects' opinions about what constitutes Mumbai's constantly evolving urban identity.

As a city, Mumbai is rapidly changing, and the bulk of the physical change has occurred in the past decade (Kumar R. , 2013). A British Broadcasting Corporation analysis reports that the Mumbai Metro project — still ongoing but already the most significant new mode of transport — will likely change the nature of physical connectivity in the city (BBC Monitoring, 2014). The Metro's transformative potential cannot be underestimated.

My work draws heavily on the theoretical insights offered by hybridity, and derives many of its methodological justifications from Mankekar's (1999) ethnographic

work. While Juluri's (1998) work on the reception of MTV among Indian youth perhaps gives too much credence to producers' capacity to dictate terms, Mankekar's work nonetheless has theoretical limitations that preclude it from being the perfect model for my work. Although Mankekar does, for instance, offer a comprehensive textual analysis of Ramanand Sagar's Ramayana and also pays close attention to audience and (elsewhere, producer) responses, she deals with viewers and program creators as discreet entities. Her opinion of the power structure is a bit cavalier: she assumes the existence of a top-down hierarchy that is one-directional (producer → consumer) and makes only passing reference to the audience's capacity to reshape storylines and affect TRP ratings (p. 357). Du Gay et al's Circuit of Culture model sees the moments of production and consumption as constantly influencing each other; Mankekar essentially uses the moments of consumption and production coupled with the text to formulate a simplistic representation of identity.

My theoretical direction is instead influenced by Kraidy and Murphy's (2003) idea of translocal ethnography (p. 303), which aims to focus on "the connection between several local spaces" (p. 304) in the context of transnational politics, and must cope with the paradox that ethnographies must be local and yet at the same time cannot be local (p. 304). Their argument is particularly useful when it comes to conceptualizing the hybrid identity of Indian standup comedians both in terms of their interaction with local and global forces and their dual status as producers and consumers.

Research conducted by scholars like Ang (1985), Gillespie (1995), Mankekar (1999) and Parameswaran (1997), while immersive in their local environments to varying

degrees of significance, have generally posed questions about the boundaries of qualitative audience studies and what ethnography potentially means in the context of media studies. Murphy and Kraidy (2003, p. 4) point out that it is difficult to “participate” in the private consumption of media, and ask if media ethnography need be based on participant observation at all to be considered “ethnographic.” Another reason for disregarding the once-sacred principle of field immersion is that “the growing body of media ethnography has been shaped by the critique of ethnography’s long association with colonialism (2003, p. 5).”

Juluri (1998), meanwhile, is more preoccupied with the issue of whether it is even possible to constitute such a thing as a ‘global’ media ethnography and whether “the high point of audience studies has passed, perhaps to travel, like old American sitcoms, to the rest of the world.” Nightingale (1996) points out that the appropriation of audience research by cultural studies has opened it up to criticism from social scientists; Abu-Lughod (1999) writes about anthropologists complaining that “despite their considerable theoretical sophistication (audience studies) are ethnographically thin.”

Notwithstanding the theoretical limitations in her work that restrict its direct applicability to my own, Mankekar (1999) offers a stirring defense highlighting the potential of media ethnography that I find compelling:

“I deploy ethnography not to provide an empirical “record” of places or persons, but to explore how the production and reception of television texts are embedded in particular conjunctures. Indeed the pretext of my ethnography is to evoke the contexts in which texts are interpreted to demonstrate the inextricability of text from context. My strategy... is to expand conventional uses of ethnography by tacking between texts, contexts and the interpretations of historically situated

subjects, thus integrating textual analysis into my analyses of viewers' interpretative practices, the texture of their relationships, their daily lives, and their aspirations and fears. My intention is to demonstrate that by carefully reconstructing the relationship between mass media and the everyday practices, social relationships and emotions of subjects, ethnography can enable the exploration of the material and discursive production of experience, and most important, the articulation of experience with structures of power and inequality" (p. 20-21).

Ever since Ang (1985) made the debate-altering argument that it may be more beneficial to ask why a program gives viewers pleasure instead of seeking to pin down concrete reasons for its popularity (1985, p. 6), several media ethnographies have made significant contributions in the field of cultural globalization. For instance, from their qualitative study "Interacting with *Dallas*: Cross Cultural Readings of American TV", Tamar Liebes and Elihu Katz (1990) deduced three factors that determine the success of TV shows in foreign cultures: the availability of the program, the universality of the problems and topics that the show deals with, and finally, the possibility of ascribing several meanings to one issue.

Drawing from scholars like Appadurai (1990) who argue that the lived experience of migrant or diasporic people is central to contemporary society, Marie Gillespie (1995) focuses on young Londoners (between the ages of 14 and 18) of Punjabi descent living in the West London suburb of Southall. She employs a highly immersive version of ethnography as her methodology while studying the crucial role that television plays in the formation and transformations of their identity as adolescents and British Asians. During her fieldwork she lived in a household with British Punjabi adolescents for two

years; before that she taught English as a second language to immigrant teenagers from the subcontinent for four years during which time she picked up conversational Punjabi. Gillespie discusses her subjects' exposure to the video cassette recorder, 'sacred soaps' like the Mahabharata, shows like *Neighbors* and mainstream American films and how these media recreate cultural traditions among South Asian diaspora families. She also dwells on their negotiations with older generation members of family and their understanding of the local and the global. She concludes that while these teenagers display resourcefulness in making representations of the self, class politics and the nation state continue to play a dominant role in structuring identities, and that binary conceptions such as 'east' and 'west', and 'tradition' and 'modernity' continue to shape her subjects' understanding of the cultural changes around them (p. 206).

Strongly justifying her use of ethnography and its use in future media studies projects, she writes:

"The central methodological argument of this book is that, in order to understand how TV is implicated in the remaking of ethnicity, or indeed in any process of cultural change, we must submit to the rigors of ethnographic enquiry. TV talk, though it may often seem esoteric and trivial, is an important form of self-narration and a major collective resource through which identities are negotiated. Ethnographic fieldwork makes it possible to document and analyze the forms, the contents and implications of such talk as a ritualistic form of everyday interaction, whether in front of the TV set or elsewhere. Both anthropologists and media reception researchers have much to gain from combining their efforts in this field. It is certainly to be hoped that academic TV research will in future produce more empirical studies, and perhaps not so many theoretically oriented summaries of the few pieces of research which already exist" (1995, p. 205).

In India, Mankekar (1999) focuses mainly on the responses of lower to middle class women (and their families) to shows like Ramanand Sagar's *Ramayan* on Doordarshan, the state-sponsored national network, although in her epilogue she touches upon the ways in which transnational satellite TV has gone on to reconstitute ideas of nationhood in contemporary India – a thread that Juluri (2003) later picks up. Through an examination of the interpretations of the scriptwriter and viewers of the TV *Tamas*, Mankekar demonstrates that television played a critical role in the formation of memories revolving around the birth of India as a postcolonial nation. She examines the role that television has played as an instrument of state hegemony and also in rearranging relations of sociality and women's place in family and society at large, along the axes of class, religion and media consumption. To some degree she explores translocal circuits via responses from subjects who have, for example, migrated to Delhi from the South of the country.

Other scholars have eschewed the ethnography approach and focused more extensively on global and transnational cultural flows. Srinivas (2003) has researched the success of Hong Kong action films and martial arts in Andhra Pradesh. He writes: “notwithstanding the foreignness of Hong Kong cinema, its films in fact become available for a certain kind of audience engagement and indeed lend themselves to profoundly local interventions associated with distribution and exhibition interests.” He concludes that action films engage the Andhra speaking audience easily because, like most Telugu films that are in essence star vehicles, they tend to be predictable, and therefore familiar by practice: “Even the first viewing of such films feels like a repeat

viewing” (2003, p. 6). Srinivas makes the argument that the fan response to these Hong Kong action films manifests indirectly through group formations such as karate clubs – as opposed to Jackie Chan fan clubs – in an attempt to recreate the film viewing experience (2003, p. 4). Srinivas has also conducted an industrial study, asking how distributors add ‘nativity’ or ‘local color’ to Hong Kong films in translation; the answer to that is, Hong Kong stars were marketed on the basis of their familiarity to Andhra audiences either as ‘the real deal’, or as relatives of one of the handful of identifiable stars like Bruce Lee or Jackie Chan (2003, p. 14).

Juluri (2003) outlines how MTV’s youth audience in India constructs a complex sense of identity that is neither rebellious towards the sense of nation nor toward older generations. Yet, he argues, this is not so much a case of the audience resisting stereotypes such as rebelling against ‘elders’ as much as a case of co-optation by larger transnational forces that seek to impose an aggressive sense of ‘being Indian’ upon viewers while paying lip service to traditional values such as respecting older generations. His book takes both a political economy and an in-depth qualitative, reception-oriented approach. Juluri provides an analysis of music television reception focusing on music countdown shows and also studies the response to Alisha Chinai’s ‘Made in India’ video.

Juluri is less inclined than any of the media ethnographers I have cited to valorize the audience’s ability to resist global hegemonic forces, and believes that MTV audiences have a distorted perception of themselves. He writes: “Music television is perceived by its viewers as offering them a world that represents them in every way; as family

members, friends, citizens and Indians facing the eyes of the rest of the world. This offer, though, has semiotic costs and social consequences: the images and stories of music television around which audiences see themselves as Indians may be accurately characterized as a form of self-orientalism, a process in which Indian music television exoticizes everything it can find in India, creating an illusory world in which everything feels like it is still India, but appears as if someone else was looking at it” (2003, p. 2).

My work draws tangential inspiration from Radhika Parameswaran’s (1997) lucidly argued dissertation which examines the reception of Mills and Boon romance novels among college-going women mostly from middle class families in Hyderabad via personal interviews and group interviews. She examines how their desire to project their identity as cosmopolitan, global consumers clashes with a patriarchal culture that asserts control over their sexuality. The study is an extension of British and American scholarly legitimizations – such as Radway’s *Reading the Romance* (1984) – of the study of women’s preferences for certain forms of popular culture. Parameswaran uses media ethnography as a powerful way to question cultural imperialism as a theoretical framework, and to propose a more in-depth articulation of cross-cultural encounters between the Anglo-American West and postcolonial cultures shaped by a history of British imperialism, whose impact is tangibly measured in urban audiences’ consumption of Western popular culture. Her work, which concludes that the practice of reading popular literature is ultimately “a social event shaped by historical processes and ideologies that maintain power and privilege” (p. 259), helps fill a gap in the understanding of how Western texts impact non-Western cultures.

Parameswaran believes that among the main approaches that could be taken to study the perusal of romance novels in India, ethnography “works best for generating a rich and detailed understanding of the appeal of Western romance fiction for Indian women (p. 27). She argues that it is only by analyzing readers’ interpretations that “scholars can also begin to analyze the significance of Western romance fiction in a third world context where the West functions as the symbol of material success for many urban, middle-class Indians.” The appendix section on her experience of conducting the interviews, with students, their parents and bookstore managers, the resistance she encountered from time to time, and how she navigates her personal subjectivity is especially illuminating and fascinating; those insights have assisted my own research.

1.3.3 Stand-up and the rearticulation of cultural politics

Robert Provine (2000) mirrors Ien Ang's approach in asking what makes people laugh. He takes this question well past comedy, and analyzes this through the lens of social relationships. Lockyer and Myers (2011) point out that there is a growing body of literature across disciplines focusing on stand-up comedians, their performative techniques and their socio-political motivations and functions (Cook, 1994; Double, 1997, 2005; Gilbert, 1997; Glick, 2007; Horowitz, 1997; Koziski, 1984; Limon, 2000; Lockyer and Pickering, 2005; Mintz, 1985; Seizer, 2011; Zoglin, 2009), yet there is a dearth of research exploring live stand-up from the audience’s perspective, and how comedy contributes towards restructuring the public sphere.

Sophie Quirk (2015) is one of those who primarily examine comedy from the perspective of comics and how they persuade audiences to accept the primacy of the

stand-up's viewpoint. She draws a causal link that in my view may be stretching the argument too far; but I found some of her ideas useful particularly in thinking through how stand-ups must shake up audience presumptions while advocating a transformation in gender relations in the Indian context. Quirke discusses for instance, the idea that stand-up comics move moral boundaries to aid the creation of a performative 'safe space,' which is something Indian comics have done for example in sets like the Comedy Roast with Ranveer Singh and Arjun Kapoor.

It is arguably easier for a famous comic to be taken more seriously than a lesser-known one. Jane Arthurs and Sylvia Shaw (2016) study how the celebrity comic Russell Brand parlayed his cultural and social capital — his status as a 'cool comic' so to speak — to find an audience for his media performances that had a more explicitly political agenda. This is especially relevant to my study as I examine how various Indian stand-up comics have used their status to articulate a distinct brand of cultural politics.

One must be cognizant that it is tempting to take a celebratory attitude towards Indian English language comedy's emergence as a powerful forum to aid ideologies such as gender and sexual equality. We ought to consider Julie Webber's (2013) counterbalancing point in her America-centric analysis that left-leaning stand-up comics like Louis C.K. and Chris Rock simultaneously legitimize "a popular progressive stance of toleration towards the sexual preference of gay men while denigrating gender performances culturally viewed as womanly (p 71)." It serves to caution Mumbai's comics that although their identity and reputation as 'cool' might sway audiences, any

presumptuous liberalizing agenda to drag India into some notion of a 21st century cosmopolitan existence may not be devoid of problems.

Meanwhile Ian Brodie (2014) tries to fill another gap in the literature by using a folklorist approach to study stand-up comedy, focusing on the interpersonal bond between producer and audience member that produces a collaborative moment. He explores the disjuncture between the illusion on stage of comedians speaking as if with intimates, and the fact that it is a bourgeois profession, by exploring a range of strategies — from microphones to clothing to Twitter — that comedians use to bridge the gap between performer and audience.

Ibukun Filani (2016) has studied one of those potential strategies, mimicry, in the context of Nigerian stand-up comedy. Filani conceptualizes mimicry in terms of resistance to power, writing:

By mocking whoever the target is, the comics assert their role as contemporary anthropologists by denaturalising the acts or actors being mimicked; they appropriate whatever they mimic within the frame of a collective cultural system, to which the stand-up comedians and their audience belong. When the audience receive the mimicry acts and give affiliation, they agree with and reaffirm the comic's social roles while they also articulate their support for the parody presented by the stand-up. Their laughter is synonymous with corrective criticism which demands that the targets should realign themselves within the right social frame. Mimicry in stand-up performance is an ironic cultural practice that resists and subverts the actions and actors that have been previously accepted and revered.

While my study focuses exclusively on Mumbai's English language stand-up comedy scene, it is useful to draw a contrast with hugely popular Hindi language comics like Raju Srivastav and Johnny Lever who continue to rely heavily on mimicry as a

comedic technique. Homi Bhabha (1994) views mimicry through the lens of post-colonial politics, arguing that any attempt on the part of the colonized to become 'civilized' by discarding their tradition in favor of the colonizer's is inescapably viewed by the colonizer as an inferior imitation. Hindi language comics mimic famous Bollywood stars almost reverentially (to rapturous applause from audiences which are in general quite distinct from consumers of English stand-up, although there tends to be some minor overlap and two audience members I interviewed were passionate fans of Raju Srivastava and the Hindi comedian-actor Govinda). The English language comics I spoke to were quick to equate mimicry with the Hindi comedy scene; they preferred to make a clear distinction between theirs and the Hindi language stand-up approach. English language comics in India are reluctant to use mimicry because they view it as an inferior form — an opinion that constitutes both an act of resistance and cultural dominance in itself. They prefer to employ other strategies of subversion for the most part, although there is an element of mimicry in the performances of comics like Varun Thakur who riff on Bollywood.

Speaking to Bhabha's conceptualization of hybridity, Sangeet Kumar (2012) argues that English language satirical television shows like *The Week That Wasn't* (whose main writer is All India Bakchod co-founder Ashish Shukla) have grown Indianized and are negotiating complex identities, alongside Hindi language news parody shows such as *Gustakhi Maaf*. It's worth noting that at this moment, stand-up in India has not yet fully differentiated itself from other comedy medium formats like improv, viral videos and satirical TV shows; there is perhaps no need to do so at this point of time in its evolution.

This unified practice of comedy in the English language, containing overlapping elements in method, is nevertheless able to effectively articulate a radical cultural politics that is reshaping public perceptions of areas as diverse as feminism, Bollywood and caste-driven politics.

It is my hope that my ethnography on Mumbai's stand-up scene will help supplement the existing pool of research by examining complex cultural processes in a non-Western, modern urban environment from a more holistic perspective. The urgent need to map the Indian stand-up comedy scene is re-emphasized by Aswin Punathambekar (2015), who makes the argument that stand-up has a vital opinion-shaping role in electoral politics, reasoning that viral comedy videos are increasingly resonating with middle class audiences that have long craved for entertainment in tune with their values and sense of humor. He writes (p. 394), "In an era marked by the relentless corporate makeover of news media and a concomitant decline in public trust in journalism, satirical videos that took on Narendra Modi, Arvind Kejriwal, Rahul Gandhi and other political figures during the 2014 election campaign season offered a strikingly different and immensely popular mode of engagement with the political."

Stand-up acts like Aisi Taisi Democracy and All India Bakchod have the potential in the coming years to occupy the discursive political space filled in the West by comedians like Jon Stewart and John Oliver; that is one area I anticipate Mumbai's stand-up culture will target better as the scene coalesces further.

1.4 RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

Putting all of these insights into perspective was a significant intellectual challenge. Part of the difficulty I faced early on lay in figuring out the theoretical framework I needed to adopt. For a couple of years, I viewed and analyzed the comedy scene through a subcultural lens. Quite frankly, it would have been hard to justify studying a uni-dimensional, bourgeois kind of entertainment that was limited to shows like *The Comedy Roast* — a crass performance filled with politically incorrect, largely masculine jokes about gay sex, dark skin, religious affiliations and gender relations.

In the classical tradition of British cultural studies, scholars like Dick Hebdidge (1979) and Sarah Thornton (1995) have resorted to using the lens of subculture when theorizing on cultural trends. Youth cultures are often central to their work. At first glance, Mumbai's stand-up culture would appear to possess traits of a classic subculture rather than a mainstream commercial enterprise — and indeed, it's possible to argue that the scene took root as a subculture first —but there are several reasons why I ultimately decided to use as my framework a re-jigged Circuit of Culture model.

Although younger audience members I spoke to did suggest that attending these Mumbai comedy gigs gave them a measure of social cachet, the ones I interviewed said they only watched a comedy show once every few months. The audience has not grown organically. Stand-up in Mumbai is not an exclusively youth culture phenomenon. While I was able to speak to some comedy connoisseurs who said they went back to watch different performers more than a couple of times a month, it'd be a stretch for anybody to claim that even fans attend repeat shows where a comedian is performing the same material.

The lingering effect of stand-up seemed diffuse, as compared to, say, Thornton's examination of social spaces such as clubs and raves as the prime British venues of youth culture. Taking inspiration from Bourdieu's (1984) work on cultural capital, Thornton is concerned with how these spaces define what she dubs 'subcultural capital.' My respondents in Mumbai liked to go bar-hopping, visit restaurants, watch movies in theaters. Attending a comedy show was one among several entertainment possibilities. While a sense of humor is certainly influenced by attending shows – and younger audience members occasionally wore T-shirts advertising their favorite band or a clever and amusing catchphrase – the sensibility doesn't manifest as a conscious everyday lifestyle choice as in the case of the punks that Dick Hebdidge observed in his ahistoric study. While being a fan of stand-up constitutes an important part of many audience members' identity, it is invariably not the central axis.

I don't deny that Mumbai's stand-up scene possesses certain elements of subculture. Thornton (1995) argues against Hebdidge (1979) and Willis and Hall & Jefferson (1979) and makes the case that the presence of media and commerce doesn't in itself corrupt a popular cultural form and disqualify it from gaining subcultural status. She conceives of hipness as subcultural capital. But as Thornton goes on to say (p. 6), To be hip is to be privy to insider knowledges that are threatened by the general distribution and easy access of mass media; approving reports in mass media like tabloids or television are the "subcultural kiss of death."

The old definitions of subculture as posited by Hebdidge do not apply here. Mumbai's stand-up comedy scene is organized around large venues like the Art Deco

styled-Liberty Cinema in the Marine Lines area, a couple of major stand-up venues in the Lower Parel area that host comedians on a regular basis, apart from college performances and amateur competitions held in bars on an irregular basis. Corporate gigs are, side-by-side, an important source of economic sustenance for Mumbai's professional comics who now number between 80 and 100 (a number however that is rapidly growing).

Indeed, even younger audiences between the ages 18-35 seemed to subscribe to an Indian version of yuppie culture: they were more often than not likely to hail from the bourgeois class, had parents who were well-educated and / or had lived in the West for a few years. Sanjay Rajoura, a New Delhi-based Hindi language comic whose main themes include class and the rural-urban divide, directly implicates such audiences in the consumerist-capitalist priorities of stand-up (Lakshmi, 2014). "The rise of stand-up comedy is good. But earlier humor was used as a language of protest. Today it is entertainment for the privileged middle class."

Stand-up comedy is similar to club culture and punk in the sense people are invested in displaying their hipness. But a prominent difference is that rhetoric, not dance or music, reinforces one kind of underlying message: "Have an opinion, express yourself, be articulate, be cool." And at performances, there is a significant interaction element between audience members themselves that is largely missing in stand-up.

Another significant issue with the subcultural mode of analysis is its limited gaze, restricted to the production and consumption moments. I certainly find engaging with the literature on subculture compelling and useful in certain contexts, but it may be relatively more worthwhile to view stand-up comedy, as Greenbaum (1999) does in her

ethnographic analysis of a Tampa standup club, through the lens of rhetorical argument and Bakhtin's idea (1968) of the carnivalesque. She writes that stand-up comedy is inherently rhetorical, designed to persuade audiences of a particular viewpoint. "Comedians function (to use Bakhtin's words) as a 'Lord of Misrule,'" she argues (pp. 33-34); they "function as ritual dismantlers of societal norms, racial and sexual stereotypes and political dictums. The verbal art of performing stand-up comedy provides the same cultural function as carnival..." But this isn't restricted to a top-down scenario where comedians are invested with all the power – carnivalesque is an especially relevant lens to employ in the context of stand-up comedy because the audience gets a say in the festivities.

Over the past five years, stand-up in India has transitioned from sub-cultural phenomenon to mainstream spectacle, which has made it relevant to a larger English speaking, aspiring middle class population, although unlike the grungy American and British scenes, it directly gained status as a bourgeois cultural carnival. In their seminal text, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, Stallybrass and White (1986) point out that the middle class routinely dissociated itself from the carnival, perhaps seeing it as an overdeveloped, crass spectacle. But since the days of the Franco-Prussian war, the state has tended to adopt the rituals of carnival even as "traditional processes and festivities were rapidly militarized and incorporated into the symbolism and 'classical body' of the State" (p. 177). As can be argued to hold true in the United States, the United Kingdom and elsewhere, stand-up in Mumbai has been monetized and incorporated as a capitalist entertainment practice that inherently allows for the performance of dissent. As

Stallybrass and White observe, “the forms, symbols, rituals and structures of carnival are among the fundamental aesthetics of modernism (p. 177).”

In the kind of carnival that has come to be associated with stand-up, as in any other, audiences are co-opted into the project of what one of my interviewees, the comedian Tanmay Bhat, called, “the powerless attacking the powerful.” Carnavalesque is a regulated act of subversion, in that it fails “to do away with the official dominant culture, its licensed complicity” (Stallybrass & White, 1986, p. 19). Stand-up comedy’s complex position as a commercial venture is compatible with the dominant culture’s goal of finding a safe outlet for dissent. Stand-up comedy is a spectacle where the stage becomes the pulpit for a jester figure to ritually mock society’s absurd truths.

But scholars like Ashley Frawley (2010) are at the outset cautious in lauding this democratic, participatory quality of carnivalesque. Frawley warns against prematurely celebrating the carnival’s capacity to challenge hegemonic beliefs and bring about change in bourgeois society, a criticism that certainly resonates in the context of stand-up:

At the risk of being far too pessimistic, it is important to delineate clearly the limits of this type of activism and to point out that ‘doing’ cannot be a substitute for ‘thinking’. Serious change cannot be effected without action, but ‘aimless hyper-activism’—doing because ‘something must be done’—can actually channel energies away from any seriously progressive project aimed at large-scale social change. Moreover, while many actions have an immediately recognisable carnival-like atmosphere (ie, mask, music, dance, etc.), even those that appear more serious may nonetheless possess many of these aforementioned qualities. ...far from being ‘revolution itself’ as the introduction to Mikhail Bakhtin’s oft-cited volume celebrating the subversive nature of the carnivalesque would have it, it is about as ‘revolutionary’ as a new hair product, and equally anti-capitalist. That is, not only do the vast majority of such demonstrations by and large fail to threaten the existing order, but they are actually both part of and reflective of that

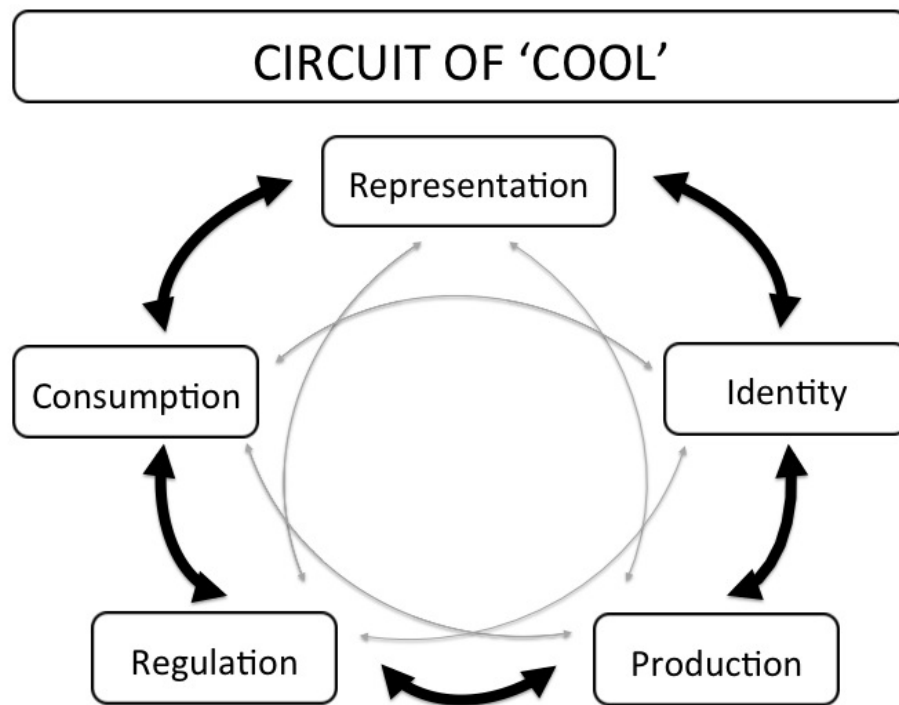
order, and further, act as a reaffirmation of existing hierarchies and social structures.

In the light of all this, I have chosen to examine how standup comedy in Mumbai fits in du Gay et al.'s 'Circuit of Culture' model (Du Gay, Hall, Janes, McKay, & Negus, 1997). I attempt to document the various articulations produced through the interaction of elements within a circuit of 'cool'. The du Gay et al. model, which expands on Hall's encoding-decoding principle, views culture as a circuit without beginning or end, consisting of five interrelated perspectives or 'moments' – regulation, production, representation, consumption and identity – working in tandem to create a shared space in which meaning is made and remade. Just as Hall (1997) subjects the Coke rebranding effort in the mid-1990s to a thorough analysis applying the 'circuit of culture' metaphor, I will examine the cultural commodification of standup comedy in the context of its historicity.

Devised by du Gay et al while considering the cultural significance of the Sony Walkman, and extendable to apply in theory to any text, the 'Circuit of Culture' strikes me as a useful theoretical metaphor; suitable to my purposes, given the parameters of this dissertation. The Circuit of Culture identifies the moments of production, representation, consumption, regulation and identity, and the interrelated articulations of these moments, as crucial to analyzing cultural processes. While it is possible to critique the model as employing arbitrary elements, I think the advantages of adapting the model for this study of Mumbai's stand-up scene outweigh any concerns about its limitations; besides, it is more than anything a way to study various emerging articulations in an organized way.

In brief: 'Production' refers to everything that goes into inventing the text or practice, taking into consideration factors such as the financial background. 'Consumption' evaluates the audience, their relationship with producers and the impact of marketing, the distinction between 'the haves' and the 'have-nots', etc. 'Regulation' considers the nature of clampdowns and subversions against the rules; who is imposing the rules to what effect, and what tests must be passed before being certified by gatekeepers. 'Identity' questions what is at stake for adopters of the practice at hand, and outlines the cultural codes that unify the practitioners into a subculture or community. 'Representation' seeks to identify generic conventions that are adhered to, what the cultural commodity signifies and to whom it does so, the visceral reactions to the performance or text.

I will adapt the model to create a Circuit of 'Cool', outlining how Mumbai's



Modified from du Gay et al., 1997

Figure 1: A Circuit of 'Cool'

stand-up comedy scene rearticulates how the various stakeholders interpret the meaning of ‘cool.’ I am attempting to examine how the various modes interact to formulate the working of stand-up as a cultural commodity in the specific context of Mumbai. Each of the five elements – production, consumption, regulation, representation and identity – brings its own peculiar cultural politics to bear upon the shaping of ‘cool.’ The various unpredictable, liminal and at times temporary articulations – meaning, the interrelation of elements at any single point of time resulting in the making of meaning – will help clarify the relevance of Mumbai’s stand-up culture as a symbol not simply of entertainment but of power and resistance.

1.5 METHODOLOGY

To examine the interrelationship between the five elements of the circuit of ‘cool’, I use a mash of techniques, including ethnographic immersion as my principal approach, semi-structured interviews, and close analyses of institutions, performances and comedy texts. Having attended over eighty live stand-up gigs, I conduct a media ethnography of the stand-up scene (for which I have offered a detailed justification in my literature review) through forty-seven interviews with standup comedians, audiences and club owners in Mumbai; I will also carry out a close textual analysis of their work, to examine how they contribute to shaping the meaning of ‘cool’ in the public sphere. I observe the institutions in place that facilitate the stand-up scene. In addition, in an attempt to be reflexive and to experience a comedian’s perspective, I performed a short stand-up set myself at HQs, a South Mumbai venue.

Taste, Bourdieu (1984) observes, is a function of cultural capital and should remain a peripheral consideration in all of this. My project, to be clear, is not directly concerned with measuring the ‘quality’ of Mumbai’s stand-up comedy scene. Such a line of pursuit, as scholars ranging from Radway (1984) to Parameswaran (1997) have shown, is problematic and ideologically biased. Dovetailing partially with the thinking of such scholars, my work takes into consideration (among other things) audience responses to stand-up comedy and how comedy fans respond to the tension between conservative and liberal approaches to cultural debate.

It goes without saying however, were the performances themselves consistently thoughtless and crass with no redeeming, intellectually stimulating component, one potentially major angle of inquiry would be rendered redundant – to me, a dissatisfying outcome, especially given the demonstrated potential of rhetorical performance to challenge authority and the status quo. It’d be harder to justify the value of such a study.

There are more angles to cover, plenty of complex issues to investigate. I find it useful to tackle questions I pose regarding the public sphere by examining the role of the middle class in opinion building. Culturally speaking, the Indian middle class is hard — perhaps even close to impossible — to define, and is a fluid category. Various studies conducted by corporate, semi-corporate and non-governmental entities such as (Ernst & Young, The World Bank, India's National Council of Applied Economic Research) mark out the middle class as constituting anywhere between 5-10 per cent of the population (Research Unit for Political Economy, 2015), yet optimistically project that those numbers could rise to cover anywhere from over 400 million, to as much as 90 per cent

of the demographic by 2040. But with incomes and the purchasing power of the rupee currency being what they are, India's middle class is currently closer at a practical level to some of the world's poorer segments (Research Unit for Political Economy, 2015) than any notion of a global middle class. Banerjee and Duflo (2008) try to bridge this problem of tiering by focusing on two groups of households across thirteen developing countries, whose daily per capita expenditures range between \$2-4 and \$6-10 and define these as constituting the middle class. While I could strictly apply Indian governmental economic standards and National Sample Surveys data, I am more interested in the section of the middle class that can lay claim to a certain measure of cultural capital that allows it to engage with stand-up in the first place; so in my dissertation, when I use the term 'middle class,' it will usually be a self-identified marker enabling social mobility.

How globalization, through 'glocalization,' has impacted Mumbai's entertainment industry (and the local stand-up scene in particular) is another intriguing question. Mumbai doesn't exist in a bubble; movies reflect a new more global reality, with many films set in Australia, America, Spain. Some of the clubby music in these mainstream movies would fit right in any Western discotheque. Audiences have grown well-versed with long-standing, internationally ratified stand-up rituals such as opening acts and punch lines. My dissertation will try and capture the overall significance of Mumbai's stand-up culture as it takes firm root and how it is refining middle class engagement with the West.

Another important question to consider is how much comedians can influence or shape the cultural agenda. It is important not to overreach while making the case that

Mumbai's stand-up scene is significantly shaping the local and national cultural agenda. “As comedy has emerged as an essential art form, with its strongest voices looked to as formidable social critics, the whole enterprise has taken on an earnest gravity that is often at odds with its original purpose—laughter,” writes Ian Crouch in *The New Yorker* (2014). Comedians have the capacity to educate the audience on what is contemporaneously cool, in terms of what to wear (or what not to wear), what to think (or what not to think). Caveats aside, this can go well beyond the superficial.

In India, comedians have already had a profound impact on the feminist movement, after the 'Rape — It's Your Fault' video (All-India Bakchod, 2013) went viral. Comedians have helped mobilize public opinion and reframe the meaning of ‘cool’ through the use of wit to bring matters of public interest in tangible ways to the attention of comedy-loving middle class with greater cultural aspirations. Stand-up comedians such as Aditi Mittal and Sorabh Pant in particular, whose material I watched evolve over several months, have played a significant part in recasting the narrative as a struggle for gender equality through jokes that challenge the patriarchy. Activists and public intellectuals have sought for years to be heard; now, thanks to comics, engaging with gender issues has become 'cool.'

Like other creative artists, standup comedians are in the privileged position of being both consumers and producers of cultural artifacts. They are influenced to varying extents by other comedians working both in India and abroad in countries like America and Britain; also their sense of humor may have been shaped by their exposure to diverse media products such as sitcoms, movies and novels. Because they are working within the

constraints of a business model, their work must inevitably be “regulated” (in the sense that du Gay et al. (1997) use the word), by a measure of corporate, legal and social control, and they must consciously include hybrid elements which would speak directly to various segments in the audience at once. An especially interesting aspect to all of this is that comedians are in a constant tussle with their audience. They are accountable to actively participating viewers (who are themselves intensely familiar with the codes of comedy). A standup comedian who gets booed off the stage arguably experiences a more visceral sense of failure than say a sitcom writer. Notwithstanding all of this, their status as local arbiters of ‘cool’ affords them prestige and access to cultural capital.

‘Cool’ in the context of Mumbai’s comedy scene is born in articulations between producers, consumers and regulators. Employing snowball sampling and judgment sampling techniques, I identified around thirty people as subjects to focus on over a further period of three years, on the basis of factors such as how interested they seemed in the project, how articulate they were, whether they had an understanding of how the stand-up scene works, and how well I got along with them. For instance, I arranged to communicate with comedians like Gursimran Khamba, a Sikh defying his religious background with a trimmed beard in place of a full one (whose Master’s thesis at the prestigious Tata Institute of Social Sciences was conducted on the late Hindi language comedian, Jaspal Bhatti); Abish Mathew, a Malayali Christian raised in Delhi and a guest at the Roast whose performances mix jokes with funny guitar-driven songs; and Aditi Mittal, India’s most prominent female comedian, who also performed at the Roast.

A lot of the comics have either been foreign-educated or lived abroad for significant periods. Aditi Mittal, Vir Das, Anuvab Pal, Vasu Primlani, Sundeep Rao and an ever increasing number of performers have degrees from the United States, either at the undergraduate or postgraduate level. Pal (who co-wrote an episode of 'Frasier' back in the 1990s), Kunal Rao (a trained chartered accountant), Primlani and several other comics have worked for significant periods abroad. Even those who haven't lived abroad for any stretch of time have done shows or performed at open mics in the US. Aditi, Abish and Amit Tandon for example are able to fill venues in America; their audiences in the US are mainly diasporic Indian audiences and foreigners who are curious about India and its emergent comedy scene.

These privileges have inevitably given comics — producers and creators of stand-up content — a powerfully cosmopolitan outlook; their experiences are mediated by Westernized habits and practices, even if their material is often resolutely rooted in Indian content. *Habitus* may be defined as “a structuring structure, which organises practices and the perception of practices.” (Bourdieu, P. 1984: 170). While no two individuals' *habitus* can be marked out as identical, there are identifiable similarities in the kind of comedy routines one encounters at clubs. At the very least, as I show through the course of this dissertation, many jokes seemingly enter into a conversation with each other; and the choice of content speaks for itself as loudly as the kind of material that is excluded.

By a similar selection process, I reached out to a reasonably wide sample of audience members (ranging from journalists to the indie actress Kalki Koechlin) and

comedy club owners. Many hardcore stand-up fans like Anisha Sharma have studied or lived abroad and are privileged enough to shop at stores like Zara. Again, their habitus gives them a cosmopolitan view of the world.

I pursued an open-ended discussion style with my subjects, but the questions possessed an inherent logic and purpose of direction. Here are some conversation spring points that I employed:

For comedians: Why did you become a comedian? Who are your inspirations? Do you feel what you do is ‘cool’, different from what everyone else does? Is comedy suddenly a viable field for talented individuals in India who don’t want to follow the norm? How do you define ‘cool’ in contemporary Mumbai culture? Do you feel you have the power to shape audience tastes? Has the comedy club or any show organizer ever imposed any rules that limit you from using certain kinds of language or making certain kinds of jokes?

For audience members: How did you hear of stand-up comedy? How often do you like to attend shows? Do you have any favorite comedians or do you watch whoever is performing? What kind of television comedies did you grow up watching? Would you call your taste Westernized? Why? Do you watch Hindi language stand-up comedy acts like Raju Srivastava? What about Hindi sitcoms?

For comedy club owners: Tell me about your club’s history (particularly if the club has an international presence or has branches elsewhere). Why did you choose Mumbai to start the club? Do you ever restrict your comedians from making certain kinds of jokes? Do you help them in developing material? How do you pick new comedians

from obscurity, do you have Open Mic nights and other such competitions? Do you actively look for diversity in voice and material?

Such open-ended questions led to conversations about westernization, authenticity and a host of other issues which gave us concrete pathways to discuss the meaning of 'cool.' Through these interview questions, I was able to ask how the stand-up scene influences the meaning of 'cool' in Mumbai.

I remain extremely reluctant to generalize my findings regarding Mumbai's English language stand-up scene to make the claim that they apply uniformly to the rest of India because India is a linguistically disparate nation with vastly varying cultural conditions. That said, I am especially interested in understanding how this culture of 'cool' relates to transformations of Indian modernity and encourages citizens to participate in the public sphere. Through those questions, I was also able to delve deep into the roles played by producers, consumers and regulators in shaping the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic narratives of middle class culture in Mumbai.

1.6 CHAPTER OUTLINE

In my chapters I propose to use three main case studies — all satirical viral videos created by All India Bakchod — to illustrate the various articulations that arise in a circuit of 'cool'; i.e. the interactions between, for instance, representation and identity, regulation, production, consumption and identity, and other such combinations in any given moment. I do this because stand-up comics in Mumbai have resorted to making powerful YouTube videos to generate newer audiences for their live performances, and

because these transgressive viral videos are an extension of the Mumbai stand-up scene in spirit and tone.

For my analyses, I take my direction from Chris Barker (2004) who sums up the process of analyzing cultural commodities in this fashion:

“the meanings embedded at the level of design and production which are subsequently modified by the creation of new meanings as the commodity is represented in advertising. In turn, the meanings produced through representation connect with, and constitute, the identities of its users. Meanings embedded at the moments of production and representation may or may not be taken up at the level of consumption, where new meanings are again produced. Thus, meanings produced at the level of production are available to be worked on at the level of consumption. However they do not determine them. Further, representation and consumption shape the level of production through, for example, design and marketing.”

Below I offer chapter summaries for the rest of the dissertation:

In Chapter 2, titled 'Mumbai's Stand-up Scene,' I will offer an overview of Mumbai's stand-up scene through a discussion of Jaideep Varma's documentary, 'I am Offended,' and by setting up the major players. I introduce the reader to a range of comedians and audience members whose interactions give shape to representational meanings and a complex sense of identity. I spend time discussing in particular the contributions that All India Bakchod and India's most famous female comic, Aditi Mittal, have made this decade towards radically reshaping Indian cultural politics. I will demonstrate how various articulations of 'cool' create a rich and vibrant comedy scene.

In Chapter 3, titled 'Bollywood, Stand-up and a culture of cool,' I will examine how meaning is created and conserved through a reinterpretation of the modern Hindi

film industry and the relevance of a new generation of actors to Mumbai's stand-up comedy scene. I will do a close textual analysis of Alia Bhatt's 'Genius of the Year' video. I will examine how the identity of performers, audiences and the scene itself is constructed. Bollywood is a ready reference, a more emblematic icon, an easier punching bag than Mumbai's stand-up comedy scene: here, stereotypes play a crucial role in transmitting meanings shared by producers and audiences. Mumbai's comedians both make fun of, and rely on Bollywood's embedded contexts to articulate new meanings with audiences in the shared space of comedy venues.

I will do a close textual analysis of the Roast; how do those seemingly abrasive jokes, the likes of which have never been heard in an Indian public forum, succeed with audiences? In this section, I examine how meaning is recast as comedians participate in shaping the audience's conception of 'cool' through anecdotal story-telling and challenging the normative standard, even as the audience's approval or disapproval resonates with producers and regulators.

In the fourth chapter, titled 'Towards a Transformative Indian Gender Reality,' I will analyze the AIB video, 'Rape — It's Your Fault.' I propose to demonstrate how Mumbai's stand-up comedy scene plays an important role in disseminating feminist ideas in the public sphere and making it 'cool' for producers and consumers to engage with this progressive cultural agenda. I discuss how the Mumbai stand-up scene's embrace and articulations of feminist politics have elevated those issues into mainstream consciousness, and assisted lawyers and activists in promoting the agenda for gender equality — and how, in doing so, stand-up has emerged as an important node of protest

and power. I will show how satire handles a sensitive topic such as rape and how satire shares space with similar efforts mounted across different media.

Chapter 5 is titled, 'Stand-up comedy and Indian electoral politics.' For the discussion on electoral politics, I will do a close textual analysis and examine the articulations and larger thematic contexts deriving from 'Nayak 2 — The Common Man Rises' video. In this chapter I discuss how Mumbai's stand-up scene is cautiously negotiating the terrain of electoral politics. I study how regulation impacts producers and representations of meaning. In my analysis of the case study, I argue that comedians are playing a critical role in popularizing social movements such as the fight against corruption not so much through evangelical, rabble-rousing rhetoric but by labeling such entities as 'cool' and tacitly legitimizing them in the eyes of the audience.

Politics is a tricky subject for Mumbai's comedy scene; many comics regard politicians as humorless and fear some level of persecution from the parties in power if they strike too hard, even if it only amounts to a temporary and inconvenient loss of income from being banned. In the interviews I conducted, business heads and comedians emphasized that no ideas are subject to formal censorship. Many comedians spoke instead about self-censorship. I argue that as stand-up finds itself on firmer and firmer ground, it will find the mandate among audiences to tackle more controversial subjects, thereby strengthening India's already vibrant democracy further.

The dissertation ends with the sixth chapter titled 'Conclusion.' Taking stock, my research project will have shown how producers, who also happen to be consumers in the larger circuit of culture, interpret 'cool.' Further, it will have investigated how the stand-

up scene in general has motivated Mumbai's middle class demographic, particularly its youth segment, to participate in the public sphere. As Murphy and Kraidy (2003) suggest, I must focus on the patterns and practices that link media consumption to a global culture. In its own small way, my project will contribute to further legitimizing Mumbai's rising new industry of stand-up. Scholars have dissected various moments in Indian cultural history, but very little academic work has so far been conducted so far on India's increasingly influential English language stand-up culture. My media ethnography on Mumbai's stand-up scene will hopefully add to the conversations revolving around globalization and translocal, middle class perspectives, and plug a gap in the literature.

Chapter 2: Mumbai's Stand-up Scene

2.1 STAND-UP AND A CULTURE OF OUTRAGE

In his documentary, 'I Am Offended,' made available for free on YouTube (BeingIndian, 2015), Jaideep Varma sets out to tell the story of modern India's complex relationship with moral outrage and intolerance through an analysis of stand-up's reception among regulators and fans. The narrative in this documentary is linear and traces the evolution of India's stand-up comedy scene in Mumbai and Delhi, and frames it in an intertextual media context by examining material such as satirical newspaper columns and witty Hindi poetry. Varma strongly suggests that the divide between English and Hindi comedy is a real one (with AIB's Gursimran Khamba asserting in the documentary that English audiences tend to be "upper-middle class with cultural capital"), and that audiences for English stand-up comedy in India tend to be more open-minded than regional ones towards raunchy or risqué material. Ashish Shakyia gives voice to one of the documentary's central points when he says, "In India, if someone wants to take offense, they can take offense to anything. You may not even know what they found offensive about your joke, and while writing it you don't think it's the most offensive joke." Varma encourages his audience to conclude that there is a place even for juvenile material like The Comedy Roast (which I dissect at great length in the next chapter) because, as the comedian Varun Grover says in an interview with Varma, it fosters an environment that acts as "a space for resistance," or "a censorship-free space where the unsaid can be said."

Media reviews of the documentary were encouraging, generally making the point that India needed material like this out in the open and that attempting to censor voices like Varma's was paternalistic. One reviewer (Ramnath, 2015) observes:

Comedy, especially of the stand-up variety, has emerged as an important challenge to the notorious Indian tendency towards hyper-sensitivity... Varma finds an astonishing breadth of comedians who are working hard on lampooning Indian attitudes, conventions and foibles. He unearths a scene that is as rich as it is raucous. It comprises men and women, multiple media (the internet, cartooning, television, live shows), and a range of approaches and forms. Some are loud and explicit, others are subtle and oblique.

While Varma's documentary is a welcome addition to the extensive media coverage of India's stand-up comedy scene, I would like to complicate his representation of the scene by studying in great depth various articulations that emerge from such discussions. In my opinion the film works as a useful archival document capturing stand-up's position in society at a given point of time, but is limited by a documentary style that records opinion after opinion. I propose to build on his observations and examine multiple dimensions by offering thick descriptions of Mumbai's culture of 'cool' that give rise to various articulations in different moments.

In this chapter I will briefly describe the experience of attending a stand-up show in Mumbai. I will locate the physical spaces where stand-up is performed. I propose to tackle and address several important questions: What were the socio-historical and political-economic contexts of comedy production in Mumbai? Who are the key decision makers and taste makers in the stand-up scene? How do comics use live performances and technology to achieve their marketing aims and objectives? What is All India

Bakchod's target market for the viral videos that I study in my dissertation? How do producers integrate the global and local in their construction of satire? My analysis is drawn from interviews conducted with the interest groups directly involved in stand-up comedy's production and reception including the comics, audiences, regulators and also the director of one of Mumbai's most prestigious, dedicated comedy clubs. It is necessary to engage such cultural intermediaries because of their role in consolidating the position of English language stand-up comedy as a burgeoning cultural powerhouse and their increasing influence as authorities in shaping consumerist dispositions (Bourdieu, 1984).

Participants provided insights into the development and negotiation of specific themes, images and shared meanings, and in particular how Mumbai's stand-up comedy scene articulates 'cool' with a defiantly liberal agenda and seeks in conscious and unconscious ways to yank urban India, and perhaps by extension the rest of the country over time, into a more enlightened age. I'd argue for caution in the face of such self-congratulation, however — in my analysis, I take the view that Julie Webber's piercingly pessimistic, America-centric analysis (2013) that left-leaning stand-up comics like Louis C.K. and Chris Rock simultaneously legitimize "a popular progressive stance of toleration towards the sexual preference of gay men while denigrating gender performances culturally viewed as womanly" (p 71) often applies in the case of Mumbai's progressive comics too.

To give a sense of how the 'other' is constructed as a constantly negotiated and shifting entity, in the next section I will offer a snapshot of proceedings from an evening spent at a Mumbai comedy club. It will be followed by discussions of how various

articulations of modernity transpire from comedy culture through an interconnected network of the production, consumption, identity, representation and regulation moments.

2.2 THE ANATOMY OF A JOKE

I made my first visit to The Comedy Store in Mumbai's thriving Western business district of Lower Parel on a Tuesday evening in January 2013 when Mumbai's winter was mild even by the usual standards. The Palladium Mall venue was at the time a sister concern of the British chain of stand-up comedy clubs. The club has since been taken over by Indian management at Horseshoe Entertainment and Hospitality which was previously the partner in a Joint Venture with The Comedy Store, and renamed Canvas Laugh Factory.

I passed through a door into a bar and restaurant area with a large menu display. Stools pressed against a table that ran the length of a long rectangular window; as dusk fell, one could take in the view of the mall's rear (which opened into a PVR cinema theater lot) while sipping on imported beer and munching on a chicken tikka sandwich.

Photos advertising tonight's main act – Anuvab Pal, famous for his monologue 'The Nation Wants to Know', which he was to perform – were plastered all over. A few plaques with quotations engraved, all comedy-related, were nailed to the walls (for example – 'A hundred laughs a day give you as much beneficial exercise as ten minutes of rowing', according to someone affiliated with Harvard Medical School). Pictures of British stand-up comedians hung prominently from an adjacent wall: a form of advertising, loaded with symbolic meaning. Four or five couples — part of tonight's

audience — walked up behind me to look at the photos. I recognized a few faces on the wall; prominent among these was Eddie Izzard, who'd been discovered by Don Ward, the owner of the Comedy Store. I gathered from snippets of overheard conversation that the couples near me seemed impressed that The Comedy Store had previously brought in foreign talent; this indicated to them that this comedy club was "legit," or "cool." The photos were old, from a time before stand-up in Mumbai had cemented its reputation as a mainstream entertainment form. So their surprise was understandable, as also The Comedy Store's desire to brand its efforts more visibly for local audiences.

The idea, as The Comedy Store's director, Charlotte Ward, explained to me later in an interview, was that foreign acts had experience while Indian comics were learning the ropes. "We used to give Indian comics two-minute or five minute-slots initially. We groomed them until they were ready. In the long run it wasn't viable to keep calling down British comics. It was a great way to introduce comedy to Indian audiences, though, and also a great way to introduce Indian acts to established British performers. Some of the earliest Indian comics like Aditi Mittal told me it was eye-opening and inspiring to meet comics who'd been doing this for twenty years."

On an unremarkable weekday night such as this, few entertainment venues would have been able to fill its seats. At 8 10 PM a member of the bar staff unhooked the stanchion holding back the spilling horde at each entrance, the signal for some eighty well-dressed people to file in as politely as possible. From their clothing and demeanor, I could tell the crowd was very middle-class to upper middle-class that night, and young, with a buckshot spread of grey hairs. Their markers identified them as belonging to the

tastemaker class of people that might be expected to show up at a venue like this. Very little about them surprised me. Most of them fit in here so well as to become invisible. They were well-groomed. The men were savvy enough to dress casually in T-shirts and jeans; many dressed like hipsters. I was in fact one of the only ones in a long sleeve shirt, albeit with folded cuffs. The women seemed a little more glamorous, and gave off an ethnic chic vibe. Brands were everywhere; people had become walking hoardings for Zara, Tommy Hilfiger, Converse.

I was surprised nobody was scanning for stags, which is something most upscale bars do in Indian cities, to keep out what the business might regard as undesirable customers. Clubs and trendy bars sometimes choose to deny entry to single men or groups not accompanied by at least one woman, or those who are dressed too informally, in shorts, or without shoes. These become signifiers of 'uncool' at discotheques, particularly, and many other up-market establishments: if you don't know to wear close-toed shoes, you are excluded — and it doesn't matter if you are rebelling or want to be perceived to be so above the fray that you wear slippers (although I have seen many white people get into Indian clubs no matter what they were wearing). Either single males didn't behave badly at this comedy venue or it didn't make business sense to keep them out.

Once inside, everyone knew to make for the best seats – the back rows, obviously, slightly higher up and enveloped in darkness where the comic couldn't see them – but these had been cut off presumably to promote the impression of fullness. I got a seat in the middle with an unobstructed view of the stage, which was a fairly small semi-circular

elevated platform, a black wooden plank not much wider than a soapbox. Please, come forward, the uniformed employee from the box office said, beckoning to people sitting in the second row. Stand-up comics often like to interact with people in the front row at the beginning of a set to warm up the audience; this they do by finding someone to tease. Nobody moved. One person coughed; another said with a giggle, "It's OK, my legs are short." Eventually the front row filled on its own as more customers entered the venue.

The lights dimmed to minimum and the music came on, loud and clear. Heads bobbed to a familiar mix of contemporary pop, mainstream rock and house: U2, Rihanna, Macklemore, Swedish House Mafia. The momentum was pumping everyone up, and I caught myself responding to Metallica's 'Enter Sandman.' Either from excitement or from the cold, I had goosebumps; I rolled down my sleeves. I was enveloped in a comprehensive sensory experience. I barely noticed the people still making their way in at the song's crescendo as the announcer, whom I could see on my far right sitting in the sound booth, called on stage the opening act.

I was surprised to see a middle-aged man emerge from behind the curtains. Introducing himself as Atul Khatri, "the oldest comic in Mumbai," (he was in his forties, he said) he launched into a rapid-fire discharge of jokes about Gujaratis, Sindhis and South Indians. Each of these communities has different relationships with power. "The room looks empty tonight," he said. "There wasn't a two-for-the-price of one deal, so there aren't as many Gujaratis in the crowd as I'd normally see. And if Sindhis are out tonight, they are probably in a restaurant with their family dividing two soups in three bowls. 'Ay, waiter, two by three, tomato soup.' I'm a Sindhi, I should know. Sindhis

won't pay 400 bucks for a show. There are a lot of South Indians here though. I can tell because though you can hear them cheer, you can't see them in the dark."

In the darkness, this Mumbai audience sat alone together: whatever they were feeling or thinking was experienced in private. It was, on the surface, not unlike being at a dance club full of punks caught up in their personal rebellions. Perhaps some were scandalized by the implicit racism in that joke and held back on participating. But others — the vast overwhelming majority, judging from the noise — expressed their enjoyment by laughing and clapping and cheering in public together.

It is important to say that this kind of joke I've cited above is not representative of the stand-up scene as a whole; it's however almost uniformly how comics open their sets in Mumbai (and in many cities around the world including Austin and New York where I've attended comedy shows). Several comics, from Khatri and Sapan Verma to All India Bakchod's Gursimran Khamba shrugged their shoulders and said that while these jokes were problematic in their representation in that they targeted ethnic stereotypes and were occasionally racist (as in the case of the joke about the skin color of South Indians), audiences seemed to love them anyway because it spoke directly to their identity as Indians, rooted as it is in the idea of a multicultural whole. "Actually what happens is that these people are happy that I called their community up to make fun of them," Atul explained, when I met him at his office near Sahar Airport. For his day job, Atul runs a computer business, and is an independently wealthy man. He is, many comics told me enviously, was one of the film actor Hrithik Roshan's neighbors. Atul told me,

"(Audiences) come to a comedy show expecting to be made fun of, and they're proud, *ki* (that), someone on stage is saying Gujaratis this, Sindhis that."

All India Bakchod's Gursimran Khamba contextualized this further by saying, "Audiences enjoy stereotypes about other communities because they see Tamilians or Punjabis or whatever in their daily lives and might even think the same thoughts about them that the comedian is expressing." Khamba and I had by then developed a great rapport, given his own training in the social sciences. He has a Master's degree from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, for which he studied the work of the late Jaspal Bhatti, a well-known Indian sitcom actor and comedian who was prominent in the 1980s and 1990s. He showed great curiosity in the questions I was asking and the methodologies I intended to adopt for my research. I came to regard him as one of my primary informants and an authority on Mumbai's stand-up scene. "As a comedian, my job is to connect very quickly with this audience and get a laugh out of them. I do this by saying something funny that makes complete sense to them. That way I instantly have them on my side."

The point is, those kind of jokes aren't subject to regulation or even self-censorship. And although some comics are uneasy about that kind of material, it is even seen as 'cool' by many in the audience because it makes them feel included by turn. While, according to comics like Aditi Mittal, some older people in the crowd have walked out of shows that contained risqué bits and explicit language (especially if it was delivered by women), most audience members I observed seemed to enjoy even through participation as passive spectators this unprecedented opportunity to articulate a shared Indian notion of hybrid identity that seemed previously unavailable or inaccessible.

For the price of a ticket, which ranges anywhere between Rs. 300 - 750 (approximately between \$5 and \$12), audiences can spend a nearly an hour and a half listening to English-language comedians create and reproduce cultural meanings those in that room can relate to and approve of; meanings that weren't previously coded in such a format or language. It's even cheaper to attend an open mic event featuring no big names: tickets can cost as little as Rs. 200 (\$3).

2.3 LOCATING MUMBAI'S STAND-UP COMEDY SCENE

More recently standup comedy in English has also grown increasingly popular with venues like The Canvas Laugh Factory in Mumbai regularly playing host to professional Indian comedians performing in English (who in practice however often employ a rapid unselfconscious mixture of English, Hindi and other languages in their acts) like Vir Das, and hosting 'open mic' nights to spot and nurture new talent. Over the past three years, since stand-up began to go mainstream, other locations have held open mic nights where aspiring comics compete to make it on the circuit.

Till only a few decades ago, important cultural performances in Mumbai were limited to arenas like Matunga's 2750-seater Shanmukhananda Hall — Asia's largest auditorium (Halim, 2012) — but in the post-liberalization era, other spaces have flourished. The comedy scene has in the past three years expanded from Lower Parel to other venues: the much larger St. Andrews College Auditorium in the Western suburb of Bandra (which hosts some of the biggest international acts like Bill Burr and Sugar Sammy); BlueFrog, a premier music venue also in Lower Parel, which, until it closed

down, hosted comedy shows on a regular, but ad hoc, basis after The Comedy Store decided not to immediately set up another physical location in Mumbai; Hard Rock Cafe in Andheri; the Cuckoo club in Bandra; bars like Headquarters in Colaba, and many more, flung out as far as suburbs like Powai and Nerul.

Despite having grown up in Mumbai, it was only during the course of my ethnography that I grew familiar, and fell in love, with the posh, highly urbane locality of Bandra, whose glitzy, cosmopolitan streak is favored by upper-middle-class Indians and foreigners alike. Thanks to the dozens of comedians and other subjects who preferred to meet around that area, I started to frequent restaurants and other venues that doubled occasionally as stand-up comedy spaces. Stand-up comedy in Mumbai has in the past five years organically spread through to the suburbs, from the Western epicenter of Lower Parel and Bandra to Powai in the North-East part of the city. Occasional comedy gigs at the prestigious National Center for the Performing Arts in Nariman Point and bars such as Headquarters in Colaba apart, South Mumbai, historically Mumbai's cultural center, has so far played only a supporting role to the growth of this entertainment form.

All India Bakchod's Khamba, a tall bespectacled Sikh who doesn't wear ceremonial headgear or grow out a full beard like devout members of his community, seemed reassured by this proliferation of comedy. He felt it was a good indicator that comedy could thrive in places like Lower Parel, outside the obvious cultural hotspots like "town" (South Mumbai) or Bandra. Mumbai's comedians often start their sets with easily relatable jokes about the divide between South Mumbai and the rest of the city — how South Mumbai residents can be snobbish about their high-priced addresses; and how

realtors like Lodha group are trying to rebrand localities by giving them posh new names like New Cuffe Parade and Upper Worli (Chadha, 2014).

It's not as though comedians truly mean to mock South Mumbai, those "poor unfortunates" who live out in the suburbs, or to create divides between the city's classes. It is true that a powerfully subversive political point is made at the subliminal level when comedians — Gramsci (1971) would have called them unconventional 'grassroots intellectual leaders' — give voice to audiences' long-held, deep-seated, resentments by engaging in a relational discourse of class conflict. But like every other comedian I interviewed, Khamba agreed that while such jokes had become clichés, they served a useful purpose by bridging audiences from the real world across to the dreamlike space of comedic theater.

Stand-up comedy's main center of operations remains the glitzy business district of Lower Parel, where the Palladium Mall stands as part of one India's biggest shopping centers, High Street Phoenix and entertainment spots are densely packed. The Palladium Mall is a short walk or cab ride away from the erstwhile location of BlueFrog. The Comedy Store used to be located on the third floor of the mall. It has since ceded its space to The Canvas Laugh Club (henceforth CLC), which remains a venue dedicated primarily to stand-up, although occasionally it hosts other kinds of performances such as monologues and plays. Every comedian I interviewed told me that the sound system, acoustics and other systems at The Comedy Store and CLC were world class. They were set up by the former manager at both The Comedy Store and CLC, a British man named Tom Course, whom I interviewed. Course worked for several years at The Comedy Store

in London. He also has extensive hands-on experience designing and fine-tuning acoustic set ups; he quit the Mumbai arm of the The Comedy Store, preferring to stick on to run The CLC when ownership changed. With a decade's experience behind him, he proved a key player in the Mumbai scene in the initial years, an important presence: a bit of a "Jack-of-all-trades, Master of All" (as Aditi Mittal called him), helping comics with sharpening their material, letting them know when to change something and when to leave it untouched, having observed all their routines as he worked in the production console during live shows. "One of my jobs is to make sure that the audio is perfect. The quality of sound is extremely important at a comedy venue," Course told me. "The best sound systems are the ones that don't make you think of them. They allow you to focus with ease on the comic. You're not losing even a word or two, no matter how much the audience is laughing or cheering. Not every venue has this luxury."

The other venues I visited relied on inferior sound systems that make the comedy circuit overall look a bit amateur at times. At CLC and The Comedy Store shows in BlueFrog, segments are neatly divided, with a Master of Ceremonies opening the show, followed by three-minute, seven-minute and ten-minute slots for rising comics (time limits are strictly and professionally adhered to with a thirty second warning light blinking from behind the audience in the comic's line of vision), and then the main performance on both sides of a brief interval. Other venues were less streamlined in their approach, and were sometimes the victim of technology breakdowns, leading to delays.

But as general purpose entertainment spaces, they function well enough. While the consumption of alcohol is strictly regulated — and almost uniformly prohibited — at

most Indian entertainment venues like movie theaters or at cricket matches or at plays, stand-up audiences at many of these venues including the CLC, BlueFrog or any of the bars hosting a gig can purchase beer or other alcohol depending on what is made available. "Alcohol makes audiences relax and laugh more at my jokes. In very rare cases this has led to trouble — some people just can't handle their booze, na? — but on the whole it makes perfect sense to let people drink," Aditi told me.

Comics like Sapan Verma and Aditi Mittal — alongside my own sustained observation over several years — have given me the impression that establishments like CLC and The Comedy Store have taken the lead in grounding the stand-up scene, giving it a sense of physical permanence, while the other venues play a secondary role in giving comics space to perform and are more concerned with filling their establishments and cashing in on the stand-up craze. Indeed, CLC and The Comedy Store's logos are the only ones that instantly convey the idea of laughter. Given that the two companies had a shared history before their split, it's not surprising to note that their iconography is somewhat similar. Both feature the image of a laughing mouth with a tongue, and in both cases, the design incorporates red, black and white in the font.

The audience members that I interviewed, at least the ones that called themselves 'serious comedy fans,' seemed to prefer going to CLC and The Comedy Store's new venue of choice, blueFROG (before blueFROG shut down in 2016), over any other venue to catch shows. "The Palladium venue is amazing," said Radio Jockey Sucharita Tyagi, a long-time stand-up comedy addict who has herself performed at open mic events and started a podcast with Aditi Mittal, since last speaking with me. "I will maybe go to St.

Andrews auditorium if a really big comic is coming to town. And some of those bars where they hold stand-up shows are nice, but the seating can be weird. You might not be able to see the performer if there's a crowd standing between you and the stage. CLC is constructed like... an indoor amphitheater. It feels like you're abroad. It's like being at the best comedy clubs."

Because CLC has the best facilities already in place, it doubles up as a live studio environment for both All India Bakchod's television news comedy series, 'On Air With AIB' (which I discuss later in this chapter) and Abish Mathew's talk show, 'Son of Abish.' Abish takes the stand-up scene in a slightly different direction. He loves the format of a late night show because he enjoys the challenge of juggling his roles as a stand up comic, talk show host and producer; he can explore his talents as a stand-up performer, a comedy writer and an interviewer all at one go. He remarked in an interview (Maneck, 2017): "It is a different type of feeling, when I perform in front of a camera, and there is a live audience. This format combines everything I love: performing for an audience, doing jokes and talking to some really cool people."

Shows like 'Son of Abish,' I argue, are an extension of Mumbai's stand-up comedy scene and should be included as central to the concerns of this dissertation because while the city's stand-up culture is growing rapidly and sustaining itself well enough, these associated acts are what has brought the Indian English language comedy circuit into sharp focus in the media and grabbed the public's attention.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that stand-up's spirit and presence is also felt in cultural pockets and hot spots like Gostana, a coffee shop in the Western suburb of

Khar where hip young artists, writers and ad-filmmakers would aggregate and catch up with each other. I met several of them over a period of six months. Virtually everyone I spoke to there — including the owner, Arpana Gvalani — was a self-avowed fan of stand-up. Arpana is an Australia-educated chef who told me she wanted to set up a place that would feel like home anywhere in the world. She was in the process of figuring out if it was possible to organize stand-up shows in Gostana's small space.

It was at Gostana that I also met Anisha Sharma, a Polish-Indian hybrid with a decidedly Mumbai personality (something that is hard to explain concisely but instantly identifiable to Indians), was one of my more web-savvy subjects. She'd recently returned after getting a broadcast journalism degree from The University of Sheffield in England. She seems to me the embodiment of the demographic I'm exploring: independent-minded, opinionated, very conscious of what it means to be 'cool' and articulate to go with it. Nowadays the co-owner of a digital film production house called Owl by the Window, she was already a local Twitter celebrity when I first met her with nearly 15000 followers. She goes by the handle @ghaatidancer, and is extremely well-connected. Anisha was the perfect informant: extremely knowledgeable about the comedy scene and local culture, she put me in touch with at least six of my audience interview subjects, including the Entertainment Editor at HuffPost India and Saurabh Kanwar, the head honcho at one of India's top social media management companies, Flarepath.

I'd like to think of myself as an insider conducting a media ethnography of a landscape that I'm intensely familiar with, but the truth is, every time I returned to Mumbai to conduct research and collect more data, I found myself startled and amazed

by how rapidly the city had already changed between each visit. The first time I returned to Mumbai from America, several new malls had opened. By the next trip, even the Eastern suburb of Vashi where I grew up had glamorous new five-star hotels and restaurants serving everything from traditional Punjabi to Mexican cuisine. Mumbai's stand-up culture is operating in a time and space completely unfamiliar to my younger self; but it is, to quote Victor Hugo, an idea whose time has come.

2.4 A NOTE ON 'MIDDLE CLASS MENTALITY'

In India, the impression has long persisted in both the media and popular consciousness that the middle class wishes to separate itself from chaotic affairs of state. Growing up as the very middle class, Tamil Brahmin son of a scientist and a teacher in 1980s and 1990s Mumbai, I was taught to aspire to an American education. A stream of cousins used my house as a base to prepare for the Graduate Record Examination and, a few months later, as a launch pad to the US, usually to pursue a MS in some engineering program. In my parents' narrative, those cousins were partly the inspiration behind my move to the United States: perhaps this is even true.

At house parties and elsewhere, it used to be common to hear adults complain about India's poor infrastructure and corruption at every level of society. My father called it the 'middle class mentality': carp ceaselessly without intending to fix anything. Friends and guests would dismiss politics as 'a dirty business,' separate from the business of living life, and something that tainted every honest family. Even today, I view with great suspicion the media narrative that American democracy is sincere in its problem-solving

strategies. To me it seems inconceivable that American politicians are sincere about "getting things done" because growing up, I believed Indian politicians were only interested in filling their pockets.

The kind of people my family interacted with had very definite ideas on popular culture as well: they deemed local contemporary cultural products such as Hindi and regional language films as culturally inferior to British and films and shows. I didn't pay much heed to that back then. I grew up enjoying Hindi sitcoms like *Dekh Bhai Dekh* and *Zabaan Sambhalke* (the Indian remake of the British comedy series, *Mind Your Language*) alongside classic British shows like *Yes Minister* and *Fawlty Towers*. Somehow I would effortlessly code-switch to anticipate different pleasures from Hindi shows. Back then, I never judged the ones I liked as inferior. Perhaps doing so would have made me seem less naïve. While my family belonged to the rising economic middle class, my access to cultural capital was interrupted and impeded by my sporadic access to structures of 'cool'. I might have figured out how to fit in better with the rich kids at St. Xavier's, Mumbai (the elite college I attended) had I known what 'cultural capital' meant; but I majored in Physics and wouldn't hear of Pierre Bourdieu until my first year in America.

Some things haven't changed in India since the 1980s. The weather remains as sultry as ever, defeating our fashion sense, which has transformed as the middle class gains access to a wider array of consumer products. The population continues to explode out of control, making middle class Indians hungry for success that continues mostly to be measured by traditional parameters. Engineering as a potential profession continues to

hold sway over many Indian middle class families, which have, over the past few generations, learnt to integrate themselves in the service economy.

In my own case, for better or for worse, I have migrated upward through the cultural classes. Whenever I visit Mumbai, my hometown, I am now conscious of belonging to the ranks of the cosmopolitan, foreign-educated social elite. That knowledge has touched every action of mine during the course of my research, from interacting with cab drivers on my way to comedy clubs to interviewing celebrities.

I now share a complicated relationship with privilege. Recently, when I succumbed to nostalgia and watched an episode of *Dekh Bhai Dekh*, I found myself cringing at the lame set-ups and the laugh track that accompanied the jokes. Life is never going to be the same again. My exposure to a variety of sophisticated television shows on Netflix these past few years – from *Malcolm in the Middle* to *Breaking Bad* — has perhaps made it impossible for me to enjoy the more innocent entertainments from the past.

Meanwhile the entertainment landscape has transformed completely between when I was growing up and now. In 1998 the government accorded Bollywood industry status, which dramatically altered the way films were funded. Whereas earlier black money was funneled into films, now banks started to step in to take calculated risks; thus began the gentrification of media space, a broader shift that resulted in the construction of gated residential communities, malls, multiplex cinema halls (Punathambekar, 2013, p. 42). Bollywood was going bourgeois. Hindi cinema was beginning to gain worldwide recognition, beyond films which were making it to Berlin or Cannes (Rajadhyaksha,

2003). Many more actors and directors travel to countries like America, Canada and Britain to train in drama programs; returning to India, they have immersed themselves in the theater scene that has germinated into Hindi cinema's contemporary indie phase.

Stand-up in the major Indian metropolitan cities, having found its feet in the early-2010s, has subsequently made it 'cool' for salaried, middle-class bourgeois youth to engage with the public sphere. India has a long tradition of street theater mixed with comedic moments but stand-up as an art form has gained prominence since Hindi comedians began appearing on television shows such as *Great Indian Laughter Challenge*. In this new atmosphere approaching carnival, comedians are, in word and deed, encouraging younger generations to think outside the box; to not conform so much as the ones who came before them.

Like discotheques from Sarah Thornton's (1995) study on club cultures, stand-up clubs are meant to be both "exclusive and egalitarian, classless but superior to the mass market institution that preceded them" — the applicable mass market institution in this case being Bollywood. Mumbai's comedy clubs are alluring to audiences precisely because it feels relevant and current. "Stand-up feels authentic," Saurabh Kanwar, the founder of social media management company, Flarepath, said to me during our interview. From the flow of our conversation it was evident he was using the word 'authentic' as an all-encapsulating term in a rough sense, referring to stand-up's engagement with the immediate present and how comedians told stories that were funny yet emotionally relatable to people's lives, and how Mumbai's stand-up scene, despite

carrying the vibe of a fun-fair or carnival, managed to seem grounded next to Bollywood's flighty narratives that sold ambitious dreams.

While all this establishes stand-up as a viable medium capable of thriving on its own merits, finding, retaining and generating audiences for stand-up becomes critical. With that in mind, comedians aggressively engage with the contemporary media sphere. Stand-up comedians have made several influential web-only videos that have played a significant part in the success of this cultural form and broadened the audience base. Samples of a vast array of material, if not full-length videos in all cases, remain available on YouTube. Aditi Mittal (@awryaditi), the best-known of the female comics, can boast of around 51000 Twitter followers. Gursimran Khamba (@gkhamba) and Tanmay Bhat (@thetanmay), on account of their podcast, both have over ten times as many Twitter followers: in the range of 545,000 and counting. Vir Das (@thevirdas), the comedian-turned-Bollywood star, has 749,000 followers. By comparison, Bill Burr, with several Comedy Central specials that have aired on Netflix, only has 474,000. Even the world famous Russell Peters (@therealrussellp) only has around 807,000 followers on Twitter. Indian comics still have some catching up to do with younger American comics like Aziz Ansari (5.74 million Twitter followers), but with all the mainstream media coverage and India's burgeoning English-speaking, middle class youth population constantly seeking new avenues of entertainment, it's not inconceivable that Mumbai-based English-language comics should find new audiences in India.

Much of the audience for stand-up in Mumbai belongs to the middle and upper-middle educated classes. Many are college students – college being one of the hegemonic

institutions that afford people from different class the same kind of capital. Some are businessmen in the city; in rare cases I saw foreign students or businessmen. Many wear similar brands of clothes, affect similar upper class accents – accents being a critical marker of class and cultural capital – although in Mumbai one hears a rich variety of accents depending on the region an individual’s family originally hails from. How, then, to separate the classes or signify belonging? I argue that ‘cool’ becomes a critically important measure of distinction and identification at every level of society.

The Mumbai stand-up scene's most famous practitioners now include Vir Das, who runs his own group called Weirdass Comedy and has since parlayed his fame into Bollywood roles, and the four members of *All-India Bakchod* – Tanmay Bhat, Gursimranjeet Khamba, Ashish Shakyia and Rohan Joshi.

It is interesting to note that All India Bakchod in particular has met with such success with middle class crowds partly because they know that segment well. The group's members all hail from middle class families themselves (Mishra & Nair, 2015). The collective has acquired an impressive following on social media, and its podcasts, attracting tens of thousands of listeners, have featured interviews with noted international celebrity comedians like Russell Peters, Sugar Sammy, Jus Reign and Bill Burr, alongside homegrown talent like Hindi superstar comedian Raju Srivastava. In late 2014, All-India Bakchod even performed a live musical show before a crowd of 8000 people (according to Rohan Joshi, a member of the group, who posted that information on his personal Facebook page, which I was able to access because we are connected on that social media website).

Mumbai's Hindi film industry Bollywood has directly and significantly contributed to the publicity stand-up has received. I discuss its contributions at length in a separate chapter on stand-up's symbiotic relationship with the Hindi film industry. In summary, young, up-and-coming actors like Ranvir Singh, Arjun Kapoor and Alia Bhatt are collaborating with stand-up performers like the members of All India Bakchod; the actor Vir Das of course began his entertainment career as a stand-up comedian. Rising stars in the Hindi film industry have seen an opportunity to tap into newer middle class social networks and gain social cache by participating in videos produced by stand-up comedians. Many of these videos have gone viral, which has benefited both Mumbai's stand-up comedy circuit and also Bollywood, as it reinvents itself for the middle class Internet generation.

In an interview (Dubey, 2014), Vir Das had this to say about the reception of stand-up among the film fraternity: “Anything that’s popular will always be the first choice of the comedian. We have the golden trinity — Bollywood, sports and politics... Bollywood is the best option available and people love it. There are different levels in the industry and everyone has a different sense of humour. I feel celebrities have a good sense of humour. I have hosted many award functions and cracked jokes about them and they all loved it.” Also cited in that piece is Gursimran Khamba, who explained, “The spoofs on Bollywood are most relatable as everyone is aware of it. Also, it helps Bollywood by keeping it alive within the minds of audiences so it’s a win-win situation on either side... I think Bollywood has come around to realising that spoofs also end up benefitting them. Earlier, there was a culture that studios would get angry if you made

fun of a film, but now they get in touch with us saying how can we do something funny around the movie that will help more people hear about it. It's a positive change.”

East India Comedy's Sorabh Pant is quoted in the same interview: “Bollywood is relatively an easy target. I don't do many jokes on Bollywood, but we do have a couple of spoofs on Bollywood and people love it and we get a good response... As far as making spoofs on Bollywood is concerned there have been many instances when stars have asked stand-up comedians not to go ahead with the spoof, but the current lot are young and they have accepted it. Many stars have also attended our shows and award functions. They have been supportive.”

2.5 A DYNAMIC NEW INTERNET CULTURE

YouTube has emerged as central to this fresh articulation between English language stand-up and Bollywood, and specifically plays a crucial role in the dissemination of stand-up videos. Producers have largely bypassed mainstream media to take to the Internet to put up videos of stand-up performances. They also communicate directly with their consumers on platforms such as Twitter.

It is critical to acknowledge the stark digital divide in India. The cost of a residential broadband connection is six to seven times more than comparable figures in China, and The World Bank points out that nearly a billion citizens are currently locked out of access to the Internet — the largest such number for any single nation anywhere in the world (Associate Foreign Press, 2016). Nonetheless it is possible to be cautiously optimistic at this stage about bridging this divide, with more and more youth motivated to engage with

artifacts of national and global culture via the medium of online resources for reasons ranging from better career prospects to peer pressure. There is hope that the middle class will grow steadily in the coming decades and comedy culture will prove resonant with a far wider audience.

A spate of web series on YouTube made for an English-conversant youth audience has caught the public's attention over the past couple of years; a show like *Girl in the City* has around 2.5 million hits for its first episode, and subsequently around 1.8 million views for the following ones (Bindass, 2016). The Viral Fever's *Permanent Roommates* has consistently garnered over five million hits per episode (TheViralFeverVideos, 2014). One media commentator writes (Borges, 2016), "While India's many film and television industries still cater to conservative tastes and censors, the country's online creators are free to change the game however they please. As a result, some of the most progressive watchable stories in the country are free, snackable, and available to everyone with an internet connection. The web shows... explore topics as varied as premarital cohabitation, gay rights, and Mumbai's burgeoning hip-hop culture."

Another kind of show, *What the Duck*, blends stand-up with cricket, and is hosted by the stand-up comic Vikram Sathaye. Then there is the intriguing example of *Sinskaari*, a new talk show on Viacom18's digital platform where the actor Alok Nath, renowned for multiple appearances in films and television shows as a morally upright paternal figure, interviews celebrities about their intimate sex secrets (The Times of India, 2016). In the first episode he interviews Raghu Ram who participated in *The Comedy Roast* with Ranveer Singh and Arjun Kapoor. Alok Nath's renaissance owes much to his becoming

the subject of a series of memes (Ali, 2014), and his appearance in the All India Bakchod spoof of Arvind Kejriwal, which I discuss later in the politics chapter. The digital format gives viewers access to a very different Alok Nath, not previously encountered in the mainstream media; the memes show him as polished, showing off code-switching between polished English and 'sanskaari,' cultured Hindi.

The rapid growth of online media forums has played its part: jokes and stand-up videos on Whatsapp, which I continue to receive on my phone from friends and family (not simply because they know I'm a researcher in the field), help rearticulate the meaning of 'cool' in Mumbai in very real ways. Most, if not all of Mumbai's stand-up comics are on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook; many of them are regarded as genuine celebrities with millions of followers — which, given India's population, is not such a surprise, but as a number, as I have discussed in my introduction, far exceeds the number of followers of better known international comics like Russell Peters or Louis CK. Many Indian comics like Kenny Sebastian use social media very effectively to build a fan base and draw them into conversation with each other, not merely related to comedy. Sample question (Sebastian, 2017): "Are there any awesome spy movies made in India, hidden gems that I have missed out on? Or we still have to wait for that to happen. #Hopes." It puts consumers of comedy directly in touch with producers without necessarily involving physically meeting. This is thrilling for both for different reasons. As more Indians gain online access and gain access to the bourgeois public sphere, I anticipate that Mumbai's stand-up scene will thrive even more and its brand will resonate in different corners of the country.

It's hard to believe that as recently as a couple of decades ago, the highly regulated television landscape was the dominant mode of entertainment consumption. As the 2000s wore on, more English language entertainment channels like Zee Cafe, AXN and FX were added to the cable bouquet giving Indians unprecedented access to American television shows. And the shows themselves grew virtually synchronous in their transmission in America and India— a few days apart, sometimes separated by just a few hours— in their broadcast when they played in America and India. This synchronicity has contributed greatly to the contested Westernization of India, and brought landmark formats such as reality shows and comedy competitions to the country where they have promptly been adapted by a host of producers for local consumption. Cable TV Hindi-language comic Kapil Sharma has changed the way India views comedy; but in this changing climate, with the film industry also catching on, Netflix could do far more for Mumbai's comedy scene.

The scene gains validation, both local and international, from English language stand-up comedy acts like Vir Das and Aditi Mittal gaining prominent circulation on Netflix. This is another effective illustration of how 'glocalization' applies to the Indian context. But in this cultural moment however, Netflix's success in India is far from guaranteed. Its long-term success in India lies in overcoming the deeply entrenched casual culture of illegal file-sharing and bootlegging. This articulation between the production and regulation moments quickly reveals the nature of the significant challenge: while original Netflix content holds strong appeal to the urban under-25 generation that has grown up watching American shows like *How I Met Your Mother* on

cable TV, this younger, more tech savvy demographic also takes the position that the consumption of content is more important than how it was accessed.

In a UK Guardian piece (Doshi, 2016) that discusses Netflix's strategy in India, a subscriber, Ishani Shukla makes a similar point: “The problem in India is that as soon as a new movie or TV show comes out, you can get a pirated version immediately online. It’s easy to stream or download movies online, and there’s not much regulation to stop people making copies of it. Even on the roadsides, they sell knock-off DVDs of new films. That will be a bigger problem for Netflix than any competing companies or lousy internet connections.”

All this could change very soon. As of August 2016, downloading torrents from banned websites in India is now considered in violation of the Copyright Act, 1957 and punishable with three years imprisonment and a possible fine of Rs. 3 lakh (roughly \$4500) (Indian Express Tech Desk, 2016). When earlier the Department of Telecommunication issued a block, other illegal websites would pop up; now a warning sign shows on sites banned by the Indian government, suggesting a possible link to the entry of global entertainment platforms like Netflix.

As one of my interview subjects in Mumbai put it (under condition of anonymity because she didn't want to be the subject of potential prosecution for flouting copyright laws), "I've always downloaded stuff illegally, so it's weird to have to suddenly pay for it. Some people were using VPNs (Virtual Private Network) to bypass the fact that Netflix wasn't available in India previously. They'd still pay for an account. But most of those Netflix shows were available for some time on torrents, and the content was circulating

widely. People like me were able to lay our hands on shows like House of Cards and Daredevil quite easily. Until now I could usually find what I want to watch without paying. Now maybe I'll just have to watch something else... but then my friends will be more up-to-date than me, and I don't want that either."

In the US, where copyright regulations have by comparison been much stricter over the past decade, I've seen firsthand plenty of anecdotal evidence (in the time I spent as a teaching assistant at the university and later) of younger college students readily paying to purchase songs online through iTunes. For years, India was the new Wild West. The students in Mumbai that I talked to didn't have access to the kind of disposable income that comes from holding down a part-time job. They were dependent on their parents for pocket money, most of which they told me, went into commuting to college and partying after classes. They preferred to spend whatever cash they received from their parents as pocket money — which varied between Rs. 2000-10000 a month, depending on their social class — on partying and enjoying live entertainment (such as rock music shows or stand-up comedy shows) rather than on purchasing music or streaming video content. Many in fact poked fun of the idea of anyone wasting money on something available illegally for free.

People I spoke to seemed excited about Netflix as a brand arriving in India, which they saw as one of the many things legitimizing their hybrid Westernized Indian identity. But in the case of several college-going viewers, if their parents weren't comfortable with using a credit card to open a Netflix account (the perception being identity theft is rampant in India, making online transactions and even simply owning a credit card less

desirable), the trial period more or less proved to be the end of the Netflix experience. Thus far, it is far from clear that Netflix in India can become a desirable product that compels people to sign up on the cachet of its brand alone.

2.6 THE RISE OF ALL INDIA BAKCHOD

The first season of All India Bakchod's television debut, titled *On Air With AIB*, contained ten episodes in Hindi and ten in English, and they aired on Hotstar and Star World respectively, starting November 2015. Although the show, strictly speaking, veers away from stand-up's soapbox mode and is structured instead in the style of John Oliver's satirical news capsule, *Last Week Tonight*, it has both cemented All India Bakchod's status as India's biggest comedy group, and further formalized stand-up comedy's position in India, both in English and Hindi, as a legitimate avenue of entertainment.

The promotional material for the show took the form of hoardings and television advertisements and both reached for farce. In the giant billboard hoardings that made an appearance all over Mumbai (Sheikh, 2015), the members of AIB recreate Indian politician-style hoardings using everything from similar fonts, colors and even gestures, with palms pressed together in greeting — only, the comedians themselves make weird faces. The script on the hoardings is intentionally ironic and in Mumbai's local language, Marathi. The choice of language for the advertisements is intriguing in itself; Hindi would have been the more obvious choice. Translated into English, some of those lines read: 'It is a claim of all girls that Khamba is a stud;' and 'Congratulations to respected

Mr. Gursimran Khamba for getting selected to perform in a new show on Hotstar,' which is a joke on obsequious political party hoardings paying tribute to leaders.

The representation in the television promo is no less farcical; except, the members of AIB are dressed formally in suits as a voiceover mocks their show's relative lack of importance and advertises a film featuring the Bollywood legend Amitabh Bachchan. The voiceover goes so far as to deliberately mis-announce the time of AIB's show (which, after 'protests' by the AIB members is then corrected). The formalwear runs counter to AIB's general image among fans as relaxed comics who are more likely to wear funny T-shirts (reading slogans like 'Being Gandu [roughly translated as 'asshole'],' a reference to the actor Salman Khan's 'Being Human' line of T-shirts). It is as if to suggest, AIB on television is the next level of comic professional.

Each episode in the series is thirty minutes long. The main theme of the first episode was the lack of protection offered to Indian whistleblowers — a theme that was perhaps not the most obvious mainstream choice for a series opener in the Indian context, but which would resonate powerfully here in America, given the events concerning Edward Snowden, Chelsea Manning and the federal government. The second episode was a much more relatable one for Indian audiences, highlighting safety issues with firecrackers set off during the Hindu festival, Diwali. The third episode dealt with atrocities committed by Indian policemen.

The response to *On Air With AIB* was tepid; the general consensus was that AIB's material felt a bit watered down in comparison to what they'd done in their Roast of Ranveer Singh and Arjun Kapoor. "*On Air With AIB* is off to a promising start, though I

doubt it will gain a similar fan following as their YouTube videos do. That of course also depends on how far they are willing to offend, enrage and engage, given the limitations of running a TV show, it seems a tad impossible," writes a critic in *The Quint* (Mathew, 2015).

Another media commentator writes (Magotra, 2015), " AIB – All India Bakchod – quickly built up that level of cultural cachet on the web. It made you want to be the first to watch their shows. To watch them, in a certain perverted sense, was to be cool... This wasn't AIB as we know it; it wasn't no-holds barred; it wasn't mad but still it just might be what the country needs – something that will allow us to simply laugh things off and yet, at the same time, give it some serious thought."

Rajyasree Sen (2015) rounds off the mixed opinions with:

"Was it as funny as I thought it would be? No. But that's because AIB themselves have set the bar so high for humour that you expect them to hit you with sarcasm and jibes through the episode. The show is definitely informative... The problem is that it's not particularly funny. And that's disappointing because if you've watched AIB's shows or videos or follow them on Twitter, you know these guys can be hilarious and risqué. Yet throughout this episode, they seemed to be erring on the side of caution..."

Tanmay Bhat anticipates that some audiences will be disappointed with All India Bakchod's decision to repackage itself and tackle a new format; those audiences might regard AIB 'sellouts' in the pursuit of mainstream success. But Tanmay doesn't see this as watering down the AIB brand, and seems to resent that AIBs fans and audiences expect the group to stick to producing material that relentlessly courts controversy. He says in the interview with *Mint on Sunday* (Mishra & Nair, 2015), "There are some restrictions you have on TV, but I don't think this is the show where you will see these restrictions. I

know the biggest worry is, 'Oh, you guys are not going to be cussy, etc'. But the edginess does not come from the cuss words. It comes from the kind of content that we are attempting in the show. In our heads, cuss words were never something that defined us."

To its credit, All India Bakchod has constantly reinvented itself; the only constant is that their content across media formats are dominated by a sense of moral indignation. That, more than anything else, seems to underpin their spin on ideologies that they articulate to great effect, whether at standup shows or in their podcasts, or in their viral videos or now on the news show.

Gursimran Khamba, Tanmay Bhat, Rohan Joshi and Ashish Shakya — the four members of All India Bakchod, now arguably India's most visible comedy collective — met quite fittingly on Twitter. (Khamba told me that he'd moved to Mumbai to begin his Master's degree at The Tata Institute of Social Sciences and having befriended Tanmay and realizing they shared a similar comedic sensibility, they eventually became flatmates for a period.) I say "quite fittingly," because unlike many of the other stand-ups, they first gained a small measure of fame and subcultural credibility first on the Internet, through their online podcasts, before they blew up starting 2013 through a sequence of viral videos that took the country by storm. In subsequent chapters, I do a close textual analysis of three of these (viz. the Comedy Roast featuring Ranveer Singh and Arjun Kapoor, the 'It's Your Fault' and 'The Rise of the Common Man' videos) to examine issues pertaining to representation and circulation within my 'Circuit of Cool.' Each of these chapters is dedicated to demonstrating by turn how All India Bakchod, and Mumbai's stand-up scene in general, has contributed towards rearticulating 1) the

perception of the 21st century cultural industry that is Bollywood 2) modern India's relationship with gender and other issues pertaining to cultural politics and 3) how modern urban Indians are changing their views on electoral politics.

To date All India Bakchod has released over one hundred videos on their YouTube page (2017), dozens of which have over a million hits; and many over five million. Videos have tackled themes as diverse as the threat to net neutrality in India (3.6 million hits), a satire on The Times of India's obsession with objectification (6.4 million views) and include a popular series called Honest Bars and Restaurants, containing short, surreally humorous skits on what happens at eateries (eight million hits for three episodes). A cursory glance makes it obvious that their biggest hits tend to feature Bollywood stars like Alia Bhatt in the skits, although the first video after their seminal 'Rape — It's Your Fault' effort, titled 'AIB: India reacts to ban on pornography,' received over five million hits probably because of the group's sudden rise to fame and the nature of the topic.

Khamba confessed to me that AIB might not have persisted with working on satirical videos if the one featuring indie film star Kalki Koechlin ("Rape — it's your fault") hadn't blown up. "It was a fun video to do because it was a new medium, but we were... never competing in the game." AIB co-founder Rohan Joshi says (Nathan, 2016) that All India Bakchod began using YouTube because initially they didn't have access to funds and saw social media as a potential tool to get their work out: "It is the single best thing to happen to stand-up comedy. We do not have the budget for traditional marketing

tools like advertisements in newspapers and radio. Social media, therefore, helps us promote our gigs and sketches free of cost. AIB is a company that was created online!"

Their stand-up gigs, some of which I attended, often follow some kind of theme and can draw audiences of four thousand and more: for example, every year they host India's version of the 'Razzies,' called 'The Royal Turds,' to satirize underachievement in filmmaking. For my dissertation I met all of them several times and had conversations with each that lasted several hours. They were each in their own way fascinating people, deeply intelligent and articulate. Rohan and Ashish went to the same journalism college I did (and in fact it transpired that during my time as a correspondent for *The Hindu*, I'd once delivered a lecture with Rohan in the classroom, which he remembered when we met again), so it proved somewhat easy for me to get in touch with them; we had several mutual acquaintances. But of the four, I found Khamba — a graduate of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences who had himself studied the late Hindi comic Jaspal Bhatti for his Master's project — the most intriguing subject.

That, alongside All India Bakchod's clear market leader position as a cultural arbiter for the times, was the reason why I decided to use All India Bakchod as an entry point in my analysis of this circuit of 'cool,' which attempts to situate Mumbai's stand-up culture against a larger backdrop of competing and co-operating cultural industries. In the chapters that follow, I adopt the case study approach and use three videos made by All-India Bakchod as my starting point to analyze Mumbai's stand-up scene.

2.7 THE STAND-UP SCENE AND A 'CIRCUIT OF COOL'

The socio-historical context of comedy production in India is an important point to address. As I explained in the introduction chapter of this dissertation, comedy has a rich tradition in India, going all the way back to ancient times when the theory of drama incorporated the 'hasya rasa' or the trope of laughter (Kumar S. , 2012); but standup comedy in both English and Hindi has grown popular among young urban middle-class Indians only over the past decade. As early as the 1980s, Bollywood comedians like Johnny Lever toured the country doing shows in Hindi where he would mimic famous Indian actors and American popstar Michael Jackson's moves on stage. He'd risen to fame originally on the strength of stage shows in Mumbai and comedy tapes called *Hasee ke Hungame* which gave him an audience outside of the city (Adivarekar, 2014). From 1997 to 2012, Shekhar Suman had a Hindi language chat show called *Movers & Shakers* with comedy routines and interviews with Indian celebrities (Olivera, 2012). The show was influential; it has inspired newer talk shows like Hindi film director Karan Johar's 'Koffee with Karan' and even Abish Mathew's YouTube chat show, 'Son of Abish,' apart from, of course, 'On Air with AIB.'

Tanmay Bhat says in an interview (Mishra & Nair, 2015), "I think the last guy who did news comedy properly was (Shekhar Suman in) *Movers & Shakers*. Shekhar Suman used to do some great stuff there and I think he had a lot more freedom and he could get away with saying a lot of stuff. I remember *Movers & Shakers* had a live audience. But what kind of live audience you get is also an important thing to look at. (Comedian) Kapil Sharma also has a live audience, but they are being paid to sit there.

Here we have invited our fans and they have no idea how things are going to go down. Most importantly, we don't have to tell them to clap.”

Standup in its most recognizable artistic form as a staged live performance is a relatively new performing art in India but has established strong roots in other countries such as the United States and England; it practically comes with sticky-notes attached on how to commodify it in the Indian context. The audience members I interviewed did not seem to care that the format wasn't homegrown; to them, that isn't relevant to the debate on authenticity so long as the material is relatable and speaks to them.

Unlike in countries like America and England, which have culturally privileged the notion of individuality for generations, groupthink has for so long been codified through the Indian education system as a way to homogenize and control vastly diverse populations that it may be regarded as an integral part of the Indian cultural fabric. Newer entertainment formats like stand-up are ideologically predisposed to teach consumers how to engage in articulations of identity. Stand-up and its various allied practices in a sense become the training ground for an entire generation learning how to think critically and discursively.

During the course of my investigation, there was, I observed, a consistently productive interaction between the comedian and audiences. Unlike American audiences at stand-up shows, Mumbai's audiences sometimes seemed self-consciously proud of their insider 'cool' status simply by being present at such a gathering. Dominant meanings were rarely challenged; jokes were invariably faithfully interpreted by my audience subjects in the intended spirit.

Any comedian on stage who was able to maintain the illusion of control over his audience was regarded by my subjects as cool; the capacity to dictate terms seemed to have a soporific or paralytic effect on people. The audiences were mostly respectful, and there was relatively little heckling of audiences on stage, partly because group dynamics in urban Indian contexts operate in such a way that individuals aren't encouraged to stand out, and partly because people were still taking their time growing familiar with the possibilities of identity assertion that stand-up extends to audiences.

In the course of my research, I met enough misanthropic comedians — that's a stereotype that some comics proudly adhere to — but for the most part, Mumbai's comedians are grateful to have an audience to perform for, unlike the jazz musicians in Howard Becker's study of social deviance (1963) who thought of their audiences as 'ignorant squares.' Few Mumbai comedians behave condescendingly towards their audiences, even as they poke fun at their ethnic identities or what part of the city they've traveled from. Comedians appear to recognize the fact that these audiences bring diverse experiences and are learning to fit into their roles as bourgeois spectators.

The comedians, though, are more exacting in the imposition of self-regulated standards and only regard those individuals in their community as 'comedians' if they are performing professionally. Mumbai's stand-ups are very conscious of the year they entered the profession: in conversations with me, they sometimes referred to themselves as belonging to the batch of so-and-so year. This is to establish their place in the pecking order. The more-established ones who have been around for much longer, like Sapan Verma, explicitly demarcate themselves from those who are just starting out part-time. "I

always tell people starting out in this, don't call yourself a stand-up comic if it's a hobby to you and you aren't supporting yourself on the cash you make from it," Sapan told me.

While such comments might be rooted in the comedians' own need to distinguish themselves from those that follow in their footsteps, and to reserve their place in cultural history when the story of stand-up is documented, I argue that this self-conceptualization as 'cool' passes almost by osmosis, invisibly, especially to self-selected audiences who come away inspired to sculpt their own individual identity as non-conformists. Many of my audience interview subjects who regarded themselves as stand-up fans spoke of positioning themselves as "the funny one" in their social circle, which I found relatable through my own personal experience as a teenager. This attitude seemed to manifest among stand-up audience members in simple things like their wearing T-shirts that bore certain "cool" messages. For instance, I saw someone at a gig wearing a shirt that read, "Mary had a little lamb. (It was delicious.)"

If stand-up comedy audiences should be held to Hebdidge's standards of subversion (1979) articulated via 'resistance through rituals,' and his somewhat limited range of oppositional ideologies — avant garde versus bourgeois, subculture versus mainstream — then Mumbai's comedy scene risks being regarded as a failure. There may be nothing truly subversive in the act of wearing clever graphic T-shirts: it is an empty gesture defying only some outdated notion of the 'mainstream.' Yet, there is redemption to find even in such moments of conspicuous consumption: it is obvious that stand-up comics are shaping the meaning of 'cool' in the city by shaping the sense of humor of future generations of Indians.

This is in part an inevitable byproduct of the fact that the material they perform must be relatable to audiences. By its very nature, successful stand-up comedy binds audiences to comedians. The very choice of the latter's subject matter is often a nod to the concerns of ordinary urban citizens and their daily experiences. Archana Nathan writes in *The Hindu* (2016), "English stand-up comedy today has taken advantage of a whole range of feelings that have been pillaged, mostly from urban settings. For instance, it could be the insignificant but tangible irritation you feel when the person sitting behind you at a movie continuously kicked your seat. Or the time you realized that even 100 per cent marks may not get you a seat in a college..." She is referring to the ways in which urban Indians represent themselves as distinct from the rest of India. Although a lot of Indian urban audiences consume Western music and television programming voraciously, it's interesting to observe that Indian comics rarely make extended forays into discussing Western culture, except when it impacts local audiences in tangible ways.

This approach reflects what Roland Robertson (1995) called 'glocalization.' Take for instance Sapan Verma's joke on the Scandinavian supergroup, Swedish House Mafia (East India Comedy, 2013) having to shut their Mumbai show at 8 PM because a wedding was supposed to occur at the same venue: "How influential was this man who stopped a 30,000-people concert? Like he could have been rich enough to just hire these guys for his own wedding right? Like just get them a Sangeet House Mafia..." ('Sangeet' being a music ceremony performed at North Indian weddings).

Even Samir Khullar, aka Sugar Sammy — the Canadian comic of Indian origin whose show I watched with two of my interview subjects, Tunali and Nikhil — talked a

lot about Indianness. Among other things, Khullar made references to the fact that North Mumbaiites pick on South Mumbaiites (Dalal, 2013). Khullar told me in an interview afterwards that every time he made a local reference that worked, he'd look at his opening act, All-India Bakchod's Tanmay Bhat (who'd suggested those references), standing by the side of the stage during the show, and give him a broad smile and a thumbs up.

Mumbai's stand-up scene is a slick product. The English language stand-up comedy scene in India originated, in the loose sense of the word, in the mid-2000s when Vir Das, now a Hindi film industry mainstay but back then an America-returned youth, and his younger protégé, Sorabh Pant, began performing all over the country (Gupta, 2014). There were no dedicated comedy venues at that point in Mumbai or any other Indian city. According to many comedians (who refused to be quoted on the record when I spoke to them about this), Vir Das and Sorabh Pant split up and went their own way, never entirely reconciling, but in the process, setting up the potential for a competitive environment which coalesced around the entry of The Comedy Store in 2008, a British company run by Don Ward, the first dedicated comedy space run in Mumbai whose Indian arm was a joint venture with Amar Agarwal (Akbar, 2009).

The comics I spoke to knew their target audience: broad segments of the college-going, English-speaking youth population and culturally-savvy working professionals with deep pockets in their thirties and early forties. And the audience members I interviewed had seen enough to know who their favorite comics were (which was one of the main things I was looking for in selecting them as subjects — an almost loving familiarity with the scene). Tunali Mukherjee for instance was a huge Tanmay Bhat fan

("He is such a great performer. I love his comedy. Also, he looks so big, but moves so gracefully.") Others like the Radio Jockey Sucharita Tyagi were passionate fans of Aditi Mittal.

Some comics, especially those like Varun Grover and Sanjay Rajoura — members of Aisi Taisi Democracy, an influential political comedy collective that I discuss at length in Chapter 5 — who mix English with Hindi in their performances, would come off as earthy to hardcore stand-up fans like Saurabh Kanwar, the digital media entrepreneur in his forties; but as Kanwar told me, there is "nothing remotely working class" about this scene. It appears to have sidestepped the rough-and-tumble stage that the American comedy scene went through in the 1960s and 1970s which saw the arrest of comics like Lenny Bruce and George Carlin for obscenity (Weber, 2015). There was plenty of controversy over All India Bakchod's Roast, which I discuss in the chapter on Bollywood's connection with stand-up comedy. Although the matter is being dealt with in the courts, the performers were at no point arrested or incarcerated. Perhaps it is unfair and unwarranted to say this, but if the comedians aren't risking incarceration, it does not sound like serious persecution. Their rebellions feel diminished.

There's also seemingly a consensus on what kind of jokes comics can tell and what they can't tell; their habitus shapes the contours and texture of their material and simultaneously betrays their prejudices. For instance, every comic I interviewed sought, however abstractly, to cast the comedy scene as pitted in a courageous battle against authority (even if they themselves disavowed any need to insert themselves personally into such conflicts). Comics celebrated the material as transgressive, yet in employing the

Foucauldian argument about power and regulation being productive instead of repressive, the question must be asked: is their material transgressive enough, and what, then, is left unsaid?

Comedians seemed uniformly prepared to valorize the scene's eagerness in engaging with gender politics and the importance of normalizing homosexuality. Yet given that none of the comics touched upon issues of caste (in any real way, apart from making things worse by damagingly mocking the darker skin tone of lower caste South Indians), and knowing that they even more consciously stay away from touching the fiery subject of religion, it is fair to conclude that the meaning of 'cool' is distractingly concerned with what is borderline acceptable, rather than what is not.

Even so, there is definitely a growing appetite for countercultural ideas in contemporary urban India, as evidenced by several protest movements (largely driven by youth) that took the country by storm this decade (Wazir, 2016). Mumbai's comedy scene seems ripe for politics and capable of addressing such powerful themes; yet, as I will discuss at length in my fifth chapter, the city's comics are cautious. Stand-up comedy has arrived in Mumbai in this current moment fully formed as a bourgeois product ready for urban consumption, inevitably and heavily influenced by the shape of American and British stand-up cultures.

A simple instance: almost every comedian has made in passing some kind of reference to Zara's sudden popularity among middle class consumers as a brand to be reckoned with. Often, it would be an off-hand reference to the fact that the Zara outlet was a floor below The Comedy Store, then located in Palladium Mall. Zara entered the

Indian market in the early 2010s (Wire story, 2010) and for middle class India, this access to *ideas* like Western street fashion was unprecedented. Such articulations of breaks from traditional middle class experience have offered plenty of material to comedians such as Atul Khatri, who, when I saw him perform for the first time, was dressed in mustard yellow gaberdines purchased at the Zara outlet one floor below The Comedy Store outlet in Lower Parel; he was quite happy to draw attention to them too. But as I will demonstrate throughout this dissertation, Mumbai's stand-up comedy scene isn't a simple illustration of the principle of McDonaldization: the idea that large transnational corporations tweak their product to satisfy local tastes.

2.8 A SPIRIT OF CO-OPERATION

While the Hindi film industry and other allied entertainment forms like pop music have had to reinvent themselves in the current transglobal media environment, stand-up comedy in Mumbai has far fewer obvious historical antecedents within the Indian context compared to the film and music industries, and has greater freedom to chart its own direction by harnessing a different set of production and distribution networks.

This gives stand-up comics the freedom in a sense to enter the scene with a bang. The Comedy Roast with Ranveer Singh and Arjun Kapoor set off a firestorm over unprecedented levels of vulgarity in the Indian context. But in many ways this episode was somewhat in sync with many cultural controversies around the world; whereas sometimes it seems that the censorship controversies that stem from mainstream

Bollywood cinema's cautious dabbling with nudity or even kissing scenes are completely out of step with both global trends and Indian audiences' expectations.

There is a noticeable and perhaps inevitable shift in the cultural landscape, and stand-up comedy is a huge driver of this change. Stand-up is radical, stand-up is cool. As Mumbai's stand-up scene develops, the field is getting denser. Another group very similar to All India Bakchod that has received plenty of attention in the mainstream press is called The Viral Fever (TVF); but they differ from AIB in one important aspect: TVF is far better known for being an online entertainment platform than for organizing live comedy shows, although individual members such as Vipul Goyal maintain an identity as stand-up comedians. The Viral Fever represents itself as an innovator in the digital space and has made several satirical videos that have gone viral. But the group has gone in a different direction after receiving \$10 million in funding to create online drama and comedy series (Chopra, 2016). The response so far has been tremendous. The opening episode of their show, Permanent Roommates, for example, has received nearly six million hits and the rest of the series on YouTube has received consistently around five million views.

AIB's Khamba calls The Viral Fever "our SNL because they'd been doing it for three years before us." AIB's own identity has changed since they began making those videos; Khamba says that while initially people thought they did videos on the side, now the perception is that "we do live shows on the side."

Competitors or not, The Viral Fever came out in strong support for AIB when they faced legal threats in the aftermath of The Comedy Roast. The Times of India

reports (TNN, 2015): "The TVF community are talking about the bigger picture in their video, where they claim that the reaction to the 'roast' is a scary one. They insist that if the same continues, there will be no freedom of speech on the internet medium and that would mean that they would have to think within the confines of what is permissible. Arguing that such moral policing will only lead to the death of creativity, the TVF supports AIB in its approach to the video that has enough disclaimers to warn people of the content." I see it more productive, however, to locate TVF in a wider cultural climate that promotes English language comedy, and therefore do not focus on TVFs work in my dissertation.

Sapan Verma, Aditi Mittal and almost every other comic I spoke to said that Mumbai's comedy scene was at a stage of development where it was beneficial for comics to help each other. East India Comedy's Sapan told me, "Competition will come afterwards. Right now, with our generation of comics, we are all friendly with everyone else on the circuit. There is enough space for growth right now, so we don't tread on each other's toes. We are happy for other comedians' success because it can only mean good things for us." Meanwhile Aditi was of the opinion that at this juncture, she could stay independent and work with different comedy groups. "Others have got around to forming groups, but I'm on good terms with everyone and I don't need to belong to any one clique. All India Bakchod, East India Comedy, Weirdass Comedy, The Viral Fever and Schitzengiggles are the most famous ones out there. Each has its own identity. At this point, my identity is that I'm one of the few female comics, so I've been able to build visibility while maintaining ties with different groups."

Today there is no question that the Mumbai stand-up scene as a brand has been growing from strength to strength and getting big: so big, that every year since 2014, Vir Das's troupe, Weirass Comedy, has been taking India's first comedy festival — The Weirass Pajama Festival — on tour across different cities all over the country. Past iterations have featured all the comedians I spoke to and dozens more, from Abhijit Ganguly and Aditi Mittal to Kenneth Sebastian and the members of All India Bakchod.

Some comedians grumble about hype; they feel the stand-up scene isn't as successful as it appears, although everyone I spoke to was very careful not to say anything that might damage the brand. Nevertheless in the past decade, stand-up comedy has had to face down existential threats; its reputation as a successful product has been seriously questioned to the extent that the very continuation of the scene has sometimes seemed in doubt.

Cash flow has emerged as a serious problem. Every comedian I spoke to complained that payments from big venues like The Comedy Store and Canvas Laugh Club were slow to come through; that those places were running on the strength of their reputation, and the fact that performing at those venues brought widespread recognition and other lucrative opportunities such as corporate gigs that paid anywhere from Rs. 90,000 to Rs.200,000 (roughly ranging between \$1500 - \$3000) depending on the comic's personal brand for a two-hour show. In many cases the performers, including international ones, hadn't been paid for up to a year (Kandala, 2014). At one stage late in my data collection, I learned through some of my sources that the comics were gathering

at a meeting called by East India Comedy's Sorabh Pant, to decide how best to ensure they might be reimbursed for their old shows.

While confessing that they sometimes worried about the viability of stand-up in India, the comics all asked that I keep this part of the conversation anonymous. There was a definite existential threat to the continuation of stand-up, the comics seemed to agree and the reason was primarily financial. One of the older male comedians who was among the earliest to enter the scene was circumspect: "The audiences pay money and expect to be entertained. It's not their fault we aren't being paid on time. We can do this for a while — get paid the big bucks by corporates who will only hire us if we are seen performing all the time at the big venues. These corporates want to see a picture of us with the Canvas Laugh Club logo in the background. That's all they care about... then they are satisfied that we've got a big enough reputation. I've performed at enough corporate shows, so I may not need the money from places like The Comedy Store or The CLC. But I expect to be paid. It's a matter of principle."

Every major Indian stand-up comic I interviewed told me that Mumbai's stand-up scene is currently surviving, even thriving, because the entertainment form is tremendously popular with companies all over the country that are seeking to offer incentives and rewards to their employees. But performing for corporate shows comes with stringent restrictions. There are regulations in place, dictated by company policy, that might seem harsher and as punitive as legal proceedings. It has a direct impact on the economics of stand-up. A few companies would want, in the early days particularly, to

review material before it was performed, though that didn't last long according to the comics I interviewed.

"It doesn't feel authentic like performing for an audience at say, CLC. But what to do? Corporates have you by the balls. You can't defy them... You have to shut your mouth and remember to stick by the rules. Disobey those rules about no bad language and only performing clean material and you'll never get to perform for that company ever again, and others will blacklist you as well, which means your major source of income dries up," one of the younger comics at East India Comedy told me with an irritated face. He asked that I not identify him by name for fear of reprisals from corporates. "They are living in the Dark Ages. They don't even care if your set was good, so long as you stick by the rules. Although more and more, to their credit, these corporate gigs are turning out to be more relaxed during the actual show, than they sounded when the HR people were corresponding with me. Once, the CEO himself of a big company put his arm around me when I was starting my show and asked me to tell vulgar jokes. He was a bit drunk. But when the CEO says that, obviously there won't be any trouble."

His boss, East India Comedy founder and one of the first comics in Mumbai, Sorabh Pant, talked about the transforming nature of audiences in an interview more recently (Nathan, 2016): "Even as recent as 2013, when I was doing corporate shows, some people were uncomfortable with certain jokes. But now there are audiences that ask for dirtier jokes."

One of the most experienced and successful comics on the Mumbai circuit who has played, many dozens of times over, the important role of Master of Ceremonies

(introducing the different talents for the night and acting as a link between each performance while also presenting their own material), told me that his experiences were mixed: "Sometimes the HR person reaches out to hire us to perform at some bonding session for employees. The company would have whisked them away to a resort and we have to go there with very little time at hand to set up equipment. Sometimes I really hate those shows. Often the microphones won't work. It's not a professional environment. I feel like a lounge singer on a cruise ship. If the crowd is bad, people will be talking over us. Sometimes I've stopped shows because people didn't care. They never noticed and I got all my money anyway. But the corporate gigs subsidize us comics... it's still a buyer's market out there. The money we make at those gigs helps us live comfortably, so I'm not about to be ungrateful. You can say, where's the authenticity? The soul, na? What am I doing there if I'm not performing my best work? You can say it's soul-sucking, and how much it sucks that they don't let us do any unsafe material even when the audience at those kind of gigs doesn't mind. But at the end of the day, I'm able to pay my bills because of these shows."

One of the female comics told me, "It's important to maintain the illusion. This is a perception thing. Makes me think of *The Great Gatsby*... maybe stand-up needs to have glitz and glamour, the dazzle-razzle to survive for now, and the money will come in anyway. The reality is more complicated."

While most comedians are understandably wary of making generalizations about how their comedy shapes Mumbai and Indian culture, some like Aditi Mittal and Gursimran Khamba think that they are able to influence, and be influenced by, a new

kind of middle-class thinking that breaks away from the cautious, even negative, thought process of previous generations. Stand-up shares a common language with indie Bollywood films made over the past decade – films like *Delhi Belly*, *Ungli* and *Jab We Met*, which liberally employ a mix of English and Hindi and operate in the realm of that complex, new middle-class sensibility. "But it is not just movies. We also have the NH7 Weekender that's a music festival. Stand-up comedy is happening independently from all that, but at the same time it is participating in the larger cultural trend," Khamba told me, suggesting that a new kind of national identity, rooted in conspicuous consumption and making a break from India's socialist past, is being articulated through the tangible reality of urban modernity.

Although following many of the traditions of American stand-up, the hybrid Indian version is geared to appeal to Indian sensibilities in a way that feels natural. As I discussed earlier, many comedians confirmed to me that their brash opening jokes, which are riffs on local ethnic differences, are employed to make audiences comfortable. The ideology interpellates segments of the crowd by turn, subtly appealing to their stereotyped sense of self and giving them a sense of belonging to imagined communities. The jokes are usually steeped in local cultural reference: former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was for instance always portrayed as speaking in a high-pitched wheeze, which seemed to be an easy joke but a very popular theme rooted in the familiarity.

Yet, in India, stand-up has barely had the time over the past decade to establish itself as a radical space. The English-language media for its part has only occasionally

acknowledged comedy for its radical potential. Mumbai's stand-up scene has been appropriated from the outset, commercialized, corporatized, and ultimately paired up with media partners at spectacles. Stand-up comedy in Mumbai has not so much evolved organically as an underground protest in the manner of the punks in Dick Hebdidge's (1979) study – which is another reason I am hesitant to label Mumbai's stand-up comedy scene as a subculture. Those who watch stand-up in Mumbai aren't necessarily rebels trying to find new ways to express themselves; they are just as likely to be bourgeois professionals looking simply for new ways to enjoy a night out.

Still, comedy is 'alternate' in the sense the tone of comedy is new to Indian audiences when performed professionally by Indians. This very English and American sensibility had never been adopted before in public performance, especially in Hindi language entertainment, though growing up I remember our comedic voices in college were influenced by British and American writers, and we often wondered why that gap hadn't been filled yet. It is clear to me from the interviews I conducted that performers themselves are very tuned-in to other stand-up acts from around the world. At a Mumbai comedy club performance, it feels like an Indian voice telling P.G. Wodehouse or Dave Barry stories – and introducing us to new names, if not directly, then implicitly, through media interviews enlightening readers about mentors and old comedian favorites.

But stand-up comedy isn't simply experienced through comedians standing up and delivering material to seated audiences. The articulations emerge in a far more complex way. In the next section I give experiential context to this discussion by narrating an exhilarating spot of ethnographic research, in the course of which I met some of

Mumbai's most intriguing people under the age of forty at a wine tasting. The South Mumbai wine bar Vinoteca becomes an articulated site of 'cool,' bringing youth culture and cool culture together, and I demonstrate how comedy becomes integral to conceptions of coolness in in every day life, and burnishes the cultural capital of audiences. The description of what was essentially a meeting of an underground community of free-spirited cultural adventurers brings together the various articulated elements of Mumbai's stand-up scene in a very material way. It will illuminate Mumbai's culture of 'cool' by examining articulations of representation and identity and how meanings of 'cool' are negotiated in spaces related to, yet different from, stand-up comedy.

2.9 A NIGHT OF RESEARCH: MUMBAI'S CULTURE OF 'COOL'

Among the hardcore fan base, I interviewed a few people who uniformly claimed to search for comedians on YouTube. People like Riday Thakur and Shravan Chawla are extremely familiar with the stand-up comedy format through their voracious consumption online. To say Riday and Shravan are huge fans of stand-up is to understate their appetite. Their personalities are sharply defined by their sense of humor. In fact, they turned out to be two of the most interesting people I ended up meeting during the entire course of my research work in Mumbai. As it turned out during my first interview with them, they were secretly studying me for reasons of their own.

I met Riday originally through Anisha Sharma (the woman whom I called my 'perfect informant' earlier in this chapter) in April 2013, when stand-up still maintained

only a subcultural hold on Mumbai and hadn't yet gone mainstream. Anisha had given me Riday's number but was vague about how she knew him. They'd met at shows and other events and when I asked for specifics she only said: "I'm sure he'll tell you about it himself." It intrigued me to notice that she followed Riday on Twitter – this was a woman who followed only around a few hundred people herself, while having a following numbering in five figures. (She never did get around to following me.)

Riday was a droopy-eyed, MBA-wielding, Pajero-driving son of a whisky baron who confessed to me his addiction to both the high-brow comedy of George Carlin and Bill Hicks and the lowbrow work of the Indian director David Dhawan, father of the young Bollywood star, Varun Dhawan, and best known for the farcical comedies he made in the 1990s with the actor Govinda.

Riday had sounded extremely interested in my project when we spoke on the phone, and asked several questions, although in the glut of shows and interviews I forgot to follow up for a week. When I finally had things under control, I called him to apologize. I didn't tell him I had clean forgotten about him, naturally. And I hadn't, in a manner of speaking: his name was somewhere on the list of potential informants I'd made on the Notes feature of my iPhone but there were so many now – comedians, improve performers, audience members, club management and their underlings, company representatives, charity organizers, college festival runners, older audience members, writers, actors and other locals of note – that I could no longer instantly identify people and had had to attach short biographical tags. I told him I'd been caught up doing interviews with people who were leaving town, a white lie.

I finally caught up with him town-side. He said he was bringing a friend who was "as obsessed with stand-up comedy" as he was. We were supposed to meet at the Starbucks in Horniman Circle late in the evening, close to 10 PM, and I got there about an hour early because I'd heard the place was less like the ones in America or England and more like a palace, a tourist attraction. Madras filter coffee – the only kind of coffee a Tamil Brahmin like me can bear to drink – wasn't being served, so I asked for a small cup of hot chocolate. For a place so big, the air-conditioning managed to keep the temperature remarkably low. I slid a sleeve onto the cup, read factoids about coffee up on the wall and craned my neck at the high ceiling. I put my recorder and laptop away and stepped out for a cigarette. When I got back, my couch had been taken up by a family of six – a balding yuppie and his tired-looking wife, the latter's traditionally-attired parents (this family was clearly Maharashtrian, I decided), one little girl and a swaddled infant in a pram. The man looked cranky, he was either annoyed about changing diapers or – judging from his Banana Republic T-shirt and shorts – missing Sunday afternoon lattes to-go from the old days in New York or Seattle. I waited to see if another spot would open up but it was still full and noisy at 10.10. I called Riday, who said he was driving; he picked me up, introduced me to his friend Shravan, and we drove around for ten minutes, stopping at a couple of places before finding a quiet corner at the back-end of a restaurant, in one of the gallis behind Colaba Causeway.

Riday told me that he helped his father, a local distributor for several international high-end liquor brands, in his import business. (Riday has since entered the craft beer market as a distributor.) "I also run my own company which I started in B-school in

Gurgaon – an offline social networking site.” I’d heard so many variations on the phrase ‘social media enterprise’ those past several weeks that I didn’t think to investigate further. Instead I dove right into why his taste spanned such a wide range. We’d talked a little about it on the phone and I commented that for a South Bombay kid it was terrifically atypical.

“I grew up watching videotapes of movies like *Andaz Apna Apna*, the Aamir Khan-Salman Khan film,” Riday explained. “It was a flop when it was released – too much of a spoof maybe. But spoofs are timeless and the movie has a cult following today. Back in the day I guess I just enjoyed the slapstick. And Crime Master Gogo, the Shakti Kapoor character. People still talk about his scenes. I tell my friends all the time in that creepy tone, ‘Aankhen nikaal kar gotiyan khelunga.’ I will play marbles with your eyeballs. Or Aamir Khan telling Shakti Kapoor: ‘Gogo ji, aapka ghaghara.’ He’s pointing at Gogo’s cape and calling it a ghaghara, a long skirt. And who can forget, ‘Aaya hoon, kuch to leke jaunga.’ (I’ve come. I’ll only go after taking something.) Doesn’t sound funny? It’s not translatable unless you know the context and culture; you had to belong to that time period. I know all the dialogues of that film.”

“I watched that film once, I don’t remember any those lines,” I said, laughing.

“They are classic dialogues,” Shravan said. “Unlike my classmates I wasn’t shy of saying I liked that movie. It probably helped that I was popular and outgoing in school – I went to Campion, used to throw parties at home. We went on foreign vacations every other year. Dubai, Thailand, Malaysia... once we went all over Europe. That was after

Dilwale Dulhaniya had just come out. I was the one telling everyone else what was 'cool'. But best was when I started following Govinda in all his David Dhawan films."

Riday showed me pictures on his phone of the two of them dressed up in a black Nehru jacket and garish yellow kurta-pajama set, as a Govinda character I didn't recognize. I took Riday's word for it that it was the country bumpkin look from Raja Babu; anyone willing to look that ghastly and keep records of it to proudly show to strangers must count as a diehard fan. The truly interesting thing about Riday and Shraavan – and I told them this in so many words – was that they weren't as indiscriminate in their tastes as they made it sound; out of all the people I'd interviewed they were perhaps most comfortable in their own skin, hybrid citizens who had adapted to the apparent dichotomy of modern living.

Riday looked pleased with my conclusion. "You get it, you're cool," he said. "You'd fit right into our group." I asked what group he was referring to. "My company, remember?" he said, and offered to drop me off at CST station; I was so intrigued, I accepted although I'd planned to take a taxi back. "What is your company called? What do you do?" I asked belatedly.

"We organize parties where the most interesting people in Mumbai under forty can meet each other," Shraavan said in the car. "We are called Covalence, though I am a silent partner. Basically people fill out a form on our website, answer a few questions, and we screen them. If we think their answers are interesting and cool, we invite them to a shindig in different parts of town, which we keep secret till the last moment. There they can mix together, talk art, politics, film. And *Andaz Apna Apna* if they like."

“You’ve been judging me just as I was analyzing your answers,” I joshed them.

“Yes, very much so. We try to bring together cool people in real life,” Riday said.

"A lot of people collect friends on social media like they're collecting tokens; we want to change that, we want real social circles to develop. Bombay is not like New York or London where you meet interesting people at almost every party or you can chat up people in bars. Here we don't approach people in bars. They have to be vetted first, because who knows, they might be crazy."

“So you bring together the best of what’s here.”

“These days a lot of people are returning from abroad to settle back in India – from America, Australia, England, Tanzania, Malaysia – we are targeting them to begin with,” he said. “Our brand’s spreading through word of mouth at this stage. That way we can keep out the undesirable crowd.”

I asked him to define undesirable. “People who don’t know how to interact with others,” he replied. “Many, if not most Indians, lack even basic social skills. We have to keep them out.” Both admitted it was borderline racist to think that way, but as Riday said, “People pay us money for the chance to meet a huge range of people with a variety of interests. Our credibility is at stake.”

It sounded like he was trying to mix dating with setting up friendships. “Well,” he said, throwing up his arms, “We do the introducing – where you decide to take it is not our business.”

“So you’re building a network with an electrified fence for Bombay’s richest and sexiest people,” I said. He responded very persuasively: “Not necessarily richest. Would

you be interested in joining us at an event next week? It'll be an experience worth including in your thesis: how young people enjoy themselves in Bombay. The only rule is you can't bring a date. We try as hard as we can to keep the gender ratio fifty-fifty. If people bring dates they'll end up socializing in pairs. Couples ruin these parties. Oh, and also, no using your phone to get out of being social.”

I was sure I wasn't expected to submit answers myself, but nevertheless spent the entire time on the train thinking up sarcastic, quirky ones to the questions posed (which Riday said changed every few months) on the website covalence.in. For example, under ‘Which historical figure would you want to resurrect and for what reason?’, I typed: ‘Gandhi. Mostly to shove it in his face that living in a village and spinning a charkha aren't the solution to every goddamn problem at least in this century.’ For ‘Which celebrity would you like to be stuck with on a desert island with and why?’ I put down: ‘I'd like for Miley Cyrus to be stuck on a desert island – and for me to get the hell out of there. Why? Even Gandhi would have given up on her as a lost cause – she gives “untouchables” a bad name.’ Which, admittedly, might have been trying too hard to say something 'cool.'

Irrespective of one's stance on liberal eugenics, Covalence is an intriguing concept creating a kind of social network that propagates slowly mainly by word of mouth and fulfills the wishes of its consumer base. My one reservation, before heading to Vinoteca — the surprise venue that was revealed to me and other participants on the day of the event — was that in those early days, they might not have attracted enough people that participants might call interesting. It was in my capacity as a private citizen with the

explicit agenda of making new friends in the city I'd left behind nearly a decade ago – and not as a researcher constantly tempted to impose standards – that I was asking, were Bombay's people 'cool' enough for me? That was what I was going to find out tonight at a wine-tasting staged in a bar located less than a kilometer from Worli Sea Face.

I was the first to arrive. The organizers had taken over one narrow and elongated room to the side of the entrance for the evening; there was a main bar area but I'd not see much of it. The floor in this room was of wood, a very dark, grainy brown, and had been recently mopped. The walls were unsurprisingly wine red. There were no chairs in the antechamber, only a table loaded with wine bottles and glasses. There were two bartenders, a thin man outfitted in a suit and a bow-tie and a woman in the same uniform.

The people who were to show up that night were most likely wine drinkers. Vinoteca stocks wines by Sula, one of India's best known vineyards. Invitees had the option to turn down the choice and still be called to another party down the line. (It was unforgivable to confirm one's presence ahead of time and then fail to show up: the price for that was permanent expulsion from Covalence.) Guests were allowed an unlimited number of glasses and all the finger food they could consume. Were the organizers banking on some of the invitees stopping at two drinks? If costs were to be shared between the venue and Covalence, how did anybody expect to make a profit? "We tied up with the company, the alcohol came for free. This is part of a promotion to spread awareness about Sula which is headquartered in Nasik. Did you know Nasik is the new wine capital of the country? They even have a wine festival every year now," Riday told

me when he collected my entry fee — Rs. 1200 (which converted to roughly \$20). He looked me over and said with a smile, “I see you freshly shaved for our event?”

I’d worn a scraggly beard to our late-night interview; a quick trip to the neighborhood barber left me feeling worked over like a plucked chicken. My barber, a Muslim youth and a big fan of the actor Salman Khan, asked me, “*Wanted* picchur dekhi hai?” He wanted to know if I’d seen the action thriller, *Wanted*, one of 2009s biggest Bollywood hits, which was a remake of a 2006 Telugu film, *Pokiri*, which had already been once remade in Tamil. His Hindi was too Uttar Pradesh for me, but I decoded eventually that he wanted to give me “Sallu bhai ka haircut.” Salman’s haircut. I’d had to politely decline.

“I take you seriously enough,” I told Riday, smiling broadly, and ask him: “Did you see my responses to the questions on your webpage?”

“Saw it that night itself,” he said. “Yours were the funniest I’ve seen in ages.”

The first guests started to trickle in around 8 15. Shravan wasn’t coming tonight. Riday was confident the night’s count would hit fifty. “All Indian?” I asked, and he laughed. Because I disliked red wine the bartender recommended the Sauvignon blanc to go with fish cubes and cheese. She was friendly and spoke good English. We chatted for a few minutes about her job.

The place was starting to fill up. Nobody was doing any mixing yet, however, so I seized the initiative; I introduced myself to the first person who came my way. Malini was in her early twenties, and told me that she loved sampling exotic cuisines and that she was also a semi-professional jazz dancer. She’d moved from Goa, her hometown, to

work in Mumbai as a donor liaison with the Indian arm of a well-known global girl child education NGO, directly after doing a Masters course at New York University. “The plan is to raise awareness among the global elite and channel funds that would otherwise go to Africa because there’s a perception that countries like Sudan need them much more,” she told me. “It should not be a competition – my job is to boost resources.” She loved reading inspiring memoirs; when I asked what she read for fun, she freely confessed that she loved Mills & Boon romance novels and the new wave of chick-lit. She didn’t readily believe me when I told her what I did; she couldn’t get it in her head that someone would want to *research* comedy. “That’s like voluntarily not having fun when you’re supposed to be enjoying yourself,” she said sounding suspicious.

As the crowd rubbed closer together and the *mélange* thickened in consistency, I heard second-hand of a professional wine taster, a scuba diver, and even more sensationally of a former Google employee who’d left the Bay Area to become a farmer (his words), and who for half the year lived on a piece of ancestral property in Aurangabad. I met them all — and later added some of them on social network sites. And I found people had heard secondhand of me. I engaged for twenty minutes in a three-way conversation involving a girl with a prominent forehead – a surgeon, as it turned out, at a private hospital famous for its high movie actor patient-intake – and a male assistant film director who namedropped Bollywood celebrities in direct proportion to the amount of alcohol he had consumed.

I am happily married; but to my amusement I discovered that talking about what I studied would have worked as a pickup line that night – it was unique and a natural

conversation starter. Everyone of those well-dressed, hip young people there had been to at least one comedy show. They didn't necessarily remember the names of comics, except perhaps Vir Das or Sorabh Pant, until I prompted them. Nobody seemed specifically as into comedy as Riday, but through this rich articulation of contemporary Mumbai culture, I could see stand-up was definitely something people took for granted — and as belonging very much to this new culture of 'cool.'

2.10 CONCLUSION

In this chapter I discuss the socio-economic and political-economic contexts of stand-up comedy production in Mumbai. I locate the city's stand-up scene in its physical environment. I identify the key decision makers and taste makers in the stand-up scene. I link the stand-up scene to allied formats and show why it is important to consider them as an extension of the scene that is nevertheless an integral part of the discussion on how stand-up has grown to be perceived by audiences. I examine how comics use live performances and technology to reach and expand their audience base.

I isolate All India Bakchod as an important player in the stand-up comedy scene, document their rise and examine how they've constructed a target market for their viral videos. I also examine how producers and audiences of stand-up comedy negotiate the global and local in the construction and reading of satire. My analysis is drawn from interviews conducted with the interest groups directly involved in stand-up comedy's production and reception, and centers on the middle class' consumption patterns. Such

cultural intermediaries, I argue, play a huge role in consolidating the position of English language stand-up comedy as a burgeoning cultural powerhouse in India.

Extending that analysis, I fit the Mumbai stand-up scene in a modified Circuit of Culture to examine articulations arising from interactions among the five classic moments: production, representation, consumption, identity and regulation. My Circuit of 'Cool' helps ground Mumbai's comedy scene in an organized theoretical framework. Here, and in the chapters that follow, my Circuit of 'Cool' teases out the abstract and material connections that have contributed to English language stand-up's growing prominence in mainstream middle class Indian consciousness. Here I show in particular how the production moment influences the identities of participants and consumers in a way that creates a clean cultural break between generations and generates a new code for comedy, which nevertheless carries echoes from earlier television shows like *Movers & Shakers*. I argue that Mumbai's stand-up scene has the capacity to serve as a training school for comedians and audiences to shape their sense of humor but also, beyond that, to engage in discursive practices, perhaps for the first time in such dynamic interactive settings.

Finally, I offer what I hope is an illuminating ethnographic summary of one of the many, many enjoyable nights I spent mapping Mumbai's comedy scene. I outline my experience as a participant observer attending a wine tasting event in South Mumbai, one of the many in-vogue, class-conscious 'cool cultures' that work in sync with the larger cultural gearwheel. The detailed description I supply here allows me to give the reader a sense of how the Hindi film industry, stand-up and other subcultures are combining to

articulate (and rearticulate) the meaning of 'cool' in Mumbai, in particular among young, urban, middle-class or aspirational populations.

Chapter 3: Bollywood, stand-up comedy and a culture of 'cool'

3.1 BOLLYWOOD AS BIG BROTHER

On December 20, 2014 All-India Bakchod held a 'Roast' at the Sardar Vallabhai Patel Stadium in Mumbai. The show, titled All India Bakchod Knockout, made perfectly willing live targets of two of the Hindi film industry's most famous young actors, Ranveer Singh and Arjun Kapoor, both 31-years-old, with one of the most successful producer-directors, Karan Johar, acting as host. Comedians Aditi Mittal and Abish Matthew collaborated on this production; so did the well-known film critic Rajiv Masand and Raghu Ram, the former host of the hugely popular youth-oriented reality television show, MTV Roadies.

The performance had remarkable contradictory elements, managing as it did to incorporate the praiseworthy alongside the deplorable — some jokes were pro-women and others anti-women; homosexuality was discursively normalized and, in the same breath, dismissed with contempt. Most surprisingly of all, for a show that was only nominally structured as stand-up and isn't truly representative of Mumbai's stand-up comedy scene, it has managed to attract a blitz of media attention and yank Mumbai's stand-up comedy scene decisively into mainstream middle class Indian culture. For this wasn't a standup show full of the usual kind of jokes, as I will go on to discuss; it was a shock-fest full of scandalous, vulgarly-worded comedic material that has since gained infamy as one of the most over-the-top entertainment spectacles ever to unfold in India.

Like most American comedy performances one sees on Netflix, the AIB Roast took place at an indoor venue. The Sardar Vallabhai Patel stadium is a sports facility with

a maximum capacity of five thousand. There were 4000 people in the crowd that night (Pal, 2015). Each had paid Rs. 4000 (approximately \$70) to attend. This was on par with ticket prices for internationally recognized stand-up comic Russell Peters's 2013 show in Mumbai, which were reported as selling for Rs. 2250, Rs. 3500 or Rs 6500 (Rolling Stone India, 2013). The general ambience in the Roast video is that of a wedding party held on a cool winter's night. Many in the audience that evening were celebrity friends of the participants; they must naturally count among the status-aware, cool-conscious people of Mumbai. Well-dressed, well-heeled people — including celebrities such as the highly prominent indie Bollywood directors Anurag Kashyap and Vikramaditya Motwane, a host of well-known actors such as Deepika Padukone, Sonakshi Sinha, Imran Khan and Alia Bhatt — seem to be still settling in their chairs, those first couple of minutes in the edited YouTube recording of the performance.

When I spoke to him, AIB's Khamba was hopeful that the show would meet with success online, where the reach could extend in far greater numbers. At the time he was hesitant to predict how the audience, however active and engaged with the content, might react to something that was so out of the norm of the public's cultural experience.

"I hope it goes well," he said to me as we relaxed in the All India Bakchod office where he and a colleague were busy putting scenes together for the YouTube version. Sofas were arranged perpendicular to each other. There was a table in the center. The room was otherwise sparsely furnished and lit by tube lights. It crossed my mind to ask Khamba if I could watch the show as it was being edited, but I didn't know if I could go so far as that and didn't see the point. "There was a lot of cursing," Khamba said, "which

the audience there didn't seem to care about... but they'd paid good money to be entertained, and we gave them something memorable. But the online version will have to be different. In fact we took the call to leave a lot of the raunchy material out. It worked at a show but we would get into a lot of trouble with the censors if we decided to go the whole way."

I watched the edited Roast for the first time on YouTube (2015). Hardened as I've become over the years, accustomed to gratuitous cursing and bawdy comedy on American and British television in particular, I was highly surprised, if not quite shocked. While I personally found a few of the jokes in the Roast hilarious, a lot of the material was unbelievably and almost unbearably crass (its effect amplified somehow by the fact of its recording); so much so that that sort of material has never featured at a Mumbai comedy club. It is easy to see why the event proved extraordinarily controversial in the media and attracted the attention of regulatory authorities (Hazra, 2016).

Despite the fact that 12-13 cases were brought against All India Bakchod in different parts of the country, and the threat of arrest leading to plenty of stress, the group believe the controversy that the event generated was great for raising its profile, although co-founder Tanmay Bhat believes there is nothing to be gained by trying to create controversy "especially in a country like India" (Mathur & Patra, 2016). The Roast was easily the most extreme comedy performance I have ever watched by Indian comics. The relentlessness was new and hugely transgressive, even for a hybrid population that is familiar, even comfortable, with Western tropes of comedy.

The Roast, as a format a counter to 'toasts', derives directly from the many similar celebrity 'roast' specials that aired on the American channel, Comedy Central. In those shows, a personality becomes the butt of extreme sarcasm and jocularly; the performances become an exhibition of no-holds-barred comedy and the wit can often seem extraordinarily caustic, vicious and personal. While the Roast of Ranveer Singh and Arjun Kapoor was distinctly Indian in its content, the tone was as abrasive, crass and witty as any of those American shows.

The performers, Khamba told me, were determined to put up a show that didn't merely pay lip service to traditions of the Roast and dissolved into something meek that "sucked up to Bollywood;" the participants were motivated to do something that broke every barrier they had ever encountered, consequences be damned. In this particular articulation, by mercilessly ragging on Bollywood and doing so in a public forum, the stand-ups were in fact displaying respect, showing that Bollywood's younger generation at least was 'cool' enough to handle any degree of mockery. The comics were signaling Bollywood's state of transition, and also acknowledging that the hyperstylized Hindi film industry with nearly a century of experiences behind it, acts like a kind of older brother / mentor figure to English language comedy which is still finding its feet.

Still, I felt a kind of tension in me, that first time watching the jokes; I was appalled by the bluntness of the comedy, fearful for the backlash AIB was bound to face from small-fry politicians and party activists roused into action by their self-serving leaders, yet excited at the same time by what it meant for my dissertation. I remember

thinking in that moment what a decisive break from tradition this was for Indian entertainment, and how it could unshackle audiences from staid expectations.

I would go so far as to argue that the 'All India Bakchod Knockout' counts as a key event in the history of Indian popular culture, because it constitutes a defining moment in the articulation of disjunctures between dynamic new comedy formats and existing cultural industries; between old Bollywood icons and new; between an India in the era of social media and the epochs immediately preceding it.

In this chapter I do a close textual analysis of the Roast and establish the linkages between Mumbai's stand-up comedy scene and the film industry. I will examine how, by forging new connections between the stand-up scene and the Hindi film industry and in dramatically transgressing the norms of regular stand-up shows, The Roast of Arjun Kapoor and Ranveer Singh succeeded in bringing the Mumbai stand-up comedy brand into the mainstream.

The Hindi language film industry emerges in this chapter as a kind of 'big brother' figure to the English language comedy scene, rather than to Hindi comedy; I discuss how Mumbai's stand-up scene draws on the support of the larger cultural industry that is Bollywood, and how, in turn, the Hindi film industry makes use of stand-up comedy's cachet to market itself differently and aggressively to newer culturally hybrid generations that have easy access to multiple entertainment options. I also conduct a close textual analysis of All India Bakchod's earlier viral video, titled 'Genius of the Year,' (All-India Bakchod, 2014) which starred one of Bollywood's most prominent young female stars, 23-year-old Alia Bhatt, and was another moment — if a less spectacular one — that set

the stand-up scene on the path to mainstream visibility. I will use these two videos as case studies and map various articulations arising out of the interrelationship between the elements in my Circuit of 'Cool' to show how Bollywood rearticulates comedy, and how Mumbai's stand-up scene is able to reconfigure the representation of Bollywood.

3.2 CASE STUDY I: 'AIB KNOCKOUT' AS DISTORTION OF STAND-UP

The opening, delivered by an unseen presenter away from the stage, goes: "Ladies and gentlemen... please give it up for your roastmaster this evening. A pilot, a sailor, an actor, a model, an architect — are all men he would happily fuck. Please welcome to the stage, Karan Johar!"

To give context — 44-year-old Karan Johar is the son of the well-known director and producer, Yash Johar. Karan, since his father's passing, has run the family business, Dharma Films. Apart from being one of India's best-known mainstream commercial directors from the past two decades, responsible for such monolithic pieces of filmmaking such as *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998), he is also a suave, polished and well-spoken talk-show host famous for *Koffee With Karan*, which engages various figures from the Hindi film industry in intimate and genuinely engaging conversation, mainly in English, and often drawing from the personal relationships between Johar and those personages. Those conversations on television sometimes make playful references to Johar's sexuality. Stories of his supposed affair with the well-known star Shah Rukh Khan, whether or not true have widely circulated at cocktail and dinner parties in Mumbai's middle class circles. Johar denies them vehemently (TNN, 2017). But these

issues had never previously been addressed so directly in a public forum of this kind. And while legal implications remain, culturally, Karan Johar has rarely, if ever, been dismissed as too campy. For all its immature content, in elevating Johar to the position of host (from which he was able to deliver his own zingers against everyone on stage), the Roast proves remarkably inclusive, far more so than most television shows and Bollywood films that paint homosexuality as a one-tone object of derision.

Karan Johar is one of the most interesting figures in the context of this Roast. Older than most of the performers here, he represents both the patriarchy and 'the other' in that he belongs to a rich "Bollywood family" but has had his sexuality dissected in the media for years. He embodies Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's (1990) suggestion that gay men must negotiate the binaries of public/private and homosexual/heterosexual through continual disclosures of their sexuality. Audience members, on their part, don't need to be gay to pick up on Johar's sexuality, but only those that Lynne Joyrich (2001) would call "knowing viewers" (p. 453) can locate the articulation of de-eroticized homosexual performance in this specific cultural moment.

In the Roast video, the actors are introduced; Ranveer Singh first kisses his then-girlfriend, Deepika Padukone, chastely on the cheek as he and Arjun Kapoor strut on to the stage, dressed in robes like boxers at a prize fight and adopting similar brash mannerisms. Then within the first three minutes of the show, in a thoroughly subversive act, Ranveer plants a smooch flush on Karan Johar's mouth.

The 'queering' of the Roast heightens the stakes in multiple ways: for the performers and audiences themselves, in what the Roast might come to represent, and by raising the

legal implications of the act (which I will address in a moment). This is a decisive and unexpected moment in the show, but as Alexander Doty (2000) writes in *Flaming Classics: Queering the Film Canon*, queerness is something from which many kinds of audiences can agree derive mirth.

"...the queerness of comedy consists of far more than humorous representations of queerness. Let's face it, as a genre comedy is fundamentally queer since it encourages rule-breaking, risk-taking, inversions, and perversions in the face of straight patriarchal norms. Although you could argue that most comic gender and sexuality rule-breaking is ultimately contained or recuperated by traditional narrative closure (as it attempts to restore the straight status quo), or through the genre's "it's just a joke" escape hatch, the fact remains that queerness is the source of many comic pleasures for audiences of all sexual identities."

Ranveer Singh is known — even famous — for projecting an extroverted identity that combines a brash hyper-masculinity that is stereotypically North Indian with metrosexual queerness. In February 2016, Ranveer Singh won praise across several media outlets both for his daring fashion sense and for his gender norm-challenging risk-taking after posing for *L'Officiel* magazine wearing a septum ring and a pussy bow blouse and "looking fierce AF" (Dixit, 2016). So it might not be viewed as entirely out of character for him to kiss a man in public, especially when it comes attached with a "it's just a joke" escape hatch at a Comedy Roast, where nothing, however explicit, is supposed to be taken seriously according to the conventions of the medium. But to kiss Johar in public was a courageous act that was clearly transgressive by prevailing cultural standards. By kissing Johar, Ranveer might or might not be labeling and outing himself as sexually ambiguous; but he increases the threat to the patriarchal order because the

dominant perception of him among audiences is that of a handsome, hip, young actor who does what he likes without necessarily sacrificing his masculinity. They are unlikely to code him as gay or even bisexual because they know he is (or was, at the time of the Roast's filming) publicly in a relationship with the actress Deepika Padukone who is present in the audience. The act of kissing Johar becomes 'cool' because it's got a devil-may-care quality to it. Ranveer is kissing a man in the presence of his then-girlfriend, and he is doing so despite the fact there is arguably a great social price to pay in India for being genuinely gay (although well-connected, ambiguously queer figures such as Karan Johar have got away with it). The fact that Ranveer is willing to queer himself anyway makes him, to the viewer, rebellious and admirable.

"None of it was scripted, it was just them fucking around," Khamba told me. It's an act as unexpected as it is a brazen challenge to anti-gay orthodoxy which regards homosexuality as a taboo subject in India — and whose position is, for better or worse, legally backed by Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (Prakash, 2016), under which the practice of homosexuality is punishable by a term of life imprisonment. In the video however, the act of kissing is replaced with a metaphorical image of a honey bee hovering over a flower — a common way in Hindi films from before the 1990s to suggest and represent sexual activity, which these days is satirized in different media as a kitschy symbol of the old Bollywood. Actress Sonakshi Sinha is seen giggling with a shocked look on her face. The shot pans to the audience, whose clapping and laughter is long and sustained. Having done something so rebellious, so defiantly cool, Ranveer Singh grabs the microphone. In a sly reference to the scandalous notion of a 'casting couch' which is

supposedly rampant in Bollywood (wherein actors rumoredly sleep with those involved in making the film to secure a role), he says, "What 'awww,' I've been doing more than that to him for four years, he still won't cast me in a fucking movie!"

Some of the punch lines in the Roast are very witty. Ashish Shakya phrases and times a gay joke impeccably, saying, "I'd like the entire panel for coming out today... and Karan for not." Other jokes are less sophisticated, more blunt: "Parineeti Chopra (a well known actress from the younger crop) is not here tonight because we said she'd get fucked by 10 dudes in front of 4000 people. Karan Johar is here tonight because we told him he'd get fucked by 10 dudes in front of 4000 people."

It is pertinent to offer here a wider offering of the jokes that were made on a variety of subjects a transcript of select excerpts from the show. Roastmaster Johar gets in some zingers at the very beginning. Right away, he addresses the relative lack of fame of the participants on stage. He assures the audience (in case they don't value 'cool' as much as celebrity) that they get three stars — Ranveer Singh, Arjun Kapoor and Johar himself — for the price of one ticket. And he has a warning for those who are easily ("or difficultly") offended. There is a joke about the skin color of Roast participant Ashish Shakya. Johar remarks, "Ashish dude, if you were any blacker, Angelina Jolie would adopt you." And: "Ashish Shakya is so black, his mother screened him for Ebola when he was born." It is a theme that nearly every other comedian addresses, which I personally found in extremely poor taste and one of the rare, truly off-color moments from the Roast. It didn't, for a moment, seem to mock the pervasive Indian ideology of differentiating people and social classes on the basis of skin tone; this kind of joke

sounded lazy. Ashish Shakya becomes an easy target because although he is steadily growing famous in some circles he does not have the broad cultural status of a gay icon like Karan Johar.

The cultural critic Deepanjana Pal (2015) takes a more cynical view:

"Everyone on the *AIB Knockout* stage was a placeholder for a certain group of people. Kapoor and Singh embodied all Bollywood actors. Johar had a double role as the Bollywood producer and the gay man, both characterised by a voracious lust. He wasn't the only person reduced to being a sex object. Mittal was there to facilitate the slut-themed jokes. Bhat was there for the fat guy jokes; Shakya for the black guy jokes. Masand sat and took many hits for all film reviewers. They all knew what parts they were playing and they played them to the hilt."

Khamba, incidentally, agreed with me that those jokes were overdone. He was prepared to throw the audience under the bus, and blame a combination of their prejudices and supply-demand market forces. "We had those jokes in so that the audience could connect easily with us," he said with a shrug.

Bashing people for the way they look becomes a recurrent, arrogant motif of 'cool' in the show. Shakya says during the Roast, "Abish Mathew is so unattractive, he was an altar boy for seven years and not one priest molested him." There are also 'fat jokes,' mainly about the very funny obese comedian, Tanmay Bhat. Shakya turns a gay joke about confronting the elephant in the room — i.e. Johar's sexuality — to "What's up Tanmay?" Which seemed regressive to me along yet another axis, because in his own stand-up routines at venues like The Comedy Store, I had noticed Tanmay used his large

physicality well while rarely making any overt references to his long-standing weight issues.

In another segment, Ashish Shukla takes aim at Ranveer: "Ranveer, you did an ad for Durex. It's the first time I saw a condom being endorsed by an STD... I like this couple, Deepika and Ranveer. What an awesome couple, right... Deepika is a state-level badminton player. Ranveer is a national level sex offender." Johar goes after the audience, in the process of making a snarky jab at the actors. "Tonight we celebrate the fact that once again an audience has paid way too much to watch another two hour piece of shit with Ranveer Singh and Arjun Kapoor's faces on it." Johar has informed the live audience what to expect while delivering the Roast opening: "It's going to get filthier than Tanmay Bhat's colon after a buffet."

Meanwhile, Raghu Ram of MTV Roadies, one of the two non-professional comedians alongside the film critic, Rajeev Masand, laces his routine with an extra dose of profanity (for which he is infamous on his show), wagering that cursing is cool and will grab plenty of eyeballs. "AIB you fuckers, you sit here and diss me and Roadies, when basically you have the same philosophy with your videos. *Gaaliyan do, lakhon chutiyan dekhenge*. [Use abusive language, hundreds of thousands of idiots will watch it.] *Bhosadike*. [Rotting cunts.] I just gave you fifty more views... Ranveer and Arjun, you've been an inspiration to the youth of this country. You guys send out the message loud and clear that if you work hard and if you persevere, then one day, you too can suck Adi Chopra's cock." Cue shot, promptly, of Ranveer and Arjun miming the act of fellatio, to the sounds of the audience's mirth.

The actors, Ranveer Singh and Arjun Kapoor do get their say towards the end of the show; although they are not professional comics, their performance is meant to be the highlight because after all, they are mostly why the audience is here. Their routine largely derives from the relative anonymity of the other participants. They mock film critic Rajeev Masand, for example, by saying: "Rajeev, how does it feel to be part of another show where nobody gives a fuck about what you say?" And there is an obligatory sex joke, this time targeting comedian Abish Mathew: "Abish's father regretted his birth so much that when he saw him for the first time, he turned around to his wife and he said, 'Kal se sirf anal, haan?' [translation: 'Tomorrow onwards, only anal, okay?']" One of the moments that draws huge applause for the actors occurs when both Ranveer and Arjun launch into a fiercely energetic, twenty-second, expletive-laced satirical rant about MTV Roadies host Raghu Ram screaming at his penis to perform — mocking Ram's reputation as an aggressive taskmaster on the reality show. Another moment that elicits a huge amount of applause from the audience is when the three Bollywood celebrities on stage get together for a set-up. Arjun Kapoor, in consoling Ranveer Singh over a film that has flopped, suggests that Ranveer ought to play a role in a Karan Johar film. Ranveer, after a moment's pause, trots along and bends over before Karan Johar; Johar gets up with dignity, walks to the microphone, and says to the audience with a smirk: "That's my position, Ranveer."

The gay (and homoerotic) jokes are relentless, and gain a lot of traction among the viewers because most people in the audience, if not all, are very aware and informed of the on-going speculation about Johar's sexuality (TNN, 2017). There is tremendous

value in decoding the messages and symbolism embedded in seemingly trifling comedy routines because they are in effect giving collective voice to cultural articulations. One interesting aspect to stand-up comedy is that it sharply articulates what people are thinking but prefer to leave unsaid in polite spaces. The transgressive capacity to destroy this barrier between thought and speech makes the Comedy Roast and shows like it extremely cool to viewers. I would go so far as to suggest that the gay jokes, especially the ones aimed at a powerful Bollywood figure as Karan Johar, have the cumulative effect of challenging the heteronormative narrative by normalizing the idea of homosexuality and asking the audience to account for the possibility that gay jokes need not necessarily make a victim of gay people. This aggressive inclusiveness has the effect of making homosexuality, at least for the course of one evening, a very normal topic of conversation — even something that is 'cool.'

3.3 THE ROAST'S TRANSFORMATIVE SIGNIFICANCE

Two years on, the impact of the Roast on popular culture is best measured by the fact that The All India Bakchod Knockout has been consistently and extensively dissected in the mainstream media (Rizwan, 2016; Das & Pyne, 2016; IANS, 2017; Bhattacharya, 2015; Bhatt, 2017).

Comedy is an integral kind of cultural production in India. Bollywood and Mumbai's stand-up scene are operating in a symbiotic culture where Bollywood does much of the heavy lifting. Stand-up basks in Bollywood's brighter glow but makes its own strong contribution to film narratives by rearticulating the expression of an urban

comedic sensibility in cinema, as a consequence of the comedy culture adding a cutting edge of 'cool,' through a younger generation of Indian actors infusing a new aesthetic that is more in alignment with contemporary tastes.

Sangita Gopal (2011) traces Bollywood's changing face to as far back as the 1970s, a decade filled with political instability on account of the war with Bangladesh, recession and the Emergency period imposed by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi who asserted dictatorial control of the country. She writes:

"The paternalistic conception of the state — ensconced in the colonial formula that the government equaled ma-bap (mother-father) — came to be seriously questioned as sections of the population began to feel that their interests and concerns could never be met by those in power. This alienation came to be refracted in cinema through the figure of the "angry young man," best captured by Amitabh Bachchan's classics of angst and violent discontent..."

Post-Independence Bollywood cinema since the 1950s is unique, argues Jyotika Virdi (2003), in that it uses "family as the primary trope to negotiate caste, class, community and gender divisions, making for complex but decipherable hieroglyphics through which it configures the nation and constructs a nationalist imaginary." I extend that to claim that by absorbing English language stand-up comedy tropes, contemporary Bollywood is able to increasingly overcome problematic and archaic representations of family, gender, sexuality, social class and religion in popular Indian cinema. This symbiotic confluence of Bollywood and stand-up transforms both a particular kind of youth cultural identity invested in the new Bollywood and stand-up comedy, and both fuse into a new kind of 'cool.' The Roast and the Alia Bhatt videos, intersecting as they do

with the Bollywood scene, give us excellent texts to speak to that articulation, even though they are to varying degrees atypical extensions of the stand-up scene.

Indian films and television have often relied on crass double entendres to generate laughs. Stand-up comedian Jeeveshu Ahluwalia (TNN, 2016), speaking at a discussion on stand-up's reputation (part of the Serendipity Art Festival on the sidelines of the International Film Festival of India in 2016), felt that emerging stand-up performers were more sensible. His argument is that most of the sex jokes in films are farcical and inserted purely to titillate audiences. I would go further and assert that comics often use sex jokes in live performances as a technique to connect with and electrify audiences through conscious acts of transgression.

Yet, in all the time I spent watching shows in Mumbai, no stand-up comic's routine at clubs, contained material that sounded even remotely so harsh as what was attempted at The Roast. The Roast was most certainly an exception. The presence of stand-ups alongside young Bollywood actors in such unprecedented circumstances allows both groups to make fun of each other in public. It was a conscious decision on the part of the Roast organizers to push boundaries. Performers at a comedy club would make merciless jokes about plot holes in films such as 'Student of the Year' but never personally target younger actors like Alia Bhatt or Ranveer Singh in such an extreme, vulgar manner, particularly in their absence. Whether or not that is a good thing, in all the shows I watched, nobody attempted such a wild transgression. Not only would it come off as disrespectful, in a sense the physical confines of a small comedy club might

produce an explosive degree of tension, which diffuses more easily in a venue like Sardar Vallabhai Patel auditorium that can hold five thousand people.

That said, the current crop of Bollywood actors knows how to laugh at itself. It is slowly building a reputation for being self-reflexive, both in their performances and in the way they represent themselves. It's interesting to ask what about Ranveer Singh and Arjun Kapoor made them perfect candidates to feature in the Roast. For one, their celebrity is in the process of construction; these two actors represent a kind of new wave Bollywood brat pack versus an older galaxy of established stars who represented a different kind of cool for a different era. The latter group includes the likes of Amitabh Bachchan, Rajesh Khanna and Feroze Khan. Around the time they appeared at the Roast, Ranveer and Arjun were building and promoting a kind of 'bromance' (Dedhia, 2015); their movie *Gunday* (2014) capitalized on their connection and sets them up almost in an intertextual fashion in relation to how the classic Bollywood film *Sholay* (1975) worked for the superstars Amitabh Bachchan and Dharmendra. "Ranveer and Arjun are cool but also very chill, easy to talk to," Aditi Mittal, the sole female comic to participate in the roast, said to me. This characterization would be an interesting evolution for actors of Ranveer and Arjun's generation, given that the older, more established Bollywood actors have a reputation for un-self-aware egotistical behavior (Dehadrai, 2016).

Shah Rukh Khan may be an exception. One of Bollywood's best known superstars, he has featured in some of the film industry's biggest hits since the early 1990s. Appearing on a TV chat show on the Zoom channel the previous month, *Yaar Mera Superstar* ('My Friend the Superstar'), AIB's Tanmay Bhat and Rohan Joshi (The

Indian Express, 2016) had praised Shah Rukh as an extremely cool presence whom they'd love to roast; Rohan went to the extent of saying he was happy that Shah Rukh had stuck to acting, or he'd have given comedians a run for their money. The palpable flattery had elicited a positive response from Shah Rukh himself on Twitter: "U guys make me blush. @thetanmay & @mojorojo keep on being as talented as you are and spread laughs."

Khamba touched upon the pressures that a connection with Bollywood brings upon a group like AIB. "We have a clear policy at AIB that we will not promote any Bollywood film. We said no to Happy New Year, which is Shah Rukh Khan's film." Khamba laughed as he said, "Red Chillies (the motion picture production company) was like, how can you say no to Shah Rukh Khan? We were like, we're genuinely flattered and it would be nice to do something with Shah Rukh, but not to promote your film. They were a little incredulous. The thing is, if something goes wrong, you'll make a film next year. But we will never win our credibility back with our audience."

Which is why it was unusual when, towards the end of January 2017, All India Bakchod posted a video podcast interview with Shah Rukh (AIB, 2017). "One of the criticisms is about the fact that adding a Bollywood person is... you're using it for publicity," Khamba admitted in the context of using a well known movie personality like Kalki Koechlin in the 'Rape — It's Your Fault' video (which I discuss in Chapter 4). But criticism of that variety is always to be expected; the benefits far outweigh the negatives. All India Bakchod has put up many audio podcasts in the past, with stars ranging from Raju Srivastava to Russell Peters. The group is admirably ambitious in how it leverages

big names to further its brand, although with Shah Rukh now in the mix, the question inevitably arises if All India Bakchod is at risk of being deemed sell-outs.

With a rueful look, Khamba said to me, "A lot of people felt that we had become PR agents. It's so telling. People were asking us, what is it for? If someone like Chris Rock does SNL, nobody's asking what is it for. They say, oh cool, Chris Rock is doing SNL. We don't have that culture here. When we announced the Roast, people were like, 'sellout, sellout, sellout.' As long as you put a mainstream face on it, people will always say sellout, without even realizing what it is. The media environment has changed over the past two years. When you think of the word 'media' now, you think, 'paid media.' It's reached a stage now where we are very careful of not being co-opted."

The podcast articulates Shah Rukh Khan's brash superstar image with the notion that he defies his age and could easily be an older version of Ranveer Singh. Tanmay Bhat prefaces the beginning of the podcast with a self-deprecating story about Shah Rukh Khan casually inviting the group over to his house for a Playstation football game session, and how they'd been disappointed when it turned out Khan hadn't followed up on the offer he next night. In the podcast, Shah Rukh Khan teases Tanmay and Rohan for taking him so seriously.

In the opening minutes of the podcast, when the topic of the infamous All India Bakchod Roast comes up, Shah Rukh quickly clarifies — quite sincerely it would appear, but delivering the message in jocular fashion — that he had nothing to do with the Roast and that he'd like to stay politically correct in this video. "I wasn't in the country, I wasn't even on the planet," Shah Rukh jokes. "The only roast I know is roast chicken, which I

love.” Making the point that someone in his position can't afford to offend anybody, he comically ad-libs about how he actually doesn't even eat chicken.

About the podcast, hosted on AIB's YouTube page and which has so far received three million hits, Pradeep Menon writes (2017) in Firstpost:

"... it goes on to set the tone for an exercise in how to make people laugh while playing it safe. And therein lies the great paradox of AIB's podcast with SRK. How, at the same time, it manages to be outrageously funny as well as significantly depressing; because the sense you get is that one of the wealthiest, most popular and recognisable Indian celebrities is nearly as powerless as the common man, when it comes to something as basic as respectfully expressing an opinion. Forget about ever being able to share your own point of view, dear reader, because you are most certainly going to offend someone and bring out their intolerant side. The media – both, actual and social – usually has a field day talking about how Indian stars can't take a stand. There's enough written and said about how India just doesn't have an atmosphere that lets a public figure express themselves without the danger of facing repercussions, which can sometimes even turn violent."

While Shah Rukh Khan, by the mere act of agreeing to share video time with All India Bakchod, is able to establish himself as 'cool' to a whole new generation of fans, few other actors of his generation have been inclined to take such risks. It could be that they are afraid of the repercussions Menon mentions; of being misrepresented or of losing control over their brand, or even, more simply, of being the merciless target of jokes, which after the Roast, is hardly an unreasonable fear.

I would argue that The Roast could never have worked with megastars from preceding generations like Amitabh Bachchan, or even 1990s mainstays who have reinvented themselves from 'chocolate boy' romance leads to action stars like Salman

Khan or Aamir Khan for example. Although each of these is widely regarded by the masses as 'cool,' this is a different register; a different kind of 'cool' in popular culture that actors like Ranveer Singh and Alia Bhatt are overthrowing. Ranveer Singh is hypermasculine but metrosexual and gender ambivalent in ways that previous generations of male actors have never explored. The Roast is relentlessly masculine in its jokes, yet Ranveer in particular pokes fun at himself and is stylized as ambiguously masculine. Ranveer comes off as larger than life, perhaps even larger than Bollywood — which is what it takes to successfully bridge and articulate the brands of Bollywood with the Roast. Arjun plays his straight man; he is the perfect foil.

The presence of an Amitabh Bachchan at an event like the Roast on the other hand would have demanded dismantling his reputation — a risky, even scary prospect when those actors are routinely constructed by the public and the media in god-like terms (Venkataraman, 2016). Audiences might have had trouble seeing someone like Amitabh Bachchan in the same light as before. And when actors themselves seem to buy into their larger-than-life image, the gap between stars and their audiences grows.

Hardly surprising then, that not everyone in the Hindi film industry — especially among those who made their reputations before 2010 — was pleased by what unfolded at Sardar Vallabhai Patel Stadium. Reception in the Bollywood fraternity seemed divided along age lines. 'Some "not taking life so seriously" lessons are needed. DESPERATELY!!!!' Alia Bhatt tweeted in February, a couple of months after the Roast aired (2015). While a lot of the younger actors, including the likes of Ranbir Kapoor Varun Dhawan, Sonakshi Sinha, Sonam Kapoor and Anushka Sharma similarly

expressed their support for what the Roast was attempting, the older generation of actors seemed to take offence (2015).

Many major stars were certainly miffed, going by reports in the media. "Oh no please, I really have no interest in watching it," said Kareena Kapoor, one of the big names whom The Indian Express contacted (Pacheco, 2015). "India has better and far more things to worry about than AIB."

Aamir Khan, most famous for his Oscar-nominated film *Lagaan* who produced the darkly satirical indie comedy, *Delhi Belly* (2011), which featured plenty of profanity, was also surprisingly vocal in his disapproval (Sharma, 2015): "My opinion is that it was a violent show. Karan and Arjun are my friends and I scolded them and told them that I was not impressed with it. I am not someone who can laugh at abuses and bad language. I think I have passed that age.

"I have not yet seen that roast, but I have heard a lot about it... And I have seen 2-3 clips of that, I was deeply affected by that and I was most disappointed in what I was hearing. I completely believe in freedom of speech, no issues, but we have to understand we all have certain responsibilities."

Aamir Khan's is an interesting case. The star of cult comedy films such as *Andaz Apna Apna* and a vastly gifted actor regarded as one of Indian cinema's greatest whose range spans romantic comedies to dark action thrillers, he has also made a television show called *Satyamev Jayate* which articulates his interest in social ills *du jour*, which he has described as his 'social responsibility.' The film critic Subhash K. Jha (2016) writes, "You have to hand it to our superstars. They are so filmy all the time it's hard to tell

when they stop acting... Apart from a tendency to be over-earnest and to manipulate the media in accordance with his need of the hour, Aamir has not a malicious bone in his body;" but as a talk show host, the cultural critic Deepanjana Pal writes (2014), he comes off as "extremely bland and rehearsed... sighing and weeping in such a fake manner." For someone who has traded for decades in the currency of 'cool,' Aamir Khan now risks sounding a bit fuddy-duddy.

He has copped criticism from ordinary stand-up viewers for his comments on the Roast. As Megha Singh, a 19-year old psychology major and stand-up comedy fan, told me, "He sounded pompous and hypocritical, especially after all the 'MC-BC' slang words (ed: which is how many Indians politely refer to profanity directed at mothers and sisters) in *Delhi Belly*. I don't know why he said bad things about the Roast but he sounded so out of touch. I still respect him, he's a great actor and he does great social work through *Satyamev Jayate* (ed: Aamir's TV talk show on social injustice), but he doesn't understand young people at all. He doesn't speak for me. I saw the Roast on YouTube... it was a great show... it brought in some fresh air. I never have thought India would be cool enough to have something like this."

When I asked her if she'd heard of American Roasts, she replied in the negative; as did many of my audience interlocutors. In the minds of those who hadn't heard of such things before the AIB Roast came out on social media like YouTube, it was a fresh format which they'd learned belatedly borrowed from several previous shows in America.

The fissures between old Bollywood and new partly help set up the Roast as 'cool,' and by turn help rebrand the younger generation of Bollywood actors who can now

distinguish themselves from their predecessors by expressing their personalities without restraint. Many connoisseurs of classic Bollywood would find it disorienting and shameful, but this fact gives younger audiences the space and inclination to re-appropriate an entertainment format that had perhaps grown stale over the years through formulaic plotting of the 'poor young man fights to get rich girl' variety.

3.4 THE SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT OF THE 'NEW BOLLYWOOD'

The financing of independent films, which as a scene has flourished over this past decade partly on account of the formalization of industry status for the film industry, has taken a slightly different path. *The Good Road* (2013) was fully financed by National Film Development Corporation while Pawan Kumar's *Lucia* (2013) used crowd-funding via social media (Frater, 2013). But as the film critic Anupama Chopra (Verma, 2011) points out in the context of the independent scene, "*We're not talking about finance or distribution, but content and storytelling. These films don't adhere to the song-and-dance formula we've had for many years.*" That goes some way to account for their success.

The darkly satirical *Delhi Belly* (2011) was perhaps among the first independent Bollywood films whose 'cool' comedic sense was wholly in tune with that of the English entertainment-craving middle class. Its central joke was scatological, and much of the humor is targeted at the youth demographic, with the popular song Bhaag DK Bose (a refrain when sung quickly blends into an expletive). Nikhat Kazmi (2016) writes: "All in all, *Delhi Belly* is a fine example of how the brightest and the boldest, when they pool in

their talent, can create a film that is guaranteed to give you your money's worth, even as it re-writes all the moth-balled rules of an ageing industry."

The film, a madcap caper about a heist gone wild, which was made using a mix of colloquial English and Hindi, marked a break from the epic wedding dramas, war films and action thrillers that the Hindi film industry produced over the past two decades. A respectable hit at the box office both domestically and internationally, it featured among others the popular young actor Imran Khan and the comedian Vir Das, founder of Weirdass Comedy, who would parlay this early success into bringing wider attention for Mumbai's (and India's) English language stand-up comedy scene.

Indian urban middle-class audiences have grown sensitive to the appeal of indie Bollywood. I use the term indie Bollywood to apply predominantly to modern Hindi language films like *Miss Lovely* (2012), *The Lunchbox* (2013) and *Queen* (2014) that appeal to both multiplex audiences and followers of the long-established parallel cinema movement coming out of India. Once, the likes of Chetan Anand, Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak, Govind Nihalani and Shyam Benegal were regarded as its stalwarts. Their films often addressed the concerns of Indian village and the peasant class. Contemporary Indian auteurs such as Vikramaditya Motwane (*Udaan*, 2010) and Anand Gandhi (*Ship of Theseus*, 2013) are no longer limited to telling the stories of any particular class in conventional ways.

Indie cinema, like multiplex cinema (a category, which, these days, sometimes overlaps with the former), often puts middle class ambitions, themes and sentiments front and center and pursues storylines that are central to the authentic life of the

Indian middle class, English-speaking demographic. Younger directors, writers, actors, cinematographers, liberated from the constraints of the 1990s economic liberalization era that supported a services-based approach, are finding themselves unfettered from having to pursue bourgeois careers in the Information Technology industry and associated areas. Some like the parallel cinema star Kalki Koechlin have returned to India after studying abroad or, like Nawazuddin Siddiqui, have taken courses at Indian film schools. Back in the 1990s, the likes of Siddiqui with their unconventional looks, would have found it hard to land lead roles in films even though their talent was unquestionable. It's a sign of how far Bollywood has come, to realize that talented actors like Siddiqui, Bhumi Pednekar, Huma Qureshi and Irfan Khan can make a success out of mainstream roles without necessarily relying upon the way they look. Then there are those like the cerebral Abhay Deol and Farhan Akhtar who have capitalized on their well-established family links to Bollywood to straddle the divide between pursuing mainstream projects and those that grant them indie credibility. Indie Bollywood has never been cooler.

No less a personage than Bollywood superstar Amitabh Bachchan has made a late transition to indie cinema. He has starred in offbeat films like *Shamitabh* and *Piku* (both from 2015), drawing further attention to the indie scene, while simultaneously making his debut in Hollywood in *The Great Gatsby* (2013) to follow the likes of Anil Kapoor and Irrfan Khan who have found a measure of success in America. These actors in turn have paved the way for Priyanka Chopra. As this critically-lauded mainstream actress establishes herself in the West through shows like *Quantico* and films in production like *Baywatch*, the Indian movie industry can be said to have entered a new golden age.

Instead of risking having to compete with stand-up for the public's attention, the Hindi film industry is better off acknowledging the comedy scene. With social media coming into its own in the late 2000s, pop culture chatter has grown past the threshold of noise. One of my audience member subjects, Tunali Mukherjee (a freelance journalist and big stand-up comedy fan, who later wrote a piece for *The Mumbai Mirror* about me interviewing Sugar Sammy) said to me: "Stand-up is much cooler than Bollywood, but Bollywood has been making some pretty cool movies like *Dev D*. The jokes in these new movies feel fresh. Earlier Bollywood had really stale jokes. You could predict the punchlines... now it's all different."

Comedy Central India, an offshoot of the American channel, Comedy Central, began broadcasting in the country in January 23, 2012. From the start it has focused exclusively on English language comedic content. Almost immediately, the channel fell afoul of the rules and became a prominent test case for censorship and freedom of speech boundaries. In 2013 and 2014, the government, aided by a court judgment from the Delhi High Court, moved to ban Comedy Central India for a period of ten days [(2013), (2014)]. The controversy had kicked off when two shows airing in 2012 carried "obscene dialogues and vulgar words" that was an affront, they claimed, to "good taste." The shows, the government stated, denigrated women and violated Cable Television Network Rules, which, among other things, states (DNA, 2013) that "no programme should be carried which denigrates women through the depiction in any manner of the figure of woman, her form or body or any part thereof in such a way as to have the effect of being indecent or derogatory to women or is likely to injure the public morality." As I will

explain later in this chapter, this would hardly be comedy's last run-in with the censors in India.

3.5 CALIBRATING 'COOL' THROUGH THE AIB ROAST

A quick, unscientific measure of the 'coolness' factor of each joke in the Roast would be to pay attention to how loudly people are laughing in the video at the humor. More than anything, the atmosphere is like a microcosmic hybrid space of Westernized India, a space full of subversive activity, a carnival of cool, where everyone wants to have a good time at the expense of some of the most powerful figures in the entertainment industry. For one evening, jesters get to tell some truths to those in power.

Deepanjana Pal makes this searing, insightful comment (2015):

"What's interesting about *AIB Knockout* is that in a culture like ours - which adores Bollywood to the point that it is virtually the only cultural industry that is thriving - so many people want to see stars cut down to size... Yet for all this staggering popularity, what *AIB Knockout* shows is that fans are hungry to see their heroes stripped of their privileges. The stars think they know the pulse of the "masses" and make films in which their heroic images are always intact because they believe that is how audiences see them. News flash: more than a million people want to see Bollywood stars be bludgeoned and bullied. Because it wasn't specifically Kapoor, Singh or Johar being attacked in *AIB Knockout*. They stood for the entire popular film industry with its nepotism, tackiness, hypocrisy and blatant disregard for equality."

This was a show of many firsts. Definitely it was the first time that a mainstream Indian show featured two prominent, recognizable faces gesticulating sexual acts. Watching the Roast, I also wondered if this was the first time expletives had been uttered

over a microphone during a live public performance anywhere in the country. It was a fair, if slightly hilarious, question. Raghu Ram's MTV Roadies was a reality show, edited for public consumption. In the television program format, cuss words were bleeped out (2008), though web editions feature plenty of that. But surely someone, somewhere, at some hip college cultural festival or some such event could claim precedent.

The larger point is of course that the divide between the socio-cultural elite's private mindset and the public facade it must present is vast. There is an ever-present element of censorship and regulation in all this, both self-imposed and exerted by external forces such as the government. The comedians themselves, especially the experienced ones I watched and spoke to, tend to use expletives on stage carefully, even thoughtfully — if not always with restraint. Every comic I spoke to, from Sapan Verma and Sorabh Pant of East India Comedy to Khamba and Aditi Mittal were unanimous in their opinion: abusive slang and expletives, whether in English or Hindi weren't cool by themselves. "You never use a 'fuck' as the punchline. You use it sparingly to put an accent on the joke, like make the frustration more intense or make it cathartic for the audience," Sorabh said. His company, East India Comedy, helps train new recruits. As Sapan explained to me, "A joke has to earn its laughs. You can't just throw in one 'motherfucker' and think you're cool and expect people to giggle. Trust me, that gets old very fast. It's lame."

Personally speaking, my favorite joke from AIB Knockout is a hilarious bit from Tanmay Bhat which is directed at Karan Johar. "You're not like most people, because when most people come, they come like uh, uhh, uhhh..." Tanmay closes his eyes and

makes a sound mimicking an orgasm — "(but) Karan when you come, you come like..." At this point Tanmay closes his eyes and hums the instantly recognizable opening bars to one of Bollywood's most famous tunes, *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*, the title track from Karan Johar's first film as director, *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998). For somewhat relatable context, that is like joking, Julie Andrews is different from most people because every time she orgasms, she hums Do-Re-Mi, one of the most famous tunes from *The Sound of Music*.

Tanmay's joke might be lost on most Western audiences, and also those in India who didn't grow up watching *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* and knowing the impact it has had on Indian mainstream culture and pop-cultural consciousness through these past two decades. But judging from the riotous applause the joke raised — by far the loudest of the evening — it's fair to say it was a hit among the Mumbai audience at the Roast. Hearing a joke about *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* stirs deep collective memories in us Indians. It makes us feel warm and fuzzy, connected to each other, bound in a common nostalgic understanding of what it felt like to grow up in an India that had liberalized, opened up its economy to the world.

Not surprisingly, perhaps to reinforce what was clearly the most popular (if not best) joke of the night, Karan Johar, Ranveer Singh and Arjun Kapoor end the show by humming *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*, complete with a light-hearted parody version of the song, which, when translated into English, now goes: "Now my penis stands erect as I sleep / What can I do / Something happens, something happens." As Khamba told me later, "People were going, Karan, bro, you directed the film!" Another thing that is reinforced

here: penis jokes are hard to resist at Roasts; and for some segments of an audience, they will always remain cool.

3.6 CASE STUDY II: 'GENIUS OF THE YEAR'

After extensively discussing The Roast in this chapter, I find it useful to draw a comparison with another extremely popular viral video that tapped into All India Bakchod's Bollywood networks. It's pertinent to note that the Roast was in fact made viable largely because of one of Bollywood's rising stars' previous collaborations with All India Bakchod. In August 2014, a few months before the Roast took place, the gifted young actress Alia Bhatt — star of the indie Bollywood film, *Highway* (2014) — appeared in a viral video titled 'Genius of the Year' (All-India Bakchod, 2014) that gently mocked her reputation for not knowing much about Indian politics but simultaneously sought to rehabilitate that image.

The 'Genius of the Year' video offers a gender-balanced counterpoint to the Roast's relentlessly masculine humor. That viral video, also made by All India Bakchod, went on to receive over fifteen million hits (Vats, 2014). Khamba told me that this had gone on to become the second-most accessed video made by Indian content producers on the Internet. "With the younger lot of actors, it's a lot more chill. Alia Bhatt is sweet enough not to have airs. We'd done a promo with her before, and she had fun. So we did this. We said, it'd take two days, and she was like 'cool.'"

Alia, daughter of the noted Bollywood director Mahesh Bhatt and actress Soni Razdan, had previously come off as a privileged, slightly clueless manic pixie dream girl

on the AIB Roast's host Karan Johar's television show 'Koffee with Karan,' where, for example, in response to a question, she appeared to not know who the President of India was. Twitter jokes had circulated for many weeks. Rohan Joshi was quoted (2014) in The Indian Express as saying, "At AIB we're always looking at doing something fun. We've known Alia from before and worked with her on some stuff, so we knew her to be a naturally sporting person. So after the Koffee With Karan fiasco happened we saw all the jokes coming up about her on Facebook. One day we — Tanmay Bhat, Gursimran Khamba, Ashish Sakya and me — just suddenly had this idea about a sketch involving Alia in response to all these jokes about her IQ level. So we called her up and told her the idea. She being a super-sporting rockstar laughed and said, 'Let's do it!' That's it." Alia demonstrated savvy in embracing the 'airhead' persona and then working to reverse the image: in the 'Genius of the Year' video, she is shown to be preparing to answer a series of difficult questions and conquering the challenge.

The satirical video, constructed as a mockumentary, opens with a note that reads: "In 2014, a documentary crew followed Alia Bhatt in the aftermath of her real-life Koffee with Karan debacle. What happened next will grow your mind." The phrase 'grow your mind' seems incongruous at first until it becomes evident that the video is about mental workouts. Cut to Alia answering the infamous question about the President of India wrongly: she accidentally blurts out the name of a 12th century Indian king. She is then shown to hide behind a pillow in hurt and embarrassment when her acquaintances, friends and family — including Arjun Kapoor, Karan Johar and even her father Mahesh

Bhatt — make fun of her. Alia's voiceover resumes: "But then one day, I found a place for people like me."

While Alia's intelligence isn't directly being questioned here — rather it's her general knowledge — it's easy to conflate the two, as the video encourages the average viewer to do. She is shown entering a room labeled Dumb Belle Gym. Efforts to train her mind fail until she displays a preternatural ability to do quick mathematical calculations to figure out discounts on a Dior bag. Her trainer, played by AIB's Rohan Joshi concludes he must "teach Alia in Alia's style. Simple." This leads to a montage with Alia learning facts, such as details about electromagnetic induction and the periodic table, through dancing to Bollywood song parodies. By Day 17 in the montage, she is able to recollect who invented the television and stave off the threat of having her top burnt by an overheating iron.

"By the end, she'd become 'Student of the Year,'" Rohan Joshi's voiceover states, in an intertextual reference to Alia's debut film of that name. The facts to memorize grow more complex. Soon Alia is dancing to another Bollywood song parody whose lyrics go, "Lithium is in group one / lithium's used in batteries / Lithium helps me take / those sexy duckface selfies." By Day 30 in the montage, she is shown to defeat her opponent at chess — a child, as if to say Alia is so mentally deficient that it's taken her a month to reach the level of the average five-year-old.

Then comes D-Day, the big test: a fictional repeat appearance on Koffee with Karan. "No way, she's damn stupid," says one supposed random stranger interviewed on the street; "I think she should stick with acting," says another. But lo and behold! Alia

Bhatt answers each of Johar's questions correctly — from the name of India's President (back by popular demand, says Johar) to a lengthy explanation of the Black Hole Information Paradox.

Alia promptly breaks down and sheds happy tears; her confidence boosted, she claims she could become anything: an astronaut, a doctor; even India's first female Prime Minister. A beat registers; the viewer, having gone along with Alia on this journey, must suddenly think for themselves again and ask, hang on a moment, hasn't India already had its first woman Prime Minister?

This is faithfully following the rule that comedy need to be reset to the point where the story arc began (Charney, 2014); for India has already had its first woman Prime Minister in Indira Gandhi. When Alia is shown to realize that she might now know the President of India but has still made a mistake regarding a former Prime Minister, she begins to utter the clearly audible, first syllable of the only expletive in the video when the audio cuts and the screen goes black.

It's one thing if Alia were playing a character with learning difficulties, but it takes confidence, self-awareness and a sense of humor to boldly mock, as she does, the perception here that she, Alia Bhatt — the actress, not some character — doesn't possess some basic facts. Alia Bhatt is not only willing to participate in a narrative where she is established at the outset as in need of intellectual training, she is also happy to poke fun at herself by suggesting she's human and can still slip up after all that invigorating mental training. In this representation moment, there are no sacred cows. She manages here to be a part of the glamorous Bollywood and also apart from it. It is this willingness to

constantly undermine herself that ultimately elevates her, frames her as immensely likable in the real, less farcical world outside the diegetic frame of this video, and makes her — and by extension, the 'new Bollywood' — extremely 'cool.'

3.7 THE 'ROAST' AND 'GENIUS OF THE YEAR' AS CULTURAL ARTIFACTS: MAPPING A CIRCUIT OF 'COOL'

Raymond Williams (1961) defines culture in the modern sense as a description of a particular way of life which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning but also in institutions and ordinary behavior. As Du Gay et al (Du Gay, Hall, Janes, McKay, & Negus, 1997) point out, that emphasis on the exchange of meaning must include understanding currents and counter-currents. In this chapter I will fit Du Gay et al's Circuit of Culture model, which famously examined the cultural context of the Sony Walkman, to specific cultural artifacts, the AIB Knockout: The Roast of Ranveer Singh and Arjun Kapoor and 'Genius of the Year.' Here I propose to examine the articulated interrelationship between five specific elements — production, consumption, representation, identity and regulation — in different moments to produce an analogous 'Circuit of Cool.' This framework will allow me to study how Mumbai's stand-up scene is reshaping the meaning of 'cool' in the context of the Hindi film industry for producers, consumers and regulators with a degree of specificity.

Stand-up comics in Mumbai work as a counter-cultural force, and naturally poke fun at the Hindi film industry as they would any other pop-cultural target. But there is an interesting contradiction at play here. The association with Bollywood has made it easier

for comedians to gain credibility with mainstream audiences. Bollywood gives comedians something to connect with the audience, and also something to talk about. Bollywood is a powerful shared symbol in India, ripe with cultural meanings and significance. Like that other hugely popular entertainment form, the game of cricket, it has the capacity to speak across generations and bind the disparate country together as a unitary identity.

I was in the United States when the Roast took place; I arrived in India a couple of weeks later. I hadn't yet seen advertisements, and the event's potential scale hadn't registered in my mind despite notices on social media that All-India Bakchod was organizing it. Later I saw a promotional poster photograph that featured two big Bollywood personalities — Ranveer Singh and Arjun Kapoor, the targets of the Roast — seated on leather thrones, suggesting that the Roast was being represented at the outset as a larger than life event. A cutout of director/ producer Karan Johar's face is placed above, suggesting he's the top draw, a kind of presiding figure to lord over the proceedings. At the top of the poster, there was a YouTube link advertising "India's Biggest Baddest Comedy Roast," right next to a logo that read "The AIB Knockout," with AIB underlined in Indian national flag colors, red, white and green. (I was surprised that didn't generate its own controversy.) The eight performers, with their photos cropped in circles, were listed under the word, "featuring." Their names were listed as: Abish, Khamba, Rohan, Tanmay, Ashish, Raghu, Masand and Aditi.

The advertisement had flair, but the patterns and extent of its consumption reach is unclear to me. Word of mouth was almost certainly one of the ways in which news of

the show propagated. Given that I was following the comedy scene conscientiously, it may be fair to say news of the show itself hadn't yet spread widely. It was a one-off event. Evidently it takes recording such events for posterity to make a dent in the wider public's consciousness.

The cultural critic Deepanjana Pal writes (2015):

Films and actors are big business everywhere in the world. Look at the way Hollywood has charmed people across the globe. The difference between our love for movies and that of most other countries is that Bollywood has managed to crowd out everything else. Elsewhere in the world, fashion magazines like *Vogue* and *GQ* use models for its covers and only occasionally feature actors. In India, actors are standard cover models for practically every publication whether it's target area is tech or fashion. Music, literature, art, theatre -- every other cultural industry has been left to languish and decay. Nothing is cherished as much as popular cinema in general and Bollywood in particular. Nothing else is as glamorous; nothing else's appeal cuts across classes in the same way.

It is true that Bollywood legends like Amitabh Bachchan seem untouchable; rumors of his affairs are treated with reverence in the media, and are co-opted in the process of myth-making that elevates Bollywood's status in the public's eyes. Other actors are deferential to someone like Bachchan, never calling him by his first name, instead calling him Bachchan Sir, or using the suffix 'ji' in media interviews as a mark of respect.

As 'Genius of the Year' shows, that kind of unquestioning veneration does not apply to the younger generation of actors. Their self-reflexive identity is tied to creating their own brand instead of relying on the family name. The Alia Bhatt, the Varun Dhawan and the Sonakshi Sinhas take themselves less seriously, or at least wish to be perceived by audiences in this age of social media as taking themselves less seriously,

even while taking advantage of their pedigree and Bollywood family connections to break into the film industry. Rohit Vats writes in *The Hindustan Times* (2014) about the production of the 'Genius of the Year' video: "The video impressed everyone how Alia Bhatt could take a joke made on her IQ." The expectations are quite low — for Alia Bhatt to show a sense of humor is seen as remarkable, given she is the daughter of celebrated director Mahesh Bhatt and could have easily let that go to her head. For her to overcome being famous and to show a lighter side is viewed as cool.

In such dynamic ways, Bollywood is rearticulated as cool for newer generations. At stand-up shows, comics are happy to push boundaries in their sets to an extent; nothing so far as the Roast when it comes to toying with the reconstruction of the Bollywood brand. Crucially, in mocking modern Bollywood's silliest fads, skewering big budget productions like the Alia Bhatt-starrer *Student of the Year* (2012) and casting them as uncool, contemporary English language comedians like Sapan Verma are ironically acknowledging that Bollywood is cool enough to make fun of.

For example, the comedian Varun Thakur, who has made minor appearances in Hindi films, offers mimicry — most notably spot-on impressions of the actor Nana Patekar and superstar Shah Rukh Khan's laugh — to win over his audiences. Thakur, a member of the Schitz En Giggles Comedy ensemble, studied filmmaking at the University of Bristol. He marries observational comedy with jokes about his status as a semi-insider in Bollywood, and does not regard himself purely as a "mimicry artist;" instead he sees himself as using mimicking "in an innovative way," to make his jokes resonate more powerfully with audiences. When I met him at his home for a three-hour-

long interview, he was wearing a t-shirt that read, *I'm not an alcoholic. I'm a drunk. Alcoholics go to meetings.* Thakur said to me, as we stood gazing out his grilled window at buildings and roads below: "There were those like Johnny Lever who have always done great impressions of Bollywood actors. But often these were too respectful and gentle. I think the current generation of comics has broken the shackles and is not averse to making fun of the big names. Most of these big movie stars are perfectly okay with our jokes, so long as they are not obscene and mischaracterizing who they are as people."

Johnny Lever, who incidentally has returned to performing Hindi language mimicry and standup after a gap of several years, finds that the scene has changed tremendously since the time he got his break in the 1980s. He finds audience tastes have grown starkly different. In a conversation with Priya Adivarekar (2014) he says:

"The kind of humour liked by the audience has witnessed a major change over the years and television shows like *The Great Indian Laughter Challenge*, *Comedy Circus* among others have played a key role in this development. Today, people prefer shorter acts and are more open to double meaning jokes. I am fine if other artists choose that route, but I am personally not comfortable in that space. My shows cater to families and I like presenting acts that deal with things that are happening around us and stuff that affects everyone. There is so much of masala and diversity in India and the mannerisms of each individual is so unique. So, it's the desiness that helps my show stand out. My job is to make people laugh and not cringe..."

Comedians like Vir Das, Ashish Shakya and Varun Thakur all take different approaches to writing material on Bollywood. For instance, Shakya, along with his comedic partners at All-India Bakchod, organize a satirical awards show along the lines of Hollywood's *The Razzies*, called *The Royal Turds*, which recognizes the worst

performances of the industry. Vir Das, for his part, has gradually become a major comedic figure within the Hindi film industry and maintains indie credibility by occasionally performing Hinglish comedic songs and stand-up sets at events far more crowded than usual. I attended a sold-out performance with Vir Das, Abish Mathew and others at the Comedy Store in Lower Parel in March 2014 (before the venue changed ownership and had changed its name to Canvas Laugh Factory). I attended over eighty stand-up performances at that venue, and in my experience the place, which had a capacity of around 250, was usually never more than three-fourths full on a good day. The last three or four rows at The Comedy Store tended to be blocked off by stanchions, to give the impression that the club was fuller than it seemed, partly so that people would be forced to sit closer to the comedian and not spread out to the seats in the back not illuminated by the stage lights' glare. (Every comedian told me they preferred it that way, either so they could gaze out into the emptiness and focus on delivering their material in the case of less experienced ones, or feed off the energy of audience members, in the case of more experienced ones like East India Comedy's Sorabh Pant, with his extroverted on-stage persona which involves a lot of shrieking and professed exasperation.) Someone like Vir Das has serious pull. He is a top draw.

To draw on Du Gay et al (Du Gay, Hall, Janes, McKay, & Negus, 1997), by connecting the Roast's semantic networks to 'Americanness,' modern bourgeois entertainment, Indian hybrid identity and contemporary youth culture, we can derive meanings to complicate the representation of stand-up comedy in Mumbai and modern India. Mumbai's stand-up scene is decidedly bourgeois in its nature. As I discuss in the

introduction section of this dissertation, the Indian stand-up scene rose from scratch in the mid-to-late 2000s and was very quickly commodified and operationalized by stand-up venues like The Comedy Store, whose foreign owners could draw upon their experience of having run similar ventures in England for over three decades. During the course of my media ethnography, I attended a total of over 80 stand-up shows in Mumbai. The comedians and audiences, by and large with a few notable exceptions, tended to conform to a certain demographic: young, upwardly mobile, with cash to blow on this cool new entertainment source. The set-up, in other words, was always corporate in a sense, whereas in places like the United States, stand-up grew more organically, over several decades, from a grungy art form into a systematic business. Yet, Indian comedic entertainment in all its varied manifestations had hitherto never explored the format of the Roast. It was an event waiting to take place; a show already popular before it was held.

One of the Roast's prime drivers is a new media enterprise called Only Much Louder (OML). The company manages All India Bakchod, among many other clients in the entertainment industry including several top Indian musicians. OML has conceptualized and organized several editions of NH7 Weekender, India's best known rock music festival that takes place annually in multiple cities. Apart from their behind-the-scenes work on the Roast, Khamba credits OML as the force behind taking their act to YouTube. "Earlier we were thinking of our podcast as an extension of live performances... OML helped us see how much more money we could make, how many more people we could reach. We thought our live audiences were big. Obviously it was

not... compared to now. We never thought of producing shit, because it's expensive. It's a different ballgame. We resisted a lot at first. We said, we don't know how it's going to go."

All India Bakchod were also able to leverage personal connections. The association between stand-up comics and the rising actors, which had the effect of roping in mainstream Bollywood, came about through the widely reported fact that All-India Bakchod co-founder Rohan Joshi was dating Alia Bhatt's sister (Pathak, 2014). I discussed with Khamba at length how the Roast came to be made. Khamba was very frank. He told me, "You can't make this Roast possible without Yash Raj Films (YRF). Both those actors are contracted to YRF. The artist will not do anything until their manager... until YRF approves it. That said, Ranveer and Arjun were cool. We ourselves do not do a show till OML has liased with everybody and seen that it is okay to do. It's nice now because we have a personal equation with people in the industry. They've seen our videos and like our shit. It's never tough to get an appointment. Except, at the same time, we will not compromise on the jokes we want to do for the Roast. If you're coming you've to be ready to take it.

"Alia Bhatt was the one who put us in touch with Karan Johar (the well-known film producer who served as Roast Master on Knockout). Rohan Joshi (one of AIBs founders) was dating Alia's sister for a while, so we knew her a little early on. Karan is one of the snarkest people you'll meet, he's hilariously snarky... We showed Karan the Roast of Donald Trump. He'd never seen a Roast before. He was like super scandalized. He had his hands on his mouth for the first five minutes. Then he was like, this is

amazing fun. Some of the stuff you'll see is him improvising. He's just having fun. He's sick of not being himself. If you break through the PR machine, you'll find these people are very chill. All the money was anyway going to charity, so they were very kicked about the show. If it's a new idea and it's not been done, they're very happy to oblige."

In hindsight, the reaction to the YouTube release of the Roast may have surpassed Khamba's wildest expectations. The AIB Roast, articulated as an American cultural practice made local, spoke directly and viscerally to existing Indian audiences and also helped create new ones for stand-up. The reception of 'Genius of the Year' made it amply clear that All India Bakchod's audience was willing to engage with narratives revolving around the 'new' Bollywood. The Roast connected viewers here successfully with a multiplicity of meanings, as American roasts had earlier with a pan-global audience. "Seven million views in four days," Khamba told me with glee when I spoke to him later, a few days after the show had gone viral on YouTube. But even after arriving at that conclusion, it took me a few weeks to wrap my head around the implication that stand-up comedy had, at last, decisively scaled up from a hipster-oriented subculture to a legitimate mainstream bourgeois activity; its sudden, but very tangible, success requiring a rethink on how to tell the story of its evolution.

Until then, I believed I would struggle to justify wanting to study stand-up as a viable entertainment medium in India. When I'd spoken a year-and-a-half before these developments with well-known comedians like Sapan Verma and Anuvab Pal (who was for a brief period a writer for the critically acclaimed American sitcom 'Frasier' and who co-wrote the 2007 cult satirical film on the Indian-American obsession with Bollywood,

Loins of Punjab), they were cautiously optimistic that stand-up was not a fad; that it would not follow the same road as pool parlors, which had taken Mumbai by storm for a period, peaking in the late 1990s and early 2000s before experiencing a dramatic drop in popularity. For a lot of the first and second generation stand-up comedians in India, who began to draw attention during the period 2008-2012, the key was to take a safer route to help ground the comedy scene. Sapan told me, "When we (Sapan's group, East India Comedy) do auditorium shows, those people, they are an older crowd, a mature crowd. They are often coming for the first time ever. So whenever we do auditorium shows, we make sure we do a lot of clean material... you don't want to suddenly alienate them by... you try to do a lot of safe material."

Alia Bhatt's 'Genius of the Year' video took the safe route. Knockout on the other hand seemed to break all the rules. Khamba seemed to derive much pleasure from the response to the Roast. It wasn't the mere fact that the audience numbers for the Roast was so high despite the ticket price of Rs. 4000 — that such a vast audience hungered for this kind of direct, and what plenty of commentators have called borderline crass, vulgar entertainment. It was that the newest iterations of the Hindi film industry — its young guns, the likes of Ranveer Singh, Arjun Kapoor and Alia Bhatt — were so firmly behind the medium.

"The audience wasn't expecting this level of insanity — not in the least," Khamba told me before the Roast video came out. "Only twenty five or thirty people walked out, which is not bad out of four thousand people. We have more leave sometimes during our

regular standup shows. We were really apprehensive, given this is India, and how much you can really roast someone."

The controversy, robustly covered by the Indian media, very quickly escalated. Where there is controversy, the threat of official censorship rears its head. The Maharashtra government quickly announced that it was investigating to see if AIB had the permits to hold such an event (2015). On February 3, less than a week after the show went up on YouTube, AIB voluntarily took the Roast down. It was a preemptive move, an act of self-censorship, recognizing that the show might have been too hot to handle for some. AIB tweeted a long message. Here I reproduce an excerpt: "No one person or force forced us to take this video down...Under the circumstances, this is us being pragmatic...[the Knockout] was an attempt to try something new and bring the roast format to a country where celebrities aren't known to laugh at themselves. "...Were the jokes repetitive? Crass? It didn't matter because it happened in the spirit of irony and good humour...The video came with a clear disclaimer with several age and content warnings. No one was forced to watch it." As Firstpost (2015) noted: "This show is definitely a milestone for comedy in India which would probably give a censor board member a cardiac arrest." But that did little to settle things down.

On February 8, the Deccan Chronicle reported (Parab, 2015) that BJP secretary Vivekanand Gupta had written a letter to the civic body chief, Sitaram Kunte, asking the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation to cancel the National Sports Club of India's lease on the grounds, charging that the club wasn't allowed to promote such obscene

performances. Censor board member Ashoke Pandit also lashed out against the performance.

Taking the Roast off YouTube didn't mean the video didn't circulate at all. Consumption patterns adapted to suit the situation. Only Much Louder's founder, Vijay Nair, has observed (SenGupta, 2015) that the Roast videos circulated widely through the cell phone app, Whatsapp. That opened up new audiences with access to mobile phones to what Nair calls "an alternate culture." Mobile phone usage in India is widely prevalent; there were over 200 million smart phone users as of 2015 [(2016), (Rai, 2016)].

It is useful to apply a historical perspective to stand-up's brushes with regulatory authorities elsewhere. Shortly after performing in Mumbai in February 2015, the American comic Bill Burr shared a couple of interesting insights about the current shape of Indian stand-up in an interview with NPR (Rath, 2015). Discussing the All-India Bakchod Roast, Burr drew comparison to American stand-up history and comedian Lenny Bruce's infamous 1964 prosecution for obscenity, pointing out that India was in a phase where controversial performances could possibly mean serious trouble for comics:

“(Russell Peters) doing stand-up in all of these countries that never had stand-up - now, they have these stand-up scenes. You know, it's weird. Like, they're kind of in their Lenny Bruce years over there where they could actually get in trouble.

“In fact, they hosted the first roast in India. And it was the classic - you know, the way comics get in trouble now. It's like they did the show, everybody laughed and it was funny. And then somebody uploaded it onto YouTube and then everybody saw it. And, of course, everybody starts getting offended and wondering what's going to happen to children, which is hilarious when you go to India, 'cause you see like a pantless toddler going to the bathroom next to like a Mercedes next to

like a stray cow, you know? So, I mean, I don't think comedy is going to hurt it anymore.”

“The self-censorship is now a notch higher, making some think twice before they even tweet,” *The Indian Express* reported in the aftermath of Christian and film industry protests against the Comedy Roast’s supposed vulgarity in *The Indian Express* (Nagpaul, 2015).

The *Indian Express* reported that Christian groups were threatening to file a criminal case against AIB. The Christian groups alleged that AIB Knockout insulted Jesus Christ and portrayed Catholic priests in a harsh light — presumably a reference to the priest molestation joke targeting Abish Mathew which I cited earlier. *The Times of India* (2015) reported that the popular MTV India video jockey and occasional standup comedian, Jose Covaco, had issued an open letter in response to AIB's unconditional apology to the Christian community. Jose, himself a Christian, wrote that no matter how much displeasure was caused by the jokes, no apology was required from AIB. Jose wrote: “A couple of jokes, no matter how offensive, do nothing to diminish our faith and really should not affect us in any way. Even a million jokes can't do that.”

AIB was on the back foot. Perhaps sensing things were spiraling out of control, it felt compelled to issue an apology (Lukose, 2015). AIB posted it via its Twitter handle. “We would also like to reiterate that the jokes at the AIB Knockout were not intended as a form of persecution or malice towards any community, for that is not who we are, or what we stand for. We explained that while writing jokes, no matter the subject, we never

intend to hurt anyone, though we now realize that as an unfortunate consequence of the nature of our profession, we sometimes do offend, and we're sorry about that.”

Sometimes an apology is an effective way of preventing being censured, but here, an apology was seen as giving in to pressure. The apology met with criticism (Lukose, 2015) on Twitter, "with supporters of AIB condemning the group for having succumbed to pressure and resorting to 'selective' apology." An apology, fans seemed to feel, was bowing down to external forces and abdicating the imperative to rebel against the system.

It was, in their opinion, the uncoolest thing AIB could have done under the circumstances; akin to selling out. Yet the balance between retaining their credibility among fans and not being incarcerated, or worse, physically attacked is a tough one to strike.

Only Much Louder's Vijay Nair views it somewhat uncharitably as a matter of the self-absorbed audience's need to construct their own identity, rather than any authentic sense of outrage (Nair, 2015). "I understand the Twitter audience and the 'outrage audience,' all of it... if hash tags save people from getting into trouble, then I'm all for hashtags but it doesn't. People come, they have a very short attention span... they will say, you know, we stand with this, we stand with that. Honestly, majority of them don't stand with anything. It's a self-image they are trying to kind of portray, saying 'This is what I stand for.' They actually don't stand with anybody else." Nair explains that the decision to remove the Roast video was taken after "a bunch of lunatics" threatened to harm AIB members' family and friends.

In October 2015, Mumbai police stated (Rajput, 2015) that they were winding up investigations and planned to call Ranveer Singh, Arjun Singh, Karan Johar to record their statements as per procedure, and also interview Alia Bhatt and Deepika Padukone who were two of the many celebrities in attendance (and the butt of multiple jokes).

If AIB continues to survive the fallout from the controversy, its tangle with the film industry potentially articulates a new strategy for Mumbai's stand-up scene to grow further entrenched in the cultural landscape. Companies like Only Much Louder don't view stand-up needing to jostle for space competitively with other English language entertainment forms such as indigenous rock music; there are audiences to tap into for different formats. It's somewhat depressing that All India Bakchod's 'It's Your Fault' video on the issue of rape, which I discuss in the next chapter, has received fewer hits than the Roast or lighter-veined Alia Bhatt effort, but that is to be expected, given Bollywood's mainstream appeal. With the Roast of Ranveer Singh and Arjun Kapoor, stand-up finally became an established, highly visible part of Indian cultural practice. The signs cannot be clearer: stand-up comedy is here to stay.

3.8 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I mainly apply my Circuit of 'Cool' to analyze the All India Bakchod Knockout. I examine the growth of the independent film scene within the Hindi film industry, and the impact that has had in reshaping the perception of Bollywood, especially among the younger millennial generation of audiences. Once regarded as a bastion of formulaic filmmaking, Bollywood is now seen as cool and trendy. Part of the

reason for this is that the humor component in Hindi films has undergone an overhaul. More and more films are set abroad, or target the youth demographic in direct and interesting ways. Also, with the entry of Netflix into the market, Indian cinema has had to quickly catch up with global standards of entertainment to stay relevant.

Younger actors and producers are more open to collaborating with stand-up performers, and this articulation between the new Bollywood and stand-up comedy is proving to be a forceful one, whose main impact has been to bring new kinds of visibility to both art forms. Consequently, English-language entertainment — mainly stand-up comedy — has gained a foothold in a country that has long privileged Hindi cinema despite the presence of a large English-speaking population that has long craved original indigenous content in that language. As stand-up, assisted by Bollywood's younger talents, starts to go mainstream, I discuss the synergistic relationship between the film industry and stand-up comedy and how that is contributing toward reshaping the meaning of cool in Mumbai. I explore how the different actors in the two case studies I picked — especially Ranveer Singh and Alia Bhatt, alongside the members of All India Bakchod — employ different strategies to break away from the cultural restraints that regulated popular culture.

I examine the strongly articulated interrelationship between five specific elements — production, consumption, representation, identity and regulation as relates to Mumbai's stand-up culture — to produce an analogous 'Circuit of Cool,' drawing on such disparate moments as the 1970s 'Angry Young Man films' phenomenon and Shah Rukh Khan's engagement with All India Bakchod. I show how and why performances such as

the Roast and a video like 'Genius of the Year' gain relevance and wide circulation among urban audiences who have craved culturally proximate entertainment with a hybrid Western sensibility. By challenging norms of censorship, stand-up comedy is able to rearticulate the meaning of 'cool' as it applies to Bollywood stars, and by turn, Bollywood is able to flash a powerful light to bring stand-up into the mainstream, and establish it as a stable art form capable of sustaining its bourgeois identity on its own steam.

Chapter 4: Towards a transformative Indian gender reality

4.1 A HISTORY OF VIOLENCE

All-India Bakchod's short, 3-minute 35-second satirical video, "Rape — It's Your Fault," (All-India Bakchod, 2013) opens with the indie actress Kalki Koechlin, widely respected for her performances in films like *Margarita with a Straw* (2014) and *Dev D* (2009), turning towards the camera and saying in English with a seemingly ingenuous smile: "Ladies, do you think rape is something men do out of a desire for control, empowered by years of patriarchy? You've clearly been misled by the notion that women are people too. Because, let's face it ladies –" and Kalki smiles again – "Rape? It's your fault!" She goes on to say: "Scientific studies suggest that women who wear skirts are the leading cause of rape. Do you know why?" Here she smiles sarcastically; "Because men have eyes." She supplies a list of 'provocative' clothing that gets marked inappropriate with a loud buzzer sound cross-referenced by an 'X'; this includes, in progression, a tank top and shorts, a long summer dress, a niqab that covers Muslim women from head to toe, and more surreally, a raincoat and a space suit. "Notice the one thing they all had in common? That's right. All women. No women, no rape!" says a supporting character, played by the popular video jockey, Juhi Pandey. The video then visits violence committed against women, both outside of and within marriages, and the idea that screaming out, "Bhaiyya!" or 'brother,' would have the effect of preventing sexual assault – as if this were a cunning act of interpellation designed to inspire guilt in the perpetrator.

Taken literally, the statements that Koechlin and Pandey make — right from the basic assertion that rape is the woman's fault — in the video are horrendous. In this era of fake news, there is perhaps always the risk that someone might choose to take those words without registering the intended twist, but as All-India Bakchod's Gursimran Khamba said to me, "That's unlikely. Even in the Indian context, with all the prejudice, something as blatant as this is obvious to most educated, English-speaking people accessing this kind of video on the Internet." The ironic, chilling inflection of the video's tone while castigating a clear evil takes out the righteous emotion from the equation, and elevates the debate by characterizing its conclusion as so obvious that it is reduced to a non-debate. All-India Bakchod, in creating a product driven by an idealistic notion, have invented an icon of high culture.

Importantly, the video drives home the point that it is ludicrous for politicians or anybody else to accuse women of inviting violence upon themselves by simply by dressing 'provocatively'. It also mocks quasi-religious figure Asaram Bapu's assertion (Singh, 2013) that women could escape rape by referring to their attackers as 'Bhaiyya' (or brother; this is based on a common cultural Indian rural stereotype –portrayed in numerous Hindi films – that presupposes the sanctity of the sibling bond and argues that if a girl were to label anyone a 'brother' he would be beholden to protect her from harm).

The video, which I use as one of three case studies in this dissertation, uses the language of satire effectively to establish English language comedy's social relevance. *All-India Bakchod* released the YouTube video with the caption: "Every sexual assault

case in India inspires a string of stupid and hateful remarks against women. This is our response to those remarks.”

The huge positive response to the video can be traced to the mass shock and outrage that found wide expression in the Indian and international media after the horrific rape and brutal murder of a Delhi physiotherapy intern, Jyoti Pandey in December 2012, and the conversation it helped foster in the public sphere. Leslee Udwin’s recent documentary film, *India’s Daughter*, which the government banned in India in March 2015 amidst international controversy (Conlan, 2015); (Hegde, 2015), was based on this incident. The act of censorship has served to intensify discussion of the treatment of women in India in popular Indian (2015) and international media outlets (Varandani, 2015).

Radhika Parameswaran (2001) invokes a strong point when she writes that Third World feminists rightly echo scholars such as Edward Said in critiquing the dominant representation of Third World women as always being passive victims of male domination (Kumar, 1994; Mohanty, 1991; Spivak, 1988). Mankekar (1993, p. 58) uncovers the myth in monolithic representations of "The South Asian woman" as "the authentic village woman;" such women are constantly battling famine, poverty and birthing multiple children.

Female audiences at stand-up gigs are a complex group, defying easy stereotypes. Although many are college-going students, they often come from a variety of linguistic backgrounds; some are rich, others are middle-class. A small number have high social aspirations and view attending a stand-up gig as a visible demonstration of status while

self-identifying as hailing from families that struggled to make ends meet. Some of the female audiences I met were there because they'd been dragged along by their friends or girlfriends or boyfriends. A few like Tunali Mukherjee, a journalist by profession, had come across stand-up comedians in the course of work and their interest had been piqued. Others like the foreign-educated Anisha Sharma have always had a taste for comedy and aggressively sought out stand-up gigs for their entertainment.

It is true that contemporary Indian women come from a variety of backgrounds, ranging from privileged to poverty-stricken, and that a fuller account of Indian women's lives would be derived from heeding Angela McRobbie's advice (1990) to give proper context to audiences' engagement with the media by analyzing peripheral activities surrounding media consumption. Yet there is good reason why the 'It's Your Fault' video has received such a strong response among Internet-accessing audiences in India and elsewhere. To date, the video has garnered over six million hits. Khamba told me that it had "been translated into eight or nine languages." He explained how the video had gone global:

We had emails from, I'm not kidding, all of South America. I know it got translated into Portuguese for Brazilian audiences and I know it's played across a lot of universities. Chile, Peru, Germany... I know it's played on German television, I know it's played on Brazilian television — a translated version of the video. They asked us for permission and we were like, OK, take it. It ran as a public service announcement (PSA). We didn't charge a thing for it. For us, happily yaar. If content is going that far. I know it's played in the States. There was one station in Florida which had written to us... also it went on Upworthy. Boof, all American traffic. People wanted to do a version in Pakistan. It played on a lot of radio stations here, just the audio version of it. We received more hits from abroad than here. For us it was very weird because we didn't think it would

resonate. We didn't realize that the South American experience for women was so similar to the Indian experience. You hear of these things in Italy, for example, but as tourists, and we don't really know that much. We figured harassment was more a South Asian thing. That was eye-opening."

Khamba believes that the presence of a filmstar like Kalki helped the video achieve mainstream success in India; the news channel NDTV did a feature on the whole video for its show, *The Buck Stops Here*, which gave the AIB video further visibility.

There was significant cross-media coverage — from internet chatter to televised panel discussions — for the video which I discuss in later sections. Using the video as a starting point and a talking point made it cool among urban audiences to talk about gender issues. Perhaps a case can be made that the video preaches to the choir, thereby diluting its use if it's not truly changing any opinions and merely reflects the frustration of the urban public; but certainly it is hard to argue that such preaching is unnecessary in a country where violence against women is a very real issue. Influential voices such as Mohan Bhagwat, chief of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, a Hindu Conservative organization and the parent organization of the now-nationally governing Bharatiya Janata Party, have blamed (Shah & Rana, 2013) urban India's dalliance with globalization and western thought for such rapes. Certainly then, it does no harm to bring the issue in the current climate to the surface of consciousness.

Such is the urgency of this issue that sometimes it appears as if it is taking precedence at the expense of gay rights and other gender-related matters. Depressingly, stereotypes surrounding gay people continue to be mined regularly for laughs in Mumbai's comedy clubs. Over the six months I spent watching stand-up performances

there, I noticed a fair frequency of jokes targeting questioning a man's masculinity, or making reference to effeminate men, lesbian porn, etc.

Certainly, the gay rights movement has made strides over the past two decades and met with some noteworthy successes (Prakash, 2016) such as the temporary repeal of Section 377 in the state of Delhi, which resulted in decriminalizing consensual gay sex. But the 2012 Delhi rape incident, which I discuss at length in the next section, put women's issues front and center in the public gaze. "We are at a stage where women's rights issues are being discussed openly. We should be thankful for that at least. It's not as if nobody is talking about anything else, but this is where our society is at for the moment. Other movements will hopefully have their turn soon. Even masculinity issues. Men aren't allowed to express their sensitivity. Somehow it's not masculine. That should also be considered as a gender issue, no? Fact remains other pressing matters are there now. There's no question in my mind, gay and transgender communities will win over society someday — but hopefully without a repeat of the tragedy that happened in Delhi," the female stand-up comic Aditi Mittal told me.

Stand-up comics, then, both female and male, have a central role to play in articulating the issue of women's rights in their performances and setting the agenda in a way that is both informative and entertaining. "We had a lot of women's rights organizations writing to us, asking us to produce material, because a lot of the content that existed in that space was 'bleeding hearts' and 'women crying' stuff," Khamba told me. "It wasn't our most subversive video, but it was one of the most effective products we've delivered."

In this chapter I propose to demonstrate how Mumbai's stand-up comedy scene plays an important role in disseminating feminist ideas in the public sphere and making it 'cool' for producers and consumers to engage with this progressive agenda. I discuss how the Mumbai stand-up scene's embrace and articulations of feminist politics have elevated those issues into mainstream consciousness, and assisted lawyers and activists in promoting the agenda for gender equality — and how, in doing so, stand-up has emerged as an important node of protest and power. I will show how satire handles a sensitive topic such as rape and how satire shares space with similar efforts mounted across different media.

This chapter will have four sub-sections. In the first I will show how this need for a public engagement with feminist discourse has played out in the context of the tragic Delhi rape and murder incident of December 12, which has, in the saddest of circumstances, given a thrust to the feminist pushback against a systemically dominant patriarchy in India. The next section will deal with the role of stand-up comedy in spreading the message. It is important to note here that I do not claim stand-up comedy is the (or even *a*) driving force behind the feminist project in India; rather it gives comics, both female and male, a stage to voice opinions that can inform and shape how urban audiences begin to view gender issues that may not directly impact them. In the third section I will locate the 'Rape: It's Your Fault' video in a circuit of 'cool', analogous to du Gay et al's Circuit of Culture (Du Gay, Hall, Janes, McKay, & Negus, 1997). I propose to examine the articulated interrelationship between five specific elements — production, consumption, representation, identity and regulation — in different moments and how

each of these elements works in relation to the others in the context of the viral video which, I argue, contributed significantly towards taking the stand-up scene mainstream and making it relevant to discussions revolving around the 2012 Delhi rape incident. In the final section I address how Abish Mathews's stand-up act at a Delhi law college in the aftermath of these events fell afoul of evolving norms and was deemed offensive by a small segment of protestors, who were successful in putting a stop to the show midway.

4.2 INDIA'S RAPE ISSUE AND THE LARGER MEDIA CONTEXT

On December 16, 2012 a young physiotherapy student, Jyoti Singh, was tortured and gang-raped in a moving bus before thrown off onto the road in India's capital, Delhi. She and a male friend had boarded a chartered bus whose few occupants pretended to be passengers on a normal route (Kashyap, 2013) but were in fact intoxicated and determined to commit an act of horrific violence that would resonate across the country for years to come. Jyoti and her friend were severely beaten aboard the bus; Jyoti may have been penetrated with an iron rod among other indignities heaped upon her. The severe injuries led to her death two weeks later. The rapists were sentenced to death; their appeal is currently pending in the Indian Supreme Court.

One of them, it was reported (Freeman, 2015), had the gall to blame his victim for the crime. This man — the driver of the bus, Mukesh Singh — was quoted in the BBC documentary, *India's Daughter* (Udwin, 2015), as saying: "When being raped, she shouldn't fight back. She should just be silent and allow the rape. Then they'd have dropped her off after 'doing her', and only hit the boy... You can't clap with one hand – it

takes two hands. A decent girl won't roam around at 9 o'clock at night. A girl is far more responsible for rape than a boy. Boy and girl are not equal. Housework and housekeeping is for girls, not roaming in discos and bars at night doing wrong things, wearing wrong clothes. About 20 per cent of girls are good."

One of the saddest things the episode has revealed is that it took so long for the issue to achieve mainstream prominence. Jyoti Singh was a physiotherapy student in Delhi, the country's capital. Women from marginalized castes in smaller Indian towns continue to face discrimination and violence on an everyday basis without a hope that much light may be shed on their condition. Uma Chakravarti observes (2003), "The tragedy of our times is that this exploitation is so routinized that when incidents of violation of the rights and personhood of Dalit women, including sexual assaults, make it to our newspapers, they do not evoke the reaction that they should in any civilized society. Only a few incidents make it to our newspapers and get taken up by activists—when they do they expose the reality of caste."

India's long-standing problem with the abuse of women's rights has been extensively documented in both the domestic and international media. After Maneka Gandhi — the minister for women and child development, no less — made the claim (Doshi, 2016) that the Indian media's overemphasis on rape was driving away foreign tourists, signaling through such intense coverage that the country was unsafe for women, *The Hindustan Times* put out an editorial (2016) emphasizing that rape continued to be a serious problem in the country and that politicians like Maneka Gandhi ought not to underplay the fact. Elsewhere *The News Minute* reports that even Kerala, known for

being India's most literate state, has a serious rape crisis. This is both perception and reality. Geetika Mantri (2016) writes, "India has never been a kind country for women, what with incidents of honour killings, assault and rape being reported frequently. Even so, the south has prided itself for lesser incidence of violence against women. Kerala especially carries the perception of being highly educated, progressive and rooted in a matriarchal society. However, it appears that the state does not fare much better when it comes to violent crimes against women..." Her assertion is borne out by a report (Varma, 2016) that suggests the incidence of rape in neighboring Tamil Nadu is six times less than in Kerala.

The rape in a public space has led to an outcry over safety that has found sustained expression in the media and the public sphere. Whereas in earlier decades, such incidents of violence may have been glossed over or forgotten as a mere statistic, a confluence of factors ranging from the global rise of the feminist movement to the saturation of the Indian news media sphere has prioritized stories of violence against women in the nation's collective consciousness.

Since the Delhi rape case, the perception abroad has settled that India has 'a rape problem', although, as the New York Times (Giridharadas, 2013) reports, some citizens seem to think this selective representation of India is a problem relating to modernity, and believe "that women enthrall men into rape by wearing particularly cute skirts." Foreign Policy magazine (Thakur, 2015) asserts that India "doesn't understand its rape problem." The Daily Beast (Khan, 2016) suggests that in India, a majority of rape cases go unreported, and that a woman is raped every fifteen minutes. It attributes various causes

to the phenomenon, ranging from the skewed gender ratio to the caste system's inherent discrimination against women. The Washington Post (Khazan & Lakshmi, 2012) calls it a sexual violence problem and offers ten reasons for such abysmal conditions, ranging from a gender skew in the police force and a sluggish court system to a stigmatization of victims and an overall low status attached to women.

Poynter Institute examines (Tenore, 2013) the portrayal of the cultural and social aspects of the Delhi rape case. In praising the Indian media's coverage of the tragedy, she quotes Sameera Khan, a journalist and co-author of 'Why Loiter' Women & Risk on Mumbai Street, who says rape coverage in India has substantially grown in recent times; the Delhi rape, according to Khan, was a tipping point, before which coverage was often uneven. The coverage, according to Khan, was "often class-biased (that is if the rape survivor is middle-class it gets more media play than if she is working class or tribal, rural, etc.); intrusive and violative of the privacy of the survivor (sometimes even disclosing identifying details of the survivor which is banned by Indian law); and often take on a moral stance ('what was she doing there so late?' or 'what was she wearing?'). Sometimes this is done more subtly and sometimes quite crudely." Khamba told me that one of the criticisms that the 'Rape - It's Your Fault' video had received was that All-India Bakchod was using it for publicity because it featured a big name Bollywood presence like Kalki; which speaks to Khan's point about the coverage being influenced by the identity and social status of the players involved — in this case tangentially.

According to Sameera Khan, the police tended to attach moral judgments and the media would simply echo those opinions. But the coverage of the Delhi rape by the

media was "unusually decent," Khan felt. She explained: "I think this has been a result of the overwhelming sad, upset, angry response of ordinary people who came onto the streets in many parts of India and especially Delhi, where for days people literally occupied public space and said, 'enough is enough, we want justice for her and all rape victims'... the media caught on to the people's sentiment very fast and echoed it and have been fairly sensitive to the survivor. This is the first time we have seen such a sustained campaign both by ordinary people and the media against rape and for safety of women in public space."

A secondary controversy erupted in March 2015 however when the BBC documentary 'India's daughter,' directed by Leslee Udwin, was banned (Schwiegershausen, 2015) from airing in India. The Indian government took the unusual step of asking YouTube to bar the video from showing in India. According to reports (Chakelian, 2015; Yahoo News, 2015) this was partly because of inflammatory content including the interview with Mukesh Singh, and partly because political leaders from the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party like Venkiah Naidu were inclined to regard it as "a conspiracy to defame India."

Women's rights activist and Communist Party of India member Kavita Krishnan who was featured in the documentary and has played a leading role in organizing protests that rose after the Delhi rape, offered her own criticisms of the film, explaining that the title fed into the patriarchal loop that prevented attitudes from changing. She says (Ray, 2015), "In India we are continuously told, "You are the nation's women. You are the nation's daughters. You are the nation's mothers. And therefore, behave yourself because

Indian women behave themselves." So to see this reflected unthinkingly in the [film's title] is problematic to me." She also observed that the film didn't address the men who stayed on the right side of the law: "It ends up profiling Indian men from poor and deprived backgrounds as potential rapists. It doesn't show you that men from such backgrounds may not be rapists — many of them are not."

It must be acknowledged that the Delhi rape incident attracted significant coverage in the world press, from organizations ranging from The New York Times to The Guardian and several international television channels, but inadvertently, this has triggered cultural appropriations. Chandra Mohanty's criticism (1988, p. 63) resonates in this context: "Western feminisms appropriate and colonize the constitutive complexities which characterize the lives of women in [nonwestern] countries." Similarly, Chilla Bulbeck (1998, p. 4) reminds us, "'other' women still often appear as just that, footnotes of difference in the general themes of white women's lives and experiences."

But Robert Jensen and Emily Oster (2009) complicate my skeptical view of the adverse global media coverage by pointing out that the introduction of cable television has had large-scale effects on Indian society. This is particularly the case for gender-related issues, since this is an area where the lives of rural viewers differ greatly from those depicted on most popular shows. The women from shows set in urban spaces are shown as more emancipated than rural women. The differences in behavior are even more pronounced when it comes to Western programming. Timothy Scrase (2002) reports that several of his respondents believe television could lead women to question their social position and might help the cause of female advancement. Kirk Johnson

(2001) quotes a number of subjects who claim television is bringing about changes in gender roles. One man says, “Since TV has come to our village, women are doing less work than before. They only want to watch TV. So we [men] have to do more work. Many times I help my wife clean the house.”

Meenakshi Gigi Durham (2015) situates 'India's Daughter' in a continuing global conversation about women's rights and contrasts Udwin's effort against other films such as Vibha Bakshi's *Daughters of Mother India* (2014) and Harvinder Singh's 2015 YouTube production, *The United Kingdom's Daughters*. Durham regards 'India's Daughter' as a well-meaning but flawed effort:

I believe Udwin genuinely wanted to heal the splits. But “healing the splits” carries with it a greater imperative than documenting a crime in India: it would also involve acknowledging the culpability of the First World, indeed the rest of the world, in this circumstance. It would involve reflexivity and a sense of accountability rooted in one’s own cultural location— and this is a framework that is missing from Udwin’s film (even if some versions of the film ended with global statistics about rape). It is a fact that in the past couple of years, gang rapes have occurred all over the world: in France, Brazil, China, Canada, and the U.S., among other countries. It’s true, too, that Jyoti Pandey’s assault was particularly savage and culminated in her murder, but the Indian subcontinent has no monopoly on vicious sexual assaults.

So I’m waiting for the world to recoil at the realities of sexual violence in every part of this planet, and for people in the capital cities of the First World to take to the streets, as Indians did, to demand redress and reform. And when they do, I’ll be waiting for Leslee Udwin’s documentaries about the rapes in Texas and Ohio and Paris and Amsterdam. I’ll be waiting for the BBC to air an exposé of the misogyny and hatred among the American and British and European and Australian men who have committed similar crimes — or even to confirm the claim made in *The United Kingdom’s Daughters* that some 30 percent of all Brits believe, just like Mukesh Singh, that rape is a woman’s fault.

Nevertheless, there is the danger of dismissing the overwhelming global interest in this one particular rape case as an effect of the Western gaze based mainly on foreign interest in India as a tourist destination. It would also be counterproductive to argue that according to UN-released data, rape incidents in America are in fact nearly twenty-five times higher per 100,000 individuals in the population (PTI, 2014). It is more productive to consider that the only glimmer of optimism in the aftermath of such a horrific rape lies in knowing the issue of gender has entered mainstream public discourse.

The novelist Nilanjana Roy (2013) writes, "The intensity of protests in December led many to wonder whether India would actually see a woman's revolution that brought in a lasting, sweeping set of changes... 'Rape culture' in India is fuelled by an acceptance of inequality and of embedded violence; it may be the first time in decades that we are exploring these fault lines - of caste, class and gender - in such a mainstream fashion."

Swati Kamal (2016) is more circumspect — yet prepared to take on dominant perceptions — when she takes stock of how things have changed in the four years since Jyoti Yadav's horrific rape and murder. She expresses a somewhat controversial opinion — shades of Maneka Gandhi here — that crimes against women were "equally prevalent in the Western world" and this was a matter of tarring and branding India as a destination unsafe for tourists.

"...the gruesome episode brought us under severe, unforgiving media glare, and India came to acquire blemish as one of the major countries leading the world in rape culture. Story after story emerged in the media and circulated in civil organisations, academia and NGOs about "India's hatred of women", patriarchy, misogyny and the resultant violence and abuse; many went so far as to link the

depravity to India's caste system and its history of communalism. The result was a blanket tarnishing of our national character...

One... would be more inclined to put the blame on a general increase in perversion, craziness and violence, which is on the rise everywhere, and has also seized Indian society. It has nothing to do with the so-called "Indian culture of misogyny and intolerance". A clue to this lies in the fact that sexual crimes against young boys are equally on the rise, and cut across caste lines.

That said, it does not matter where we stand relatively. For a society known to venerate the feminine aspect as a goddess, or even one that claims to be based on a system of eternal humanitarian values, the figures that emerge are a matter of highest national shame — 35,000 rapes in 2015.

4.3 STAND-UP FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Kamal's opinion is not a popular one to voice, partly because it appears to shift blame away from men and apportion it to something abstract like a global pandemic of perversion and violence. Comics uniformly drill the message into audiences that the real problem arises when women are viewed as objects and less than human — as "meat," as virtually every comic I met, male and female, called it. They deepen and enrich the audience's understanding of women's issues by making jokes about things men don't experience: menstruation cycles, the female body, etc.

In the preceding pages, I have offered an abbreviated survey of feminist literature surrounding the 'India's Daughter' controversy. While my own analysis takes on a feminist slant, my dissertation addresses themes revolving around satire, so I have spoken to comics and audiences rather than lawyers and activists.

Aditi Mittal, for example, is arguably India's most famous female comic; she is best-known for creating a character called Dr. Mrs. Lutchuke that is popular and well-

known among audiences for delivering sex education in a funny Marathi accent. Some of the humor can be directly confrontational. Another well-known comic I spoke to, Neeti Palta, in performances, has this to say to male audiences: "First they banned Maggi (a brand of instant noodles). Then they banned porn. Now you poor Indian men won't be able to do anything in under two minutes."

Sometimes it's a reaction against patriarchy. "Are women allowed to be funny," Neeti reflects. "There is an element of tokenism about funny female comics. Earlier there were fat women like Tuntun and Manorama who were made fun of. They were not often perceived as funny. There's a difference. That is how they were projected. When guys do humor, you can have relatively handsome men being funny. With women, you have one-off examples like (the actress) the good-looking Archana Puran Singh. Rekha who usually plays a siren had some comedic moments as well. Women are always considered the softer sex. Audiences don't expect humor from them."

Sometimes this means laughter can get uncomfortable, "or worse, the room fills with silence," as Aditi told me. Men often find jokes for women by women unrelatable. At its worst, older female audiences might not even connect with the material about women. In response to an interview question (Sharma & Khurana, 2013): "Does she get the deep-throated mirth, you know the one that goes with peals of delight?" Mittal's response was, "Yes, I do, but usually in jokes that do not involve things about women. That day I performed at a Rotary Club's women's gathering. Silence after I mentioned the words 'women' and 'masturbation' in the same sentence. It was scary. I paused and

all I could say was, 'OK ladies, masturbation exists.' And thank the lord, it worked, and a few of the ladies in pearls laughed."

Charlotte Ward, the young female British director of The Comedy Store in Mumbai, drew my attention to basic business numbers. She pointed out that most audience members were men. "A man understands stand-up. A man thinks it's hilarious... When a woman walks in, she comes out and she goes, 'No, I don't like it.'" The reasons she gives for that ought to be scrutinized in some detail. Charlotte holds the view that potential Indian female audiences find it harder to relate to the material because an Indian woman doesn't always work; "she's not always reading the newspaper, so she does not understand what is happening around the world unless the husband at the dinner table tells her this is what's happening, so she can't really understand The Comedy Store, so I have to split my audience. This is when an Aditi (Mittal) will walk in as a comedian and the women will understand her. Whereas you take a Bakchod night... and you'll see women on her Blackberry and completely disinterested." During my visits to the venue, I found many young women who didn't fit that characterization.

Here I ought to segue to address her point about female audiences. During the course of my ethnography, I performed a two-minute set at an event for new talent organized by East India Comedy (a comedic super-group of sorts led by Sorabh Pant, similar to All-India Bakchod) at HQs, a bar in South Mumbai. Leave aside the fact that it was an intimidating experience simply to perform; what I found intriguing was that the joke about a man's emotional growth curve that I thought would get the most laughs barely elicited a ripple even from women in the crowd. "The thing about guys is, men

evolve and evolve and evolve until we finally reach what I call a God stage... in this stage, some of us finally become women." It could be that many might not consider the joke sharply written enough (although Kunal Rao of East India Comedy seemed to think otherwise in his feedback); or maybe it was too intellectual and not gut-level enough, as Aditi Mittal suggested to me. It did however perplex me that a joke that flattered women had in fact fallen somewhat flat.

Neeti offered her own examples as contrast when she heard of my experience, saying she'd done some jokes about the fact that she'd had an arranged marriage early on, playing on the stereotype that one doesn't know one's partner too well in those circumstances. An example that she said got laughs: "I had an arranged marriage and my honeymoon was an awkward experience. I didn't know what name to be moaning out. Like oh you tall man with the big spectacles..." She says she ended the joke on a sweet note, with her husband in the audience: "I think after all these years he's starting to like me because he's starting to buy me dinner."

In July 2014, East India Comedy released a blisteringly funny video titled 'Sex Education in India,' which has received five million hits and counting (2014). The satire targets the lack of adequate sex education in India. In it, a teacher begins the session by omitting the word 'sex' in sex education, saying, "Good morning students, today, we are going to talk about (sneeze) education." He proceeds to give as little information as possible, muttering to hide the phrase "reproductive systems," showing a picture of the male and female anatomy whose private parts are blacked out. He is shown as avoiding taking questions from female students.

These perspectives, it must be said, fit in a larger media matrix. Media in various formats have engaged with feminist questions and issues of femininity before. Rukmini Pande and Samira Nadkarni (2016) draw our attention to the multimedia short story, 'We Are Angry' (2015) and the graphic novel, 'Priya's Shakti,' both of which serve as "activist multimedia pieces that leverage the power of Internet-mediated platforms to raise awareness about the condition of the 'Indian woman' in the contemporary moment;" although Pande and Nadkarni critique those texts as "portraying an essentialized and universalized image of the 'Indian woman,' reenact certain violent historical erasures along the lines of caste, sexuality, class, and religion."

Mumbai's stand-up culture has also interrogated the more conventional television shows like 'Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi,' with 'conventional wives like Tulsi' as Shoma Munshi (2009) calls it. There is "no indication that the soap opera bubble has burst," Munshi writes. "Newer soaps... are alive and doing well." Scholars like Mankekar (Mankekar, 1999) have studied Indian urban soap operas as a women's genre in the context of female audiences. It's interesting, if entirely in line with my expectations, to note that none of my interview subjects who attended stand-up performances — not female, and certainly not male — watched, or admitted to watching, 'saas-bahu' (mother-in-law, daughter-in-law) television shows that are very popular among older generations of homemakers. Women like Tunali Mukherjee — the journalist I interviewed — considered themselves too urbane for that fare. "Those shows are boring. They are for women who don't work and are stuck all day at home, forced to serve their mother-in-law," she said. Sophisticated, well-educated women like her voiced a clear

preference for Western entertainment in our interviews, though they would occasionally watch Bollywood films, especially of the indie variety. "Some of those movies are cool, they are modern... about people I can relate to," Tunali said.

Women like her are much more at ease watching actors like Kalki Koechlin play complex female characters such as the woman with cerebral palsy exploring her sexuality as in *Margarita with a Straw* (2014). Her choices, Kalki told me, have often consciously strayed from the mainstream towards projects she is passionate about, though that is partly shaped by how the industry views her. Kalki and other actors like Abhay Deol increasingly occupy a space intersecting masala films and more indie-credible projects. Films like *Margarita With a Straw*, legendary actress Sreedevi's comeback vehicle *English Vinglish* (2012) about a middle-aged mother learning English to overcome her family's mean-spirited jibes, and the bildungsroman comedy *Queen* (2014) starring Kangana Ranaut spend time articulating a vision for modern Indian women who might exist out of the mainstream. These kind of films have in turn reshaped the representation of women in even mainstream ensemble dramas such as *Dil Dhadakne Do* (2015) which features internationally-known actors like Priyanka Chopra and Anil Kapoor and deals with issues such as emotional abuse and divorce in upper class families.

An earlier generation of women used resources like Mills and Boon romance novels in smaller cities like Hyderabad to gain knowledge about heterosexual activity and sex education in general, given the absence of formal means of educating themselves in these matters (Parameswaran, 1997, p. 194). Scholars like Ratna Ghosh (1985) have pointed to the role of cultural bias in contributing to a lag in educational opportunities for

women in India. As Purnima Mankekar (1999) has argued in her examination of 1990s India media, women were rarely afforded agency in the context of sexuality.

Today the Internet often steps in to fill the gap for young urban women with hybrid, fluid identities, although, as Nishant Shah (2015) points out, mere access to digital platforms won't result in the dissolution of institutional inequalities. Stand-up comedy has a significant role to play in shaping female audiences' opinions, either through live engagement with performances or reading interviews and articles about stand-up comics, or even discussing those performances among friends. Comedians are making it 'cool' to talk about gender-related issues in the open, the way Alisha Chinai's seminal music video, 'Made in India' challenged the patriarchy a couple of decades ago by privileging, perhaps for the first time on Indian television, the female gaze (Kumar & Curtin, 2002). Kumar and Curtin caution that texts must not be celebrated as subversive merely as a knee-jerk exercise in semiotic analysis; in that spirit I cite the Kalki anti-rape video in the context of the specific conditions of Mumbai's stand-up comedy culture (which operates in an era rich with other texts such as magazines targeting women such as *Cosmopolitan India* and *Femina*), as interpreted through the lived experience of modern urban Indian women.

A direct line can be drawn connecting 'Made in India' to 'It's Your Fault;' even if the media formats are different and the latter is, relatively speaking, far more explicitly subversive. This is a function of history and the point at which we stand. Comedians, both male and also especially the most famous female ones, have the chance to speak up radically transform how women have been treated particularly in urban spaces —

especially women with cosmopolitan ambitions who might not have the security of middle-class security.

It is important to note that I do not claim Mumbai's stand-up scene is the prime mover of dissent against the patriarchy. It is important to acknowledge that stand-up comedy, however much it articulates entertainment with cultural politics, is at heart a profit-making enterprise, and can easily be seen as riding on coattails of activists, feminist scholars and lawyers who are engaged in the struggle to reshape the patriarchal Indian landscape. It is not my intention to belittle the contributions of those stalwarts.

It is reasonable to assert however, that stand-up however with its multiple modes of engagement with audiences (live shows, mediated performances accessed online on YouTube or on television) is uniquely positioned to make social participation 'cool' in a way not previously seen with other media in urban India. It can activate and energize tens of thousands of young viewers and audiences who might then be educated and motivated to participate in protests such as those after the Delhi rape.

As English language stand-up comedy grows more and more mainstream in Mumbai, its cultural impact has begun to grow proportionately. In May 2016, for instance, All-India Bakchod co-founder Tanmay Bhat posted a video on Facebook (Express Web Desk, 2016) explaining his take on the word 'feminism' — “If you believe men and women should have equal rights, that makes you a feminist. That’s it. There’s nothing else.” He had a ready audience online that was prepared to hit 'like' over five thousand times and further disseminate his opinion. The views numbered 269,000 in this

particular case. The 'Rape — It's Your Fault' incidentally was enormously successful by any standards, receiving over six million hits.

Cultural arbiters like Tanmay Bhat and All-India Bakchod clearly wield enormous influence. When someone like Tanmay voices an opinion on feminism, it quickly becomes news that is reported in multiple outlets (see Prakash P. , 2016; Express Web Desk 2016; Shah N. , 2016; Deccan Chronicle, 2016; Ramakrishnan, S. , 2016). Ramakrishnan for instance, takes issue with a popular Bollywood actress Lisa Haydon who had stated her belief that feminism was an overused term, and that "Women have been given these bodies to produce children, and the spirit and tenderness to take care of people around us." She writes, "... as far as feminism being an overused term, we'll allow All India Bakch*d's Tanmay Bhat to speak on our behalf," and proceeds to quote him from his video extensively, placing him indirectly in conversation with Haydon. (Sample quotes that she uses in the piece from Tanmay include, "Equality is a fight that is being fought around the world *for centuries now. It's the most basic thing*", "Today you're in this position because people have been whining for years about something you don't think is relevant," and finally: "*If you haven't faced sexism, good for you. But don't stop other people from talking about it.*")

4.4 GENDER, STAND-UP AND A 'CIRCUIT OF COOL'

One of the main aims of this chapter is to apply Du Gay et al's Circuit of Culture model to a specific cultural artifact, the 'It's Your Fault' video to understand the larger cultural context of how gender issues, particularly women's issues, are perceived in India.

By analyzing the 'Rape — It's Your Fault' video through my 'Circuit of Cool', the chapter illustrates the complexities arising from Mumbai's stand-up comedy scene as it makes itself relevant, even extremely useful, to the larger conversation by directly participating in cultural politics and making an ideological contribution towards dismantling or at least disrupting the patriarchy. I interpret comedy's take on gender conflict through the lens of meaning-making and -negotiating, and examine the implications, both foreseen and unforeseen (including the blowback against comics making misogynistic jokes), of comedy taking on an activist role in the pursuit of gender equality. Drawing from the encoding-decoding model (Hall, 1980) and the work on the circuit of culture, (Du Gay, Hall, Janes, McKay, & Negus, 1997), my circuit of 'cool' applies a similar multidimensional methodological framework to analyze complex social processes and power relations that "can never be guaranteed" (1983).

As follows the theme of my dissertation, I propose to examine the articulated interrelationship between five specific elements — production, consumption, representation, identity and regulation — in different moments to produce an analogous 'Circuit of Cool.' To begin with, I will conduct a textual analysis of the 'It's Your Fault' video and by studying the reaction to it from producers, consumers and media coverage of the video. This framework will allow me to study how Mumbai's stand-up scene is reshaping the meaning of 'cool' in the context of gender issues.

In its production and representation moments, the 'Rape — It's Your Fault' video comes off as 'cool' on its own account; that notion is confirmed in the fact that it went viral very quickly. It was watched 100,000 times in less than 48 hours (Kohli, 2013) and

currently has over six million views since it was released on Sept 19, 2013. The video bristles with moral indignation: it was a statement in the aftermath of the Delhi rape case that tapped into public outrage without fueling a moral panic. Unlike other initiatives like Bollywood actor Farhan Akhtar's M.A.R.D (Men against Rape and Discrimination, also playing off on the word 'mard,' which is the Hindi word for 'man') which twists the issue around to make it about men's support (Akhtar, 2016), the 'It's Your Fault' video firmly took the side of the victim.

This might not sound like a significant breakthrough in the fight for equal rights to Western ears or even many urban Indians, but in fact it counts as a radical articulation strategy in India — a country dominated by a class- and caste-based patriarchy. In employing satire, the video is able to break free from socially-imposed shackles and tackle the subject from outside a traditional emotional framework. The video resonates with me and the consumers I interviewed (subjects who all watched 'Rape — It's Your Fault' had expressed strong opinions) because the values encoded in it find an audience that is in sync with the producer's motivations. 'Rape — It's Your Fault' is counterintuitive, rebellious, has its own strong voice, and makes a point that carries moral weight without hammering it over the viewer's head.

In the video's representation of rape it is clear the joke is not being played on victims. The intended target of the satire is the patriarchy and its glib assumptions about women. This is conveyed to the audience both implicitly, via tone, and an explicit message that breaks from the satirical tone at the end that reads, 'Stop Blaming the Victim.'

But much before that, in one of the video's most powerful scenes early on, the VJ Juhi Pandey appears with her hair styled down to her shoulders; she's wearing lipstick, and is dressed in a multicolored spaghetti top that shows some cleavage and which conservative-minded Indian individuals regularly complain is 'revealing.' Facing the camera, Juhi takes the stiffly patriarchal argument that women invite violence upon themselves by dressing "inappropriately" to an absurd, satirical extreme in saying, "Now some people might argue these crimes are committed by men, and to these people I say, 'who gives birth to these men? That's right — it's us!'" The sarcasm suddenly abates; abruptly the scene transitions into something altogether disturbing as a man in a mask and ninja outfit rushes on screen to attack Juhi. With an anodyne synth-theme playing in the background, she poignantly whispers, 'It's my fault.' This switch from a woman making an intellectual argument to finding herself in an emotionally vulnerable position sharpens the effect of the satire, suggesting that an attack can emerge anytime, from anywhere; that it could impact any woman in society, even if on the surface she does not seem particularly vulnerable.

In the next scene, Kalki Koechlin, dressed in a loose-fitting chocolate-colored shirt, offers the viewer the satirical explanation that the Indian godmen-sanctioned strategy of calling one's attackers 'bhaiya' (brother) will instantly repel such attacks ("rape canceled," she proclaims). Just then she is grabbed and silenced by hands to the mouth; when she desperately tries to scream 'bhaiya,' over the hands stifling her mouth and gets that word out, the hands disappear, as though the word were a magic incantation. She

coughs, recovering from being choked, then summons a toothy smile and says, "Ladies, this works every time..."

The video also factors in the truth of marital rape in the next scene, where Juhi Pandey's character is dressed in traditional wedding garb, complete with a nose ring. Our attention is drawn to the privileging of the male gaze in that only the woman's face is seen here; an unseen individual whose sleeves suggest he's the bridegroom proceeds to divest her of her jewelry and undoes her hair in a gesture that signifies the disrobing of the woman on her wedding night, as Juhi is saying: "Another way women shamelessly propagate rape is by working late into the night. Ladies, why work and be independent? In fact, why work at all?" Her words, whose irony is highlighted against the lack of agency afforded to a newly-wed woman in the video, make the larger point that financial independence in itself is no guarantee of physical security in India. She glances at the unseen man still standing off-camera and says with a smile, "That's what husbands are for. Fun fact..." Her smile fades; her voice softens, as the hand reaches out and in an act of restrained and choreographed violence now rubs off Juhi's lipstick, grabs her chin and shakes her face. She completes the thought: "...if he's your husband, it's not rape."

Like the Roast, which I discussed at length in the previous chapter, the 2013 'Rape: It's Your Fault' video acted as one of the first triggers that catapulted stand-up comedy into the mainstream. But there are clear differences in how these two cultural artifacts fit in my Circuit of Cool. For one, regulation doesn't play a centrally important role in this discussion, beyond the thought that although this satirical Internet viral video firmly adopts a righteous tone, there's the hypothetical possibility that its depiction of

violence against women could have been tragically misconstrued by mass medium audiences less well-versed in the language of satire; the video might not have received approval from regulators as a television advertisement in India. The Internet, with its self-selecting audience for such a video, was probably a better venue for it. Unlike the Roast, which was widely criticized, and censored, for its abrasiveness and vulgar content, the 'Rape — It's Your Fault' YouTube video was met with near-universal acclaim for its powerful anti-rape message (see Roberts, 2013; Awaasthi, 2013; Jayraj, 2016).

One of the most interesting and unexpected ways in which the production and representation moments articulate with identity is in the sense that the 'It's Your Fault' video interpellates its audiences as feminists. This sense of 'you are with us or against us' creates peer pressure and viewers, male and female, are likely to feel sucked into identifying as feminists or pro-feminist, which might further propagate feminist goals in the mainstream but at the cost of devaluing the currency of feminist jargon — as in the case of some Bollywood celebrities like Deepika Padukone fashionably appropriating words like 'feminist' (see McDonald, 2015; Sra, 2015). Gunjeet Sra teases out the contradiction by suggesting that an articulation between the fashion industry and Bollywood produces an anti-feminist moment:

"Vogue and Padukone have a lot in common: They're both from an industry that is based on fetishising, objectifying and reinforcing sexist standards of beauty on women. So when these two forces combined talk about women empowerment, one is left a bit confused, because, let's be honest, the fashion and Bollywood do not empower anyone—women most of all."

Vasu Primlani, Aditi Mittal and Neeti Palta are unanimous in their assessment: some men, certainly feel threatened by the advent of feminists in general and feminist comics in particular; those men regard such comics in poor terms and the word 'feminist' as is the case in many situations, takes on the shape of a pejorative. There is a measure of 'cool' in identifying as feminist; but not everyone necessarily agrees. To sidestep such baggage, some new-wave stand-up comics like Kanan Gill consciously attempt to articulate a different vision for pro-women cultural politics. *"I'm not sexist, but I am also not a feminist,"* says Gill. The popular youth-oriented website Youthkiawaaz calls this 'establishing an imaginary middle ground in which he claims to be 'outside' of debates on gender disparity... [showing] how dissociation within a certain context takes an opposing stand. (Sharma P. , 2016) '

The 'Rape — It's Your Fault' video may not have starred professional comics; but it was produced by the same influential group, All-India Bakchod, that produced the Roast. In terms of production, the video is of course not a purely altruistic effort: it is a commercial product driven to popularize the AIB brand, and while as Khamba noted the video had been adopted as a PSA elsewhere in the world, in India, the satirical video launched AIB firmly into prominence. All the same, its commercial motivations do not take away from its social value, and offers a viable model for stand-up comedy to seep deeper into public consciousness.

The 'Rape — It's Your Fault' video becomes an entry point to discussing larger themes arising from various articulations. All-India Bakchod's Gursimran Khamba, a content producer who has played an influential part in shaping stand-up as mainstream

entertainment, thinks comedy has a substantial role to play in making critical conversations about gender 'cool.' His hope is, addressing these difficult matters in the public sphere will go a long way towards reshaping the way audiences and the public at large engage with complex gender issues.

"I think the approach of comedy and satire is different. In India we usually appeal to emotion which is why the current Public Service Announcements are always like, think of your mother, think of your sister and never about the actual victim," Khamba told me. "We didn't want to perpetuate the same stereotype, and also where the man will come and save you." Yet, realities of the situation dictate that the comedic approach be modified in some ways, as he explained:

"I sent the 'Rape - It's Your Fault' video after editing to two of my gender studies professors at Tata Institute of Social Sciences and the four of us at AIB sent it to fifty of our female friends combined, because if this was making them uncomfortable, we didn't want to put it up... One very interesting point, as a guy which I would never have thought about was, closer to the end of the video, Kalki gets progressively beaten. We did it as a form of satire. What one of my professors said was, 'In a lot of court cases, the woman who has been raped has no marks on the body. So the perpetrator gets let go because the prosecution cannot prove it. So if you end up putting marks in progressively increasing fashion, you are perpetuating the stereotype that if a woman has been assaulted she has to have marks on her body, which is a problem people in courts struggle with. In the end we decided to keep it that way because it's still broadly making a point than it is taking away and is more visually powerful. We also cut a section where a man in a mask assaults Juhi. This was going on a bit long. It made everyone uncomfortable. We also made it a bit more cartoon-like."

Kalki Koechlin, the well-known indie Bollywood movie star, is an interesting choice as the face of the 'Rape — It's Your Fault' video. The daughter of French parents,

she was raised in Pondicherry among Tamil kids who, she told me in an interview, "would stare at foreigners in Pondicherry with me, the way people do in India." The irony of that was lost on her for a long time: she wasn't conscious of the fact that she was white till much later. Her white skin affords her a kind of rare privilege in India that is not even extended to light-skinned Indians: she's at once a foreigner by passport and an Indian by assimilation who, growing up, spoke French at home, English in school and Tamil with the maid servants, mostly to translate for her mother.

Kalki has a reputation in the media for edginess and speaking for mind; she told me that she once said on live television that she liked pornography, and that not watching it contributed to making Indian minds more repressed. (It was met with silence, she says.) "The thing I've noticed about stand-up comedy here is that sex jokes work with our audiences. But there's nothing new there," she observes. "I really like the kind of stuff that Aditi Mittal does. She's got this great sense as a performer." Kalki says the patriarchy has a way of wearing you down, and that all Indian women have experienced it growing up. "The craziest thing I've ever been told is that as a white-skinned person I need to dress better, because my white skin shows that I'm promiscuous."

While such topics are legitimate targets of satire, there are limits on what kind of material comedians can safely do without generating massive amounts of controversy. The articulation of the representation moment is a tricky one. Mumbai's stand-ups are understandably reluctant to make direct jokes about rape; certainly none that reference the Delhi rape. There is the fear perhaps that making jokes about rape normalizes it — if not glorifies it — just as talking about gender issues makes them 'cool.' "I don't believe in

political correctness, but at the same time I am an old-fashioned girl," Neeti told me. "Jokes about women aren't wrong. It's about context and tone. Jokes about periods when made by women can be funny. But rape jokes are hard to make and almost never funny." Male comics such as Sorabh Pant emphasize that it's important for women to feel respected at all times; he told me he regards himself as a feminist ally and takes special care to not rely on easy stereotypes when it comes to women. I watched several of his sets; while he did make quick connecting jokes based on local ethnicities like most comics to get easy laughs, his view of women was refreshingly positive, well-rounded and resisted any obvious jokes about married life and other such topics.

"Violence against women and the innumerable prejudices they face is serious business and it's pretty difficult to hit a lighter vein on these issues," Vasu Primlani. Her journey has taken her from environmental activism to stand-up; her jokes mainly revolve around environmental issues and gender. Ever since she was raped as a child by a neighbor, she told me, as she has in media interviews (Deepak, 2016), she's had trouble trusting men. Malini Nair observes (2016) that among the many things the Delhi rape tragedy changed was the casual culture dropping jokes about assault. Nair quotes Aditi Mittal as saying, "Humour is always very contextual and it exists differently in different places. I have heard these kind of jokes before. But after Nirbhaya (as the Delhi rape victim was referred to initially in the media to protect her identity), it isn't funny at all." This culture of outrage and a refusal to embrace what was so far the status quo of weariness is what the 'It's Your Fault' video so successfully taps into.

To draw on Du Gay et al, by linking the 'Rape — It's Your Fault' video's semantic networks to femininity, modernity and contemporary youth culture, we can derive meanings to complicate the representation and priorities of stand-up comedy in Mumbai and modern India. Kalki, as an actress, testifies to the fact that we live in a world where women are indisputably reducible to their looks and are often judged for them. Urban Indian cities like Mumbai are certainly no exceptions. Her experience is hardly unique: it is the typical Indian experience.

The All-India Bakchod video speaks to the idea that Indian women can never take their safety for granted. "I feel unsafe in India, more than in other cities around the world," says expat Nupura Acharekar, a standup fan who lives most of the year in Finland, whose hometown is Mumbai. She's been to a few shows in Mumbai because she "thoroughly enjoys comedy." It's an encouraging sign, she said, that "at least urban attitudes towards women are slowly changing. Standup forces people to think about these things, and slowly maybe people will discuss with other people. Then change will come."

Others like Sucharita Tyagi, a Harry Potter-loving popular radio jockey and senior executive producer for a radio channel, like female comics because they experience a sense of solidarity. Sucharita, a huge stand-up comedy fan, having attended 40-50 shows in a year, says. "I feel they capture my experience in a way male comics don't. You can tell if a comic is funny from their Twitter account. Some of these male comics come across as cocky mofos... I do enjoy jokes by a good male comic. The 'Rape — It's Your Fault' satire is crucial because it was made by a group of guys and that shows us that we have allies among men and that all men aren't out to hurt us women. We don't realize

how easy it is for some men to commit violence against women, and for men to acknowledge that makes you feel heard. Understood. But I have to say, I tend to naturally, like, gravitate towards someone like Aditi Mittal. We are very close now. She's very relatable and has warmth. It's great when stand-ups show you a different way of seeing the world, but sometimes relatability is more powerful."

It raises the question: is there any such thing as female, or female-centric humor? Is it an imagined gender divide? Aditi told me that there was a general expectation that "women should curse less." Sucharita Tyagi says, "There is no definition of good taste or bad taste in my opinion. It's about open-mindedness."

Given the general level of sophistication about the discourse, it came as something of a surprise to discover as I was beginning my ethnographic research of Mumbai's comedy scene that there were only three major female comics in the country with name brand recognition among regular comedy club audiences: Mumbai-based Aditi, and to slightly lesser extents, Delhi-based Neeti Palta and Vasu Primlani. Others have followed of late, in 2016: most prominently, Radhika Vaz, with her feminist comedy shows: 'Unladylike: The Pitfalls of Propriety,' and 'Older. Angrier. Hairier.' None of these comics featured in the 'It's Your Fault' video, although Aditi Mittal would feature in the Comedy Roast (where she was repeatedly made fun of as a token female presence, it ought to be noted). Even today, when the overall scene has expanded to accommodate nearly 150 comedians, there is a paucity of female comics. Ajay Nair, chief operating officer of artist management firm Only Much Louder, asserts that there are more than 40-50 aspiring female comedians in India. "We have 8-10 established comediennes," he said

in an interview (Shekhar, 2016). Divya Shekhar writes: "This demand spurt has made room for material that is a far cry from the tried and tested, loud and often sexually grotesque humour that one is often exposed to. The small but determined group of comediennes is writing about what it means to be a woman in India, in a sarcastic, sassy and funny way. They are talking about rape, infanticide, body shaming, politics and feminism in ways that people are not used to discussing, forget laughing, about."

The situation will still take some time to change; but for now, this deficiency in numbers is to an extent redressed in the vocal nature of these comics' performances. "You have to be badass," Aditi told me. "At the same time, I'm no less level of feminine than anybody else."

It's another issue that people don't always acknowledge Aditi's femininity, or box her identity in as a woman, without considering intersectionalities. She's been subjected to both situations, she says. Aditi told me, "I was a tomboy in school and now I'm a woman in a man's world. Sometimes I get treated better because I'm the only woman. Not always. Sometimes people say obscene, sexual things to you. As a stand-up comic I'll take this in my stride, I'll give it back to the person. But it gets uncomfortable."

From my position as a male researcher seeking to make discursive points about representation and identity, describing any physical characteristics or features of female stand-up comics, especially when their male counterparts' comedic personas aren't (at least for the most part) defined by their looks, feels reductive, and like one is falling into a trap. Occasionally one encounters an unusually large, overweight male comic like AIB's Tanmay Bhat, but even he, as I've noted previously, is able to draw his viewers

away from his physicality by making virtually no jokes about his size. On the other hand, it is important to note that the physical traits and body language of these female comics code important details that bear upon their performances.

There's a glimpse of the tomboy in Neeti; I had assumed she was in her mid-twenties, and was surprised to find in fact that she was in her late thirties. Aditi has struggled with weight issues but she embodies a more traditional femininity than the two other most famous female comics who've made an impression on the Mumbai stand-up circuit. Aditi says, "As a woman you don't know whether you're being laughed at or laughed with. We have to constantly demonstrate confidence before the audience knowing any 'niceness' could be interpreted as a sign of weakness and lead to heckling. I try to behave in a way that shows women can be confident without compromising on the fact that I am a woman."

Vasu Primlani, India's first openly gay comic, would agree very strongly with that. She had short graying hair and was dressed in a black suit when I first met her. The first time I watched Vasu perform, I was sitting in the center of the second row at The Comedy Store. I hadn't yet approached her to discuss my project. She noticed that I was silent — when I watch comedians, I almost never laugh, even if in my head I am registering the joke as funny. Vasu made fun of the fact that I was silent, and insisted that I scream "woo-hoo!" in a falsetto alone. The crowd thoroughly enjoyed how she picked on me.

Here, I want to make note of a complex interaction that I had with Vasu Primani. I do this to illustrate the relationship between ethnographer and subject, and to note the

views of an influential comic that have the potential to reach tens of thousands over the years. Vasu, who has lived in the US for a period, and I spent several hours talking about Western attitudes towards women, how gender politics impacted Mumbai's stand-up scene, and how stand-up could impact the way society at large treated women. I felt our dynamic was awkward, yet oddly energetic; that she was, consciously or subconsciously, playing mind-games with me, through her words and gestures. This was someone who self-identifies proudly and openly as a lesbian in a country where homosexuality remains illegal under Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (though that is currently under judicial review). We talked for a while about her experiences as a survivor of molestation in childhood (it was perpetrated by a neighbor), and while there was no suggestion that she viewed men necessarily any differently because of it, she did give me insights into how she viewed the flow of power between genders, with comments some would consider provocative, like, "I've slept naked with men, close male friends, without them touching me." In her words, she was interested in examining "the desires of the soul." She seemed to be challenging me to flirt with her to prove some twisted insight into the nature of men as fundamentally seeking a sexual connection (and it is important to emphasize here that I held back entirely and retained a strong grip on the direction of the conversation).

Satire is too delicate for her; she likes to openly defy the patriarchy. During one of our conversations, Vasu, in comparing herself to the other female comics, referred to herself as 'a ball-buster.' She told me, "I especially like the challenge of putting men in their place at comedy shows," and went on to echo an experience very similar to one that Aditi had described to me as having happened to her at a New Year's show at The

Comedy Store in Lower Parel. "Men can act extremely entitled and arrogant at shows. They think sitting in the audience, they can say whatever they want to say." I asked her how this was different from heckling. "Heckling is one thing. At least there's an element of repartee and wit there. If the comic loses his cool, then the audience can immediately sense it. You've lost the audience then. But when some guy refuses to stay silent because he's drunk and because he wrongly thinks he's funnier than the comic, it's not heckling. It's boorish behavior. If an audience member will not allow the performer to perform — which is what the crowd has paid good money for, remember — the only option remaining is to have the man thrown out." When I suggested that it wasn't entirely clear that this was necessarily a gender-related example she was offering, she countered that in fact often, men seemed to gain the courage to behave badly since the performer on stage happened to be a woman. "You look at them, and you just know from their behavior that they'd not dare behave that way if the comic was a man."

They might be comics up on stage — cool performers, even celebrities — to younger crowds in their early late teens and twenties, but to some older audience members, women like Aditi Mittal are children first. Patriarchal norms inevitably guide the way those people view female comics up on stage. "Once someone approached me after a show and told me, 'Beta (child), you were very funny. But do your parents know you say such things on stage?'" Aditi said. "The impression is that if you're a joker who will marry you?"

So far as material production goes, the comedians' personal experiences naturally shape their best material, by giving them perspective on real life. "There were rumors that

I slept around to get where I am," Aditi says in an interview (Sheth, 2016). She told me she'd been harassed by a male comic who'd hoped to sleep with her. She was once even told to shut up by male comics at a meeting to plan a collaboration.

Aditi narrated to me an incident from a trip to Varanasi that she'd made with friends; it has made her empathize with women who were born outside privilege. "One of the porters at the guest lodge we were staying at started talking about the rapes. The primal emotion we feel is, why? Why do these rapes happen? This French girl I was with asks, 'How can this happen so often? Does your government *want* you to be unsafe?' No. No government in the world wants their people to be unsafe. But the government response to it has been absolutely dismal... like water-cannoning the protesters. People's attitudes can be terrible too. This porter points at me — a girl in t-shirt and jeans — and says, 'In the old days, women would dress more respectfully.' I lost it. He's talking about some English girl smoking marijuana and I said, 'If those holy babas can smoke marijuana, why can't women?'"

Feminist scholars have long described how being women gave them easier access to non-Western women's culture (Altorki, 1988; Abu-Lughod L., 1986; Bolak, 1996); but I am glad to assert that so many of these young women — both producers and consumers — were very open-minded to my requests for interviews in public settings (especially at cafes or the comedy club venues themselves), and engaged in thoughtfully answering the at times-delicate questions I posed them. Part of the reason for this may be that this is a sign of the times: in a safe, cosmopolitan urban environment such as a Mumbai comedy club, divisions between genders no longer pose the same kind of threat that might impose

on women outside. Perhaps my status as an Indian man getting a degree abroad helped assuage any apprehensions, although they did not ask for any University of Texas identification card, and they might have been judging me purely on the basis of my relaxed and respectful body language.

The women who attend comedy shows are often savvy and engage in performances of cool by dressing stylishly, speaking confidently when engaging amongst themselves or while interacting with the opposite gender. Their very presence at a comedy club is significant, in and of itself. My interviews with more than ten female subjects ranging from the club owner and comics to audience members revealed that young, educated urban women today have less trouble negotiating and articulating their hybrid mode of consumption, and in fact actively seek out media that celebrates their world view. They are growing aware of the notion that they need not apologize for their perfectly legitimate demand to feel safe, or for holding opinions that older generations might have called 'Westernized;' and that there is a community of women who increasingly share their opinions. It is an empowering connection that stand-up comics, as opinion leaders, are in position to help make.

Aditi Mittal is very aware of her place in the country's pop cultural history. She feels she has a larger responsibility not so much towards lecturing women on what they can become, but in showing them that standup is a viable career option and that women can be funny. Aditi has been dubbed one of 'India's trailblazers' (BBC, 2013), a tag she has mixed feelings about. "The more people think of me as an exception, the more the notion that women can't be funny will be propagated," said Mittal in an interview with

The Guardian (Maheshwari, 2014). “It will make this field more forbidding to aspiring girls.”

Women like Aditi and Neeti — but not so much Vasu Primlani — are cautious about calling themselves feminist, while continuing to advocate, what she herself calls, feminist beliefs. "If I can draw in audiences, male and female, by talking about women without necessarily calling myself a 'feminist,' I am more than happy to do so. I don't go by labels, but at the same time I am who I am... If someone is offended by my stories and jokes which come from my experiences as a woman, that's their problem. I will continue to tell jokes about menstruation and how men act when someone is talking about their period."

Aditi Mittal makes jokes about menstruation and how hard it is to find the perfect brassiere: material which has sometimes met with a frosty reception. By comparison, the 'It's Your Fault' video, which deals with sensitive themes like rape and violence committed against women, is ironically rather "safe" for Mumbai's audiences because it channels righteous anger and defends victims. In our conversations, AIB's Tanmay Bhat had kept returning to the idea that comedy was most effective when it targeted the powerful. Aditi addresses the concept (2015) in an essay for Verve Magazine.

In a way, power is comedy and comedy is power. You'll often hear the words 'punching up' and 'punching down' being bandied about in green rooms of comedy clubs. This description of a joke is based on who the target of the joke is... When you are 'punching up', the target of your joke is higher than your perceived and experienced status in the power structure of the society you live in. That's why it's so easy to make fun of politicians and celebrities — they are privileged, richer and more powerful than us and when you're that rich and famous, you should be too powerful to care about what people say. A joke on

Vijay Mallya never goes un-laughed at — Rahul Gandhi, Uday Chopra and Tusshar Kapoor jokes are so common now, that they're actually considered hackneyed. It's why the Internet exploded with memes when Alia Bhatt didn't know who the President of India is. It was too easy; she is a beautiful woman, born into privilege, with a job description that includes the high life. We could never be her. For the person cracking it, and for the person laughing at it — the joke is a tool of survival, a defence mechanism.

But simultaneously she complicates the idea of power by showing how power is relative. She uses the example of the actress Alia Bhatt, whose video 'Genius of the Year,' I identified in the previous chapter as one of the factors that helped stand-up achieve mainstream popularity. The same Alia Bhatt becomes an illustration of both 'punching up' and 'punching down.'

When we 'punch down', the target of the joke is lower than your perceived and experienced status in the power structure... The element of power in this humour is derived from relief. Thank God I am not the one in trouble. 'Punching down' also serves the function of establishing hierarchy. That's why it's hilarious to make fun of Rakhi Sawant when she says 'chitting' instead of 'cheating' or exclaims 'Jejus' instead of 'Jesus'. What she is saying is lost in the melee of quips about her mispronunciation. In speaking out, she has exposed the fact that she is not one of us magazine reading public and we use her incongruity to make humour... 'Punching down' is the trademark joke style of Comedy Nights With Kapil. The poor wife is a permanent nag and therefore the butt of jokes about nagging... By that same merit, Alia Bhatt jokes are a classic example of 'punching down' as well. In our muddled middleclass morality, actresses are literally lowest in the pecking order — even today, a young woman expressing a desire to be an actress is met by fevered opposition. It's very easy to make fun of her. This, in my mind, establishes the fluidity of the power of comedy and the comedy of power, because every single individual perceives and experiences status in a different manner — so 'punching up' and 'punching down' become subjective. What is funny to some may be horribly offensive others. And that's what makes comedy so potent.

Aditi's words serve as a reminder that ideologies such as the movement for gender equality are constantly contested — even when a moral compass shows us an obvious direction to take. Stand-up comedy in India has made great strides on behalf of urban women's rights and it has made some missteps. I discuss one such misstep in the next section.

4.5 POLITICS WITHOUT GUARANTEES: THE BACKLASH AGAINST ABISH MATHEW

Censorship, which constitutes an important element of the Circuit of 'Cool,' comes in various forms. There is the more traditional version applied by comedy clubs and by the comedians themselves, showing self-restraint. But sometimes regulation is asserted by the audience and not by the authorities. Comedians as producers hold great power over audiences, but it does not mean they cannot be criticized. Less than three months after featuring in the All India Bakchod Comedy Roast that I described in the last chapter, Abish Mathew got into trouble when performing a set at the National Law University in New Delhi on March 23, 2015. While my dissertation mainly focuses on the Mumbai stand-up scene, I believe the Abish Mathew incident has ramifications for the nation's stand-up culture as a whole.

To illuminate the exact circumstances, I reproduce below an excerpt from a report (John, 2015) written for the university's independent student newspaper by a male student who attended the show. The writer, Arshu John, remarks that Abish did not steer clear of sexist jokes in his set; and his "unoriginal material" dealt with "done-to-death jokes of

women drivers, women using Facebook at work and Punjabi women getting fat after marriage."

In one such joke, after building up the premise that five minutes is a long time for Indians (because we ask for five more minutes to finish an exam paper or to sleep – coz nobody else does that?), he joked that five minutes is a long time for Mallu fathers because it grants them enough time to force their daughters to become nurses, ship them off to Dubai, go home, drink toddy, beat their wives and still have three minutes left (I'll get back to the examination of this joke). At this point, two girls of the third year batch stood up from the central aisle and publicly stormed off showing Abish the middle finger. Abish ignored this and proceeded with his set... About forty minutes into the show, the two girls who had stormed off returned to the centre of the aisle with two other girls holding placards reading "Get Out Sexist Pig". On protest by the audience, three of the four girls moved to the side of the auditorium from where they continued to heckle him and asking him to 'get the fuck out'. Abish... left the stage without completing his set.

Mainstream media outlets like Mumbai Mirror, Firstpost and Scroll, along with popular culture-focused websites such as scoopwhoop.com picked up the story. One of the protestors, Arushi Mahajan, explained (Jain, 2015) precisely what was problematic about Abish's routine that night: "He made jokes about Mayawati (a prominent politician from the state of Uttar Pradesh, and a member of the underprivileged Dalit community) being ugly and about her complexion which made us uncomfortable. We went out to bring placards to make him feel uncomfortable at the jokes he had been making... A group of men constantly booed us for what we had done in the auditorium. We are being compared to state censors which got the AIB Roast pulled down but we are not trying to do any of it. We just want to express our dissent on the kind of content at which 200 people chose to laugh in a law school."

Part of the problem is that jokes that both 'punch down' and 'punch up' (to use Aditi Mittal's phrasing) against prominent people like Mayawati often seem to be popular among audiences. The intent is impossible to gauge; what matters is that comedians have by and large normalized their usage in Mumbai's comedy circuit, by using these as fillers to connect easily with crowds. Protesting against such jokes feels like railing against the wind. This begs the question: should stand-up comedy avoid jokes that push the envelope? George Lukianoff — featured in 'Can We Take a Joke,' a feature-length documentary about comedy and outrage culture — and Jonathan Haidt write in *The Atlantic* (2015) about political correctness sweeping through American campuses:

The ultimate aim, it seems, is to turn campuses into "safe spaces" where young adults are shielded from words and ideas that make some uncomfortable. And more than the last, this movement seeks to punish anyone who interferes with that aim, even accidentally. You might call this impulse *vindictive protectiveness*. It is creating a culture in which everyone must think twice before speaking up, lest they face charges of insensitivity, aggression, or worse."

One commentator (Dadawala, 2015) claims the Abish Mathew episode has similarly triggered a debate over freedom of speech and feminism. He quotes one of the female protestors, who remarks that the protest was not popular among stand-up fans in the audience that night: "It's a residential college and I have no qualms in stating that we are afraid for our security given the ugly backlash we received from the overwhelming majority of the student community."

This suggests that a majority of the audience were willing to dissociate from the context of Abish's comedy and not conflate it with anti-feminist rhetoric. It isn't so much that the crowd were active agents of the patriarchy, or even passive advocates of letting

status quo male humor fill the room. The audience was probably willing to forgive Abish for his transgressions partly because Abish's personality is easy-going and his song-and-dance routines include jokes that are in general female-friendly. I've seen Abish perform over six or seven times and in my judgment, he can often get away with controversial material that might trip up another male comedian with a more arrogant on-stage persona. Only this time, a small but vocal minority raised objections that were heard.

An unpleasant tension arises then between freedom of speech and the right to dissent. Does it become 'uncool' for the minority to raise its voice in these circumstances, inconveniencing and interrupting as it did a show for political reasons that didn't gain traction with very many in the crowd that night? It can be argued that the moral imperative is of far greater importance and the episode constitutes a genuine teachable moment for producers, consumers and regulators alike. Isha Jalan writes (2015), "The incident has started a debate on freedom of expression and the right to protest." Firstpost (2015) criticizes both Mathew and the protestors who returned carrying aggressive placards, writing, "by behaving in churlish and deeply insulting ways themselves, the protesters have made the valid fight against sexism seem unreasonable and violent. Ironically, Mathew and the protesters have one thing in common: they are both indefensible."

The protestors went on to post an open letter (Aarushi Mahajan et al, 2015). They offer a rebuttal to Mathew:

Within the free speech paradigm, a protest following problematic speech enjoys more legitimacy than stifling speech before it has been uttered. Pre-censorship of speech requires a far greater burden to be discharged. Further, while Abish

Mathew may have the right to free speech, to our mind, he does not have the right to the platform of our University auditorium because we are trying to create a space where people belonging to all genders feel safe, and our protest was against the use of University space to perpetuate sexism through humour.

We must recognize that speech can effectively counter other speech if the marketplace of speech is actually free. However, in the real world, different power differentials and structures do exist. And for that reason, one speaker has a position of power over the other. In this case, Abish Mathew had the mic and stage, while the protesters, carrying their posters, were asked to move aside, and to let the show continue.

Would self-censorship be a more judicious approach in this case? Abish remained defiant. Firstpost (2015) cited a tweet of his from a couple of days after the episode in its piece: "If I make my jokes any cleaner, I'd have to sell it as hand sanitizer!" Later that year he spoke to me in person about the episode when he was visiting New York to perform at comedy club open mics. "It was a misunderstanding that got blown up, really," he told me. "My act is not misogynistic. In fact I'd say I'm very respectful towards women. These protestors at the event made some rude hand gestures and the placards called me a sexist pig. But I kept my cool. I explained to them that although those jokes were edgy, they were meant to be lighthearted. I wouldn't make any jokes about female foeticide, for instance. That stuff you just don't touch. They were being a bit sensitive. Yes definitely they have a right to protest against my material, but listen, it's a fact the audience was on my side and wanted to see me perform."

4.6 CONCLUSION

In this chapter I began by describing the seminal All-India Bakchod satirical video, 'Rape — It's Your Fault' and its relevance in shaping and mobilizing public

opinion on issues such as women's rights in the aftermath of the Delhi rape case of 2012. Using my Circuit of 'Cool,' I analyze the reasons why the rape case had such a significant impact on Indian consciousness, and how the country's collective consciousness has been forced to grapple with the trauma. While it might be difficult for individuals entrenched in Western society to comprehend the nature and power of the Indian patriarchal system, it is critical to acknowledge that such is the state of affairs, stand-up's wholly reasonable articulations of cultural politics can at times take on a radical identity.

I discuss how stand-up comedians, both female and male, have an important role to play in raising the issue of women's rights in their performances and setting the tone in a way that is informative while retaining its 'cool' edge. My argument isn't so much that stand-up is causing this cultural pause to allow people to reflect; rather it has emerged as a venue that allows discursive formulations to gain a foothold in popular consciousness. As stand-up comedy, assisted by satirical videos with viral potential, starts to go mainstream, I discuss how comedians, in engaging with contemporary issues that urgently need addressing in the public sphere, make stand-up comedy more relevant and relatable as an entertainment format — almost an alternate resource to keep audiences updated on what's happening in the country and beyond.

To that end, I apply Du Gay et al's Circuit of Culture model to one specific cultural artifact, i.e. All-India Bakchod's 'Rape — It's Your Fault' video. I examine the interrelationship between five specific elements — production, consumption, representation, identity and regulation — as it relates to stand-up's articulation of gender representations. I discuss the views and opinions — and the inevitable brushes against the

patriarchy — of the relatively few female stand-up comics (including India's first female comic and the first openly lesbian comic) who have made a mark on Mumbai's comedy club culture. I segue to outline my own experience performing pro-feminist material to a (slightly bewildered) crowd at a stand-up event in South Mumbai. I conclude by examining in detail a specific moment that emerged as a sharp conflict between a male comic and feminist audiences that objected to his material, and how this was covered in the mainstream media. The backlash against Abish Mathew suggests an empowering feedback loop that amplifies the struggle against the entrenched Indian patriarchy and has strengthened the hand of Indian feminists. All of this goes to further demonstrate how stand-up continues to shape (and reshape) the meaning of 'cool' in Mumbai, in particular among young, urban, middle-class or aspirational populations.

Chapter 5. Stand-up, electoral politics and the articulation of 'cool'

5.1 'THE COMMON MAN RISES': AN ANALYSIS

With tongue firmly in cheek, All India Bakchod's *Nayak 2: The Common Man Rises* charts the rise to power of the most unlikely politician India has seen in many generations — Arvind Kejriwal, a graduate of the prestigious Indian Institute of Technology and a former Revenue Services officer who is currently the Chief Minister of the state of Delhi. In 'Nayak 2: The Common Man Rises', All-India Bakchod is essentially satirizing what goes into the construction of a politician's brand. This All India Bakchod video employs several throwback references to 1980s and 1990s Indian culture and even tosses in an offhand reference to the Bat symbol in constructing a satirical origin narrative for Kejriwal as a vigilante operating outside the system, who — unlike the comic book hero, though — finally *becomes* the system and gains political power.

The video — four minutes 45 seconds long which has to date received over 5.5 million hits — opens with a Kejriwal-lookalike tossing and turning in bed at night, dreaming of the noted politician and former Indian Deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani asking in his querulous voice, "Who is this Arvind Kejriwal?" The voiceover remarks humorously that as Kejriwal is an alumnus of the Indian Institute of Technology, he ought to write terrible, clichéd books like the famous Indian pulp novelist Chetan Bhagat. But when, in the dream, the thought occurs that Anna Hazare, the Gandhian organizer of wide-scale protests in 2011, has thrown out Kejriwal's rum, faux-Kejriwal wakes up in a sweat and says with a determined look: "I'll have to create a political party myself." This

is partly a jocular reference to the fact that Kejriwal was widely seen as having used Hazare's cachet as a social activist to grow his own brand, and then jettisoned Hazare whose political views are considered uncomfortably extremist (see Bhatia, 2011; Sengupta, 2011).

AIB's video, 'Nayak 2' is not a sequel to anything despite the presence of the numeral '2,' but a reference to the cathartic Bollywood political thriller, *Nayak: The Real Hero* (2001) about a television reporter who becomes chief minister for a day and shows the country how problems can be solved by cutting through red tape. Punathambekar (2015) locates *Nayak* amongst several other films such as *Lage Raho Munnabhai* (2004) *Rang De Basanti* (2006) from that decade which fostered a public debate about what it means to be politically engaged. 'Nayak 2' borrows its title from the film and affectionately caricaturizes Kejriwal whose startling rise to the chief ministership in 2014 on the back of the large-scale grassroots anti-corruption protest movement led by the Gandhian Anna Hazare may have been anticipated, even encouraged, through such films which indulged the possibility of a common middle class citizen taking the reins of power.

In an apropos touch, veteran Bollywood character actor, Alok Nath, who is best known for playing the role of the well-meaning, sentimental middle class patriarch in classic Bollywood films like *Maine Pyar Kiya* (1989) and *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* (1994), provides a voiceover in Hindi that serves as Kejriwal's guide and moral compass. Among the scripted words of wisdom that Nath's voiceover offers (that I, as a native speaker of Hindi, have translated into English): "In order to be loved by the public, you will need to

look like the middle class. First, you'll need to wear a heavy sweater that'll make you like a middle-aged uncle. Wear a muffler and a Nehru cap and fight the Nehru family. LOL.”

All India Bakchod points to the Nehru cap, also known as the Gandhi cap — an anachronistic mark of honesty and virtue from the Gandhian age of the early 20th century, intermittently used in Bollywood films since as a mark of insincere politicians, and now re-appropriated for its positive connotations by Hazare (Whitehead, 2014) — as a critical symbol of 'cool.' It is important to note that AIB is neither making fun of the Nehru cap nor of Kejriwal for appropriating it; rather they are highlighting the irony that in order to defeat the Congress party, which has been dominated by the Nehru-Gandhi family for generations, Kejriwal must take to wearing the Nehru cap. The use of the “LOL” – 'laugh out loud' in Internet parlance – is aimed at the youth demographic of the satirical video which would find the unexpected appearance of youth slang here funny by itself.

The fact that the real Kejriwal in winter dresses exactly like the way his doppelganger does in the video sharpens the visual comedy. In the video, he becomes in effect, a Batman for the masses. Many symbols connote his ordinariness: the shawl wrapped around Kejriwal's face; the Marie biscuit that he nibbles on; but the search for a potent symbol of a humble lifestyle finds its most successful parodic expression in the idea that the vacuum cleaner is too upper-class to work in India as a potential party emblem. Alok Nath's voiceover advises instead Kejriwal to go lower, and lower still. Use a broomstick instead, Nath preaches.

Punathambekar (2015) notes that viewers derived different interpretations from different aspects of the video as it circulated across digital and mobile media platforms. He observes that while some made use of the “Hashtag Sanskaar” (hashtag culture) dialogue bit near the video's end to launch their personal opinions on Narendra Modi and the BJP's Hindutva / right wing cultural agenda, others connected Kejriwal's broom symbol to a re-appropriation of the broom from the 2008 anti-affirmative action protests staged by upper-caste students.

Indian English language stand-up comics, who have held forth on cultural politics with great gusto (as I demonstrate throughout this dissertation), thereby earning significant credibility and relevance, have by and large withdrawn or at least shown great caution when it comes to tackling electoral politics. I argue in this chapter that Mumbai's comedy scene shows a decisive willingness to engage with cultural politics especially when it's on the right side of history, but is, on the whole but with notable exceptions, unwilling or at the very least reticent when it comes to taking a stand on political issues of the day.

I will show how stand-up comics have consistently and carefully preferred to poke fun of figures such as Arvind Kejriwal not to deflate his image but to inflate it; with the effect of dubbing Kejriwal as 'cool' and potentially a viable opponent to Prime Minister Narendra Modi in the long run. I will also demonstrate how groups like All India Bakchod have dangled with political opponents in limited ways, through performances such as the Roast (which I discussed at length in the chapter on Bollywood) and Tanmay Bhat's Snapchat controversy (which I explicate on shortly); these

entanglements have nonetheless made it clear that there is a long way for Mumbai's comedy circuit to go before it can take on politicians on its own terms and stand powerfully and capably as a bulwark against political excess. I demonstrate how in some cases politicians have successfully appropriated comics to deliver their messages, a setback to the comedy scene that could visibly rob it of its vitality and intellectual independence.

I discuss at length the paternalistic culture of censorship that has long shaped modern India's relationship with youth and gender and alternative subcultures. I will further discuss in this chapter how with Narendra Modi's BJP in power at the center, minorities are feeling threatened and muzzled; and how comedy collectives such as Aisi Taisi Democracy have stepped in to fill a vacuum and give voice to meaningful dissent.

I argue finally that further brushes against political parties may be inevitable, and that Mumbai's stand-up comedy scene is perfectly positioned not only take the moral lead in making voting 'cool,' it has the potential to strengthen the democratic process by giving voice to the concerns of minorities and marginalized communities through satire and other registers consistent with the medium.

5.2 INDIAN POLITICAL SATIRE AND THE REARTICULATION OF 'COOL'

Punathambekar (2015) points to a rich Indian digital culture and locates AIB's satirical videos within an intertextual field that connected the 2014 Indian elections to films, TV shows, conversations and debates centered around right-wing nationalism, gender and caste politics. He writes, "In forging critical connections across news media,

popular culture and ongoing political events, satirical videos such as 'Nayak 2' link the time of elections to the continuous daily time of politics."

Indian political satire has antecedents on television. As Rajayasree Sen points out, actor and TV host Shekhar Suman attempted news comedy successfully with his chatty talk show, *Movers and Shakers*, which mixed Hindi colloquialisms with English jokes as far back as in 1997. "He commented on politics and newsmakers and actually made some pretty good digs at his favorite bugbears, [politicians] Laloo Prasad Yadav and Atal Behari Vajpayee. She also cites (Sen, 2015) a more recent show, *The Week That Wasn't*, which "doesn't shy away from cocking a snook at politicians across all party lines including [Narendra] Modi and Rahul [Gandhi] and Modi's BFF, Amit Shah."

Sangeet Kumar (2012) offers a more detailed picture by tracing the history of political humor in India from tales of witty duels between Mughal emperor Akbar and his Hindu courtier Birbal, and proceeds to sketch out recent political developments in India including the anti-corruption movement that brought Arvind Kejriwal to power in Delhi. He discusses at length contemporary, "hybrid global" political satire on Indian television and conducts a comparison between English language show *The Week That Wasn't* and *Gustakhi Maaf*, a Hindi series which parodies political figures through the use of puppets and is an officially sanctioned Indian version of the French show, *Les Guignols*. Kumar takes note of an occasion when the politician Uma Bharati was left upset after coming face to face at a rally with a puppet version of an opponent. He however makes clear that is the exception rather than the norm: most politicians leap at the chance for publicity and are happy to feature on the program especially during election season.

English language stand-up comedy in India is evolving at a time when the middle class, as *The New York Times* (Yardley, 2011) reports, is demonstrably growing impatient with endemic problems such as public safety and corruption. Middle-class Indians have grumbled about corruption since much before I was born, but my generation grew up wanting to differentiate ourselves from our parents — those who were raised in the 1950s and later. Many like me detested the arena of dirty politics, and refused to vote on the principle that such actions were meaningless, given the abysmal quality of candidates. In the Southern city of Chennai where I worked as a journalist with *The Hindu*, one of India's biggest newspapers, my friends and I were prepared to morally justify corruption on the basis that if not for the alternate economy of bribes, lower-rung bureaucrats would starve to death on the salaries they made. We certainly felt no connection to Gandhi. When I arrived in the United States, frankly I was surprised that so many of my classmates believed in the transformative power of politics and bought into the idea, true or false, that Congressmen and Senators were truly interested in their constituents. But during the course of my research, I discovered many Indians from the generations behind me are different: they are idealistic enough, optimistic enough, to believe in Aam Aadmi Party's Gandhian values.

Around 2011, corruption transformed into a viable political issue around which elections could be fought when social activist Anna Hazare launched his anti-corruption movement (Thakur & Rana, 2011). The movement would ultimately culminate in a popular grassroots movement that subsequently coalesced around the central figure of Arvind Kejriwal, a former revenue services officer. The newly formed Aam Aadmi Party

(or the 'Common Man' party) has since defeated the much older Congress Party and the Bharatiya Janata Party to come to power twice in the state of Delhi.

Anna Hazare's Lok Pal bill – which sought to create a citizen's ombudsman body to independently investigate corruption cases – received wide publicity in the Indian English language and foreign media (see Joseph, 2011; Jenkins, 2011; Rahman, 2011; BBC, 2013), and took hold of the Indian middle class' imagination, not coincidentally around the time more violent revolutions in the Arab World were reshaping power structures. The issues sparked off a national conversation. The Delhi State Assembly elections of 2013 and the Lok Sabha parliamentary elections of 2014 delivered a resounding verdict eviscerating the Congress party, which had been accused of rampant corruption and abuse of power.

In all of this, stand-up comedians have had an opinion building role to play. Punathambekar (2015) touches upon "the relentless corporate makeover of news media and a concomitant decline in public trust in journalism," which contrasts sharply against the fearless tone of satirical videos before the 2014 Indian election cycle that took on politicians ranging from Narendra Modi and Arvind Kejriwal to Rahul Gandhi, the Congress Party's crown prince-in-waiting. He does however clarify in his observation that comics have grown more careful since the right-wing populist BJP government came to power.

Above all, All India Bakchod's Gursimran Khamba wants to establish that 'voting' is cool. "Who the public votes for doesn't matter so long as it votes," he told me in one of our interviews. "For too long people didn't give a shit. That needs to change." Beyond

that, Khamba is not shy about expressing his personal political opinions. When the Aam Aadmi Party came to power in Delhi in 2013, Khamba wrote a thoughtful piece (Khamba, 2013) about how the Aam Aadmi Party's success had impacted the public sphere:

"Like a lot of other people in Delhi, I didn't think Arvind Kejriwal had a shot in hell. It's not that the anti-corruption message didn't resonate, I just thought fasting was not the answer to every problem. Maybe it came from my discomfort at how Kejriwal caught our attention — by idolising someone who got people flogged for drinking in his village, sharing a stage with the likes of ponytailed manager who has no sense of irony — somewhere along the way, I became deeply cynical. Yesterday however, magic happened. ...It must also hurt to be schooled on changing the political system by an AAP representative who uses words like "wanna" and is wearing a cap made famous by one of the Congress party's icons... As more statistics roll in, I cannot help but feel a little less cynical about the voters of Delhi. This is an excellent start (and for now, that is all that is). The fact that the party managed to prove a lot of us wrong is truly exceptional. Maybe there is still a place for idealism in Indian politics. Now if only they'd stop dancing around with brooms because really, they don't look cool. They just look like tantricks playing quidditch."

As in the case of comedians contributing to the rearticulation of Bollywood's brand, the mere act of mocking Kejriwal (even as they proclaim themselves as "fanboys" of his in the comments section of that video) in a sense legitimizes his presence in politics in the minds of audiences. *All-India Bakchod* is in effect, dubbing Kejriwal as 'cool.' Coincidentally, the sole Parliamentary representative of the newly risen Aam Aadmi Party currently in the Indian parliament is a Hindi language stand-up comedian, Bhagwant Mann. A video of him (Mann, 2014) performing in Parliament went viral in July 2014. In the video, Mann, an Aam Aadmi Party MP from Punjab, offered a critique

of Indian Finance Minister Arun Jaitley's budget presentation. In fact, Aam Aadmi Party now has three regional language comedians in its ranks (Agnihotri, 2016), hiking up its cool quotient in the eyes of youth.

What is new about all of this — the attempt on the part of politicians to revitalize the youth segment — is the social media dimension. In this age of social media, well aware of the importance of youth voters and the appeal he holds, Arvind Kejriwal has sought to engage stand-up comics on Twitter. In June 2016, for example, when comic Vir Das took to Twitter to praise the fact that one of his shows had started on time, that too without needing to bribe a single official, saying, "I'm sure we made history today." Kejriwal sought some credit and reflected glory by retweeting Das and commenting, "Not a single bribe..."

What Khamba did well in his comment piece was to retain his aura of independence through humorous jabs while endorsing Aam Aadmi Party's brand of politics. Vir Das's tweet however could easily be taken as wholehearted backing of a new way of political functioning. There's a price to pay if consumers of stand-up interpret such exchanges as producers of comedy cozying up to those in power. Several Twitter users who clearly do not support Aam Aadmi Party tweeted their disapproval (Ak, 2016). One Twitter user going by the handle Agoyr wrote, "Comedians will be encouraged by comedian in chief, Nautanki ka raja Kujliwal. Enjoy the chance." Another user, GTX, tweeted: "It's just that one comedian @ArvindKejriwal trying to help another comedian." Hardcore Delhiite posted, "@thevirdas Arre Arre! How can you indirectly praise @ArvindKejriwal? Aren't you scared of the potential fall in your Twitter following?"

Rohit Rawat used sarcasm: "You didn't have to bribe to start a show on time? Well, well. How much did they bribe you to tweet that? Haha!" Twitter user Rajneeshk was direct: "How many jokes on Modi/ BJP/ RSS/ Cong/ Gandhi Family / AAP in your show sir?"

Das, sensitive to the possibility of being seen as an AAP stooge, tweeted in response, "Sincere request. If you're a political party handle.... stay the hell away from my tweets. I've got my own battles, I ain't fighting yours. (Express Web Desk, 2016)"

There are legitimate fears that comedy could easily be co-opted by politicians to channel their message and reach out effectively to the youth demographic in particular. When Indian-American comic Rajiv Satyal opened for Prime Minister Narendra Modi on a 2015 visit to San Jose, he was demonstrating the effectiveness of stand-up as a replacement for traditional emcees (Kaushik, 2015). Yet the implications go far beyond that.

Appurv Gupta, who has performed material that mixes Hindi and English before rabble rousing BJP politician Uma Bharati, says in an interview (Kaushik, 2015), "I feel proud of the fact that sab theek ho gaya and kisi ko kisi baat ka bura nahi laga [everything was good and nobody felt bad about anything]." He admits to being pleasantly surprised — and expresses no concern — that politics and comedy are increasingly mixing. "At such events, one has to follow certain norms, but stand-up comedy is increasingly becoming part of political gatherings. And I think in this case, the change started happening in small towns."

This can get tricky: opening comedians up to the charge of being in cahoots with political masters, if stand-ups aren't harsh enough in speaking truth to power. It's a

slippery slope, and Neeti Palta in that same interview (Kaushik, 2015) acknowledges that comedians are forced to self-censor at such gigs. "Yes, it is true that we are now getting prominent parts to play at big award shows and high-profile events, we are not called in as fillers in between the main event. However, we have to practice restrictions. Even in corporate events, we are given a huge list of do's and don'ts to follow. And if there are any political parties involved, people have to think twice before taking any decisions, as they think *ye stage pe kuch bhi bol dega aur meri naukri chali jayegi* [this comedian will say anything on stage and I will lose my job]. Only a few people have that kind of patience to treat humour as humour and not get serious about the jokes cracked. Obama is such a good example of this. I think that kind of change is yet to come about here." While politicians like Obama and Kejriwal advertise their cultural capital through associating with comedians and gain a measure of 'cool' from their ability to seemingly enjoy popular culture like regular people, the reverse association might not have the same effect, and could take some off the gloss off the stand-up comedy scene.

As Indian middle class urban life grows increasingly Westernized and the population gains exposure to a wider range of media sources, comedians find they cannot take their audiences for granted. Youth are finding ways to articulate their complex hybrid identity through appropriation and resistance. They are challenging long-established cultural norms and testing the boundaries of freedom of speech. And they want more out of their comics.

India's best-known female comic Aditi Mittal pointed out to me in an interview that in a country where the education system has long relied on rote learning to impart

knowledge, "watching stand-up comedy is like attending a PhD program — audiences get trained to think critically. But when you teach them to think you are teaching them to raise their standards and expect better things from *you*."

Aditi freely accepted my point that it was hypocritical for Mumbai's comics to more or less stay away from satirizing Prime Minister Narendra Modi's reputation as a populist autocrat even as many have caricatured more mild-mannered politicians such as Manmohan Singh and Rahul Gandhi as inefficient, and Aam Aadmi Party's Arvind Kejriwal as a control freak. Writes columnist Rajyasree Sen (2015), "This isn't surprising, because many stand-up comics and scriptwriters I know, who've been asked to script political satire shows on the lines of Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert and so on, have been clearly told by Indian channels approaching them that they cannot make jokes about the ruling party, Modi, Amit Shah, Amitabh Bachchan, Mukesh Ambani and so on." All India Bakchod has cautiously tried to engage with electoral politics in its news based show *On Air with AIB* whose first season aired in October 2015 on Star Plus and Star World (Chaterjee, 2016). The format of the show is similar to John Oliver's show *Last Week Tonight*. It could yet prove a game changer.

5.3 TANMAY BHAT AND THE SNAPCHAT CONTROVERSY

A show like '*On Air With AIB*' has a readymade audience primarily because today, stand-up shows play to full houses around the country, in cities as wide apart and culturally diverse as Delhi and Mumbai, Kochi, Coimbatore and Darjeeling. Comedy specials performed by English language Indian comedians are beginning to air on Netflix

and Amazon Prime. Comedians are gaining heft, cachet, a measure of power as cultural arbiters. Groups like *All-India Bakchod* are helping shape middle class impressions of the new class of national leaders like Aam Aadmi Party's Arvind Kejriwal through jokes performed at comedy clubs and online satirical skits (All-India Bakchod, 2014).

The problem with stand-up trying to get involved with political messaging, however, comics like Aditi Mittal and Abish Mathew told me, is that the drama that inevitably follows drains them of energy. "We, as comics, could be doing a lot of good things in India without necessarily tackling politics head on," Abish (no stranger to controversy himself, as I discuss in the chapter on stand up's relationship with gender politics) told me. "Sometimes that's like bashing your head against the wall. When you can avoid getting into trouble and instead do things the smart way, I say do it the smart way."

He is in fact underestimating the problem, which is that Indian politicians act like bullies and try to muscle their way into cultural debates. Take for instance the Tanmay Bhat Snapchat controversy. In May 2016, All India Bakchod's Bhat posted a casual two-minute Snapchat video using the 'face swap' feature with a famous Bollywood singer, Lata Mangeshkar, and cricket legend Sachin Tendulkar. Mimicking both, Tanmay Bhat pretended the two celebrities were in a fight. The exchange (Bhalla, 2016) was admittedly tasteless, and includes such non-witticisms as hurling expletives while denigrating Tendulkar's abilities as a batsman, especially next to current Indian cricket captain Virat Kohli's talents. Bhat also compares the wrinkled, 87-year-old Mangeshkar to someone who's been under water for eight days, with Bhat in Tendulkar's voice

claiming Mangeshkar was 5000-years-old and that she needed to die like Game of Thrones character Jon Snow.

The video, best described as "nonsense" (Mehta, 2016), went viral after Bhat posted it on Facebook. It somehow managed to court such publicity when politicians stepped in that arguments raged on for months in the media and other public forums such as social media. Bhat himself responded on Twitter to say that the backlash took him back to the time of the controversy surrounding the Comedy Roast with Ranvir Singh and Arjun Kapoor (Express Web Desk, 2016).

The commentator Rajyasree Sen (2016), in making the point that the video has unexpectedly become a symbol of resistance against morality vultures, writes:

"Who would have thought that a Snapchat Face Swap video would become the totem for free speech in India? But it has. Thanks to the thin-skinned Indian, people across continents now know that in India, a comedian who made a Snapchat video about a cricketer and a singer has been threatened with physical violence and arrest... Threats of violence, displays of ignorance, misplaced morality and a total lack of understanding of comedy has been on display for the last few days, not to mention a poor grasp over the country's laws. This reaction to comedy is a comedy of the absurd by itself. The argument that the video 'wasn't even funny' is beside the point. The point is that Bhat or any other citizen should have the freedom of expression to be funny or unfunny as long as he or she is not inciting violence."

Every participant in the fiasco, it seemed, had an ax to grind. Some like Indian Express writer Pooja Pillai suspected (2016) that Bhat was stoking controversy for publicity — and certainly, it is true that stand-up comedy has consistently benefited from the splurge of media attention at every turn, going as far back as the Comedy Roast with

Ranvir Singh and Arjun Kapoor. The media duly obliged, with dozens of articles and visual commentary on the subject to fill news pages and television hours in the 24x7 news cycle. Television personality and serial rabble rouser Arnab Goswami came up with a one-hour show featuring a ten-man panel on the Times Now channel including English language comedian Sorabh Pant of East India Comedy and arguably India's most famous Hindi language comic, Raju Srivastava. Goswami framed the debate by asking, "Tanmay Bhat gone too far with his MOCKING video?" This particular episode has over 700,000 views on YouTube (The Newshour Debate, 2016). NDTV hosted its own twenty-minute segment with Karan Johar and Tanmay Bhat, who were both part of the Comedy Roast, and posed the question, "Are we a republic of hurt sentiments?"

Politicians meanwhile took the opportunity to articulate different visions of state and national pride and claimed the reputations of two Indian legends was at stake. Maharashtra Navnirman Sena Chief Raj Thackeray, for instance, filed a First Information Report with the police, and sought to appropriate and characterize the matter as pertinent to Marathi pride, viewing both Mangeshkar and Tendulkar as Marathi icons carrying national, even international, stature. The Shiv Sena labeled (Pillai, 2016) Bhat and his group, All India Bakchod, as "mentally deranged." The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party lodged a complaint with the police for its part, and the Mumbai police explored the possibility of reaching out to YouTube and Google to have the video banned (Mehta, 2016). Thackeray's fellow party member Ameya Kopekar went to the extent of making explicit physical threats against Bhat, saying, "Forgiveness won't do, these people should

be caught on the road and beaten up. We will protest and he won't be able to come out on the road. We won't let his shows happen anymore."

"Our political leaders think the solution is violence," writes Lipi Mehta (2016). "Step 1: Threat | Step 2: Violence | Step 3: Curb freedom of speech | Step 4: 'Protect' the nation like a boss. And if you're wondering how 'insulting' someone is freedom of speech, just to remind you: a ton of hate speech exists online and nobody seems to be wondering how that's even a thing."

Pooja Pillai (2016), arguing that the reaction to Tanmay's Snapchat video shows that "Indians have a long way to go before behaving like rational adults," writes:

The jokes may be in poor taste but how exactly do they affect Tendulkar and Mangeshkar? Neither of them is likely to be defamed by these jokes or suffer any loss, financial. People might lose respect for Bhat instead – as many claim they already have – but no one will lose respect for Tendulkar or Mangeshkar, at least not because of this one rather unfunny funny video. So why the hullabaloo? If anything, this controversy is yet another indication of the herd mentality in our online lives... One person expresses disproportionate anger over something trivial and everyone else quickly jumps onto the bandwagon, trolling and bullying the author of the supposed outrage. Politicians, who are supposed to address real issues like sanitation and infrastructure, are quick to latch on to the furiously lashing tail of this public anger and initiate legalised harassment in the form of police complaints and FIRs because they have rightly identified sustained social media outrage as the best form of publicity.

Comedian Sorabh Pant responded to the controversy (FP Staff, 2016) by saying, "This kind of reaction has just gotten boring now. It was off something he did on Snapchat. Snapchat! That's what people are getting worked up about. Frankly, I haven't seen the video because, I'm so exhausted with the outrage. I have others things to do. Obviously, most Indian political parties don't. They're just looking to find the moral high ground on any issue — just so they can pretend they have ethics."

All of this echoes concerns about India's absurd outrage culture raised in Jaideep Varma's documentary about the Indian stand-up comedy circuit, titled 'I am Offended,' which I discussed in Chapter 2, which outlines Mumbai's stand-up scene. As Lipi Mehta (Mehta L. , 2016) points out:

"Is this really that big a deal that the Mumbai Police's cyber cell has approached Google, Facebook and YouTube to take down the 'controversial video'? Clearly, the cyber cell has better things to do (or so we'd hope!). And what is with us being so outraged when two of our 'cultural icons' are 'insulted' but we don't see such outrage when Yogi Adityanath says *really* scary shit like how Muslims' voting rights should be snatched, and how (kid you not) dead Muslim women should be raped? What about when Babu Bajrangi said he felt like "Maharana Pratap after killing Muslims" and boasted about killing pregnant women? Was the cyber cell called to take these videos down?"

One of the things frustrating many commentators and producers and consumers of stand-up comedy is how it is perhaps emblematic of our times that the a non-issue like the Tanmay Bhat Snapchat controversy has transmuted into a political flashpoint and managed to hijack cultural reporting for so many months at a stretch. While Sachin Tendulkar has remained silent on the matter, one media outlet gleefully quoted Lata Mangeshkar as saying she had no idea who Tanmay Bhat was (DNA Web Team, 2016), suggesting that a relatively unknown like Bhat had been shown his place by the legendary musical presence. Elsewhere (TNN, 2017), Mangeshkar was also reported to have said: "I don't like the idea of people getting hassled because of me. I want to assure all my well-wishers that these (spoofs, etc) are very small matters. There are far greater issues in life. We must not give undue importance to those who thrive on maligning people. I am sure they have their reasons for doing what they do."

While those in the Bollywood fraternity like actors Anupam Kher, Riteish Deshmukh and Celina Jaitley were offended on Mangeshkar's behalf by Tanmay Bhat's perceived idiocy (Storypickers, 2016) and made their views clear on Twitter, many fans of standup took to the social media site to express the view that the matter was being blown out of proportion. Kunal with the handle @kunalmajumder pointed out, "The thing with censorship — more people have watched @thetanmay mocking Lata Mangeshkar and Sachin Tendulkar than before :)" He emphasizes the point that controversy draws needless attention to an act of humiliation, although he doesn't factor in the likelihood that political parties like MNS are out to strengthen their brand at the expense of Mangeshkar and Tendulkar by advertising news of their perceived degradation; it being almost secondary to their interests to debate if these two cultural icons are, in any legal sense, being defamed in the process. "This country needs a 'hosh mein aao!!' button," wrote wastrelette, while my interview subject, Suprateek Chatterjee, former Features editor of Huffington Post India, took to Twitter to say, "Guys, seriously. The world doesn't need more reasons to laugh at us." Rega Jha, editor of BuzzFeed India, tweeted on the absurdity of the police wasting critical time on such matters: "who else feels suuuuper protected by a Cyber Crime Cell that's currently contacting Google to take a Snapchat video off Facebook?"

Observes Tejas Mehta (2016), "The video "triggered far more outrage than deserved by 'nonsense.'" The debate proved enervating and has discouraged and defused tentative efforts made by Mumbai's comedy circuit to engage proactively with the political landscape. But is it stand-up's responsibility to necessarily articulate views on

electoral politics? Is there some moral imperative encouraging stand-ups to play the role of Gramscian grassroots intellectuals inspiring the masses towards some kind of hegemonic inversion? This isn't necessarily playing devil's advocate; it's a fair question. AIBs Gursimran Khamba believes, "It's important to take the horse to the pond but not force it to drink the water;" preferring to highlight how voting is 'cool,' rather than necessarily denigrating any individual politician. Comics like Sapan Verma think it is important that stand-ups not forget that entertaining audiences remains their *raison d'être*; "Lecturing a crowd is counterproductive because they'll disengage quite quickly and they won't listen to you no matter how good your message is."

Many of the comedians I spoke to have long believed that basing entire routines on edgy, political material is simply not worth the energy expended if it's going to land them in hot water, although Indian English language stand-up comedy stalwarts like Anuvab Pal and Daniel Fernandes have long worked with themes that are at least tangential to the political sphere, if not centrally dealing with Indian political realities. But comics like Fernandes and Sundeep Rao and Jeevesh Ahluwalia believe that while politics and religion are two of the deepest subjects worth mining in comedy, that truism doesn't apply in the Indian case. Ahluwalia was reported (IANS, 2016) as saying, "I don't think that a large part of the audience is biased... the reaction is such a volatile reaction that everybody on stage gets so scared that they don't want to touch that arena altogether. That is why you don't have many people doing it, or they do it in a fashion that they play around with. They don't want to push that envelope very, very far." As I discuss in the

next segment, stand-up comedy will have to face down moral policing if it is to articulate the right to free speech.

5.4 A SYSTEMATIC CULTURE OF CENSORSHIP AND 'MORAL POLICING'

India is not a police state; yet selective moral policing in India is not a new phenomenon, and is tied inextricably to articulations of censorship and representation in several historical moments, from the Indira Gandhi-imposed Emergency period of 1975-1977 to more recent times. 'Moral policing' refers to the idea that social and political inhibitors have been put in place either by society or the state apparatus to prevent the so-called moral corruption of the population. An obvious example in India would be the enforcement of the 2015 national ban on pornography; a less overt yet no less repressive example would be that of the violent response including throwing eggs and tomatoes at the car of Tamil film actress Khushboo, who had proclaimed that women having pre-marital sex was acceptable (Verma S. , 2015). 23 defamation cases were filed against her, which were all subsequently dropped. In another serious case, a Muslim man was stripped and beaten by a mob of suspected Bajrang Dal political activists for having dated a Hindu woman (Bahuguna, 2015). Other systematic acts of moral policing involve squads of cops, both plain-clothed and uniformed, seeking to prevent men from loitering near women in the state of Uttar Pradesh, which a British journalist (Smith, 2017) refers to as a "Taliban-like" act; meanwhile, in the state of Gujarat, cow slaughter is now punishable by a term of life imprisonment (ostensibly because cows are regarded as 'holy' to Hindus).

The prime instigators of moral policing aren't always political parties in search of the next controversy that could win them more votes. College principals and bureaucrats have in the past exercised a measure of authority in trying to police events ranging from college cultural festivals to what students wear. In my own college, St. Xavier's, for instance, women were forbidden from wearing the color 'red,' because the Jesuit principal at the time believed that the color red stoked young men's lust. Aside from that, several women's organizations have sought to make moral judgments; Mahila Mandals as they are known, have in many instances launched protests against nude modeling in advertisements, as in the Madhu Sapre-Milind Soman case, the Pooja Bhatt body painting photo scandal and the Mamta Kulkarni magazine cover scandal (Olivera, 2005). In other cases, books ranging from Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* and historical volumes challenging the status quo interpretation of establishment political figures (PTI, 2016) have been banned. Dozens of these have been banned over the years by the Indian government on account of fears that the material would provoke religious or moral tensions (Tripathi, 2011).

It is however generally true that political parties benefit most in terms of media coverage and visibility from moral policing; they are usually the most motivated factions behind driving these forms of censorship. The Shiv Sena has made such cultural interventions (Jain & Raval, 1998) since the 1970s before the outfit was an electable political formation, attacking targets that "didn't suit traditional Maharashtrian views"; Bal Thackeray, its charismatic leader over four decades, finding such tactics politically expedient, only needed to tweak targets to set off controversy and raise his party's profile.

In the mid-to-late 1990s, when the Shiv Sena was (for the first and so far only time) in power in Mumbai, the culture minister, Pramod Navalkar, gained notoriety and, according to The Times of India, was even "synonymous with the term 'moral policing' (Olivera, 2005). Navalkar, according to scholars (Thakurta & Raghuraman, 2008), had "earned a dubious reputation for moral policing, raving and ranting against young couples dating and pubs." Navalkar also threw a fuss when the Channel V Video Jockeys Marc Robinson and Sophia Haque kissed on stage during a Savage Garden pop concert in Mumbai (Jain & Raval, 1998). The late Shiv Sainik politician was quoted as saying the Kamasutra is for married couples (Wax, 2007); his party has repeatedly made the anti-globalization argument that Valentine's Day is not for Indians to celebrate because it goes against Indian culture. It has organized right-wing mobs to commit acts of vandalism and disrupt couples celebrating the occasion.

The right-wing militant extremist youth wing of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Bajrang Dal, which tried to re-articulate Valentine's Day in 2015 as "Mother-Father" day, went on in 2016 to draw attention to Indian freedom movement figures such as Bhagat Singh, hanged for the murder of a British officer. Reportedly, the Bajrang Dal President, Rajesh Pandey, wanted to wean away youngsters from Western influences; the Times of India (Jaiswal, 2016) quoted him as saying, "Our youth must be nationalist rather than blindly following foreign culture." According to the same article, Bajrang Dal activists threatened to drag lovers to Arya Samaj temples "for summary marriages." Previously, the Bajrang Dal had vandalized the apartment of the internationally known painter, M.F.

Husain for depicting religious and mythological figures in the nude; several activists also destroyed some of Husain's work in Ahmedabad (Jain & Raval, 1998).

Similarly, the extremist Hindu right-wing group known as The Hindu Mahasabha has sought, as recently as 2015, to intervene when couples express their love for each other on social media or elsewhere and get them married (Sharma S. , 2015), although such efforts have been met with withering contempt on social media.

Sahana Udupa (2015) recounts the ruptures that arose in 2009 after conservative Sri Ram Sene activists in the Southern city of Mangalore unilaterally deemed the presence of women in pubs as against local and Indian culture, and committed acts of violence against those female drinkers, dragging them outside and issuing beatings, while emphasizing their right to rid India of such 'social evils.' Udupa contrasts the right-wing activism against ferocious liberal protests that reiterated the right of women to drink and dance. The protests against Sri Ram Sene activists took on a satirical tone through a Facebook group called the Pink Chaddi (pink underwear) movement; this group of Bangalore-based female activists, calling themselves a 'Consortium of Pub-going, Loose and Forward Women' urged women to send pink underwear to the head of the Rama Sene on Valentine's Day — a clever subversion of the 'brown chaddis (or brown shorts)' that members of the right-wing Rashtriya Swayam Sevak wear as a part of their uniform.

"What intrigued me was the hesitation of a large section of the Kannada news media and a section of the English-language media to embrace the 'liberal' narrative of prominent English-language dailies aggressively defending the rights of the partying youth and the *Pink Chaddi* campaigners. For the English-language newspapers toeing the line of liberalism, the attacks symbolized a formidable barrier to the country's onward march in the global marketplace and the very

promise of 'New India' and 'global-cosmopolitan Bangalore.' The liberal discourse around women's rights symbolized the 'youth spirit,' when ideologies of liberty and liberation were conflated with those of economic liberalization. For many Kannada journalists, it not only embodied a threat to their local cultural autonomy but it also reinforced their discomfort with the growing commercialization of news and the discourses of urban modernity peddled by the 'new-age' English-language newspapers launched or re-launched in the years of economic reforms.

The English-Kannada binary was then not just a simple difference in news content and news frames, although this difference itself was highly uneven. It signified a larger tension in the semiotic economies of the news media, and how they intersected with urban politics. Nowhere was this binary more apparent than in the journalists' narratives and the ways in which they related to the transforming city and to each other. How do we understand these tensions of a news field and the multiple struggles over the city they instigate?"

Organizations like Sri Rama Sene seem to be articulating the strategy that in a country where women routinely worry about the threat of rape and 95% of the female population has reported feeling tremendously unsafe (Chowdhury & Nandi, 2013), it's best that women ought to cover up, and not engage in promiscuous activity, lest such behavior encourage the country's potential rapists. This is of course ignoring the implicitly paternalistic nature of the advice, manifesting at its worst in the public humiliation of women who are merely expressing the wish to spend time alone with a man.

But political outfits are beginning to acknowledge that such lines of thinking are anachronistic, which is perhaps why in 2016, both the Bajrang Dal and the Shiv Sena issued strict instructions that the cadres weren't allowed to harass young couples (Verma L. , 2016). Aditya Thackeray, the increasingly influential grandson of Bal Thackeray and

head of Yuva Sena, the Shiv Sena's youth wing — who incidentally graduated from my college, St. Xavier's, Mumbai, a few year ago — was reportedly behind the directive to party members to desist from this common form of harassment.

The Bajrang Dal's language however remained a lot more antagonistic; a senior party functionary was quoted (Verma L. , 2016) as saying, "the acts that couples indulge in" in public spaces on Valentine's Day was "similar to the nature of animals," and that interfering with them was useless. "It has been decided at the top level of the organization that our workers will not disturb any couple any more," the functionary, Surendra Mishra said, while another, Rakesh Verma confirmed that the organization remained steadfastly against Western culture, but that the party workers' protest would be directed at torching Valentine's Day cards; there would be "no misbehavior with any couple."

The Uttar Pradesh state tourism department took official sanction of Valentine's Day further than ever before, by announcing in 2016 that it would henceforth be marking State Tourism Day on February 14, a year after the then-Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, the rather youthful-seeming Akhilesh Yadav, was photographed with his wife at the Taj Mahal in Agra, perched on what is commonly called Lover's Seat with the monument in the backdrop; Yadav had then proceeded to encourage youth to celebrate Valentine's Day as Taj day (Joshi, 2015) — a very different and politically savvy tactic to reclaim and reconcile Valentine's Day and make it more 'Indian.' Then in an almost satirical twist, two political parties — the MNS and BJP, found themselves bickering for credit in 2017 after the Maharashtra Navnirman Party had originally set up a 'selfie' booth the previous year but ran out of funds. When a local corporator announced his decision to pull the plug, he

was overruled by his party chief, Raj Thackeray (nephew of Bal Thackeray, who quit the Shiv Sena to start his own party); but in the interim the BJP promised to make improvements and create its own spot, festooned with decorations, where couples could take selfies (Karangutkar, 2017); there were, according to the same Mid Day piece, even rumors of the Shiv Sena wanting in on the fun and setting up its own selfie point.

These developments mark a new line of thinking where in order to capture youth votes, politicians are having to pivot towards accepting what often used to be marked out as an occasion for mindless aping of Western traditions. Episodes such as this are ripe for satirical mining. As one newspaper editorial observes (Hindustan Times, 2017), the ‘progressive’ twist has been brought about by a political compulsion and a race among political parties to capture the youth demographic: "The Shiv Sena wants to wrest back the ground it has conceded to Raj Thackeray’s MNS in terms of young voters, particularly since elections for the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation are just days away. That’s the message its youth wing head Aditya Thackeray could have been sending out when he condemned harassment of couples on Valentine’s Day last year. Being pro-youth does create the right optics for today’s politicians."

5.5 MINORITY POLITICS IN THE MODI ERA

While political parties of all hues — but especially the ones that previously attacked symbols such as Valentine's Day as Western propaganda — are now seeking to placate, woo and operationalize the younger demographic as effective voters, there

appears to be no effort on the part of right wing parties to reach out to other kinds of minorities.

Harsh Mander (2017) writes, "In these troubled times, the world's two largest democracies – India and the US – are increasingly becoming hostile, threatening places for people with Muslim names... With Trump's openly bigoted anti-minority stances, there is today a much more permissive environment for countries like India to also follow Muslim-baiting strategies more openly." Mander, a former civil servant and now activist, offers interesting contrasts and parallels between what he perceives as currently happening in India and the US with regards to minorities:

"We have often heard of the frog who when thrown into a pot of boiling water, reacts immediately by jumping out. If the frog is placed into lukewarm water, which is slowly heated, it does not react or resist even as the water gradually boils, and the frog ultimately dies. Zoologists today contest the science of this experiment, but as a metaphor, it vividly illustrates the difference between what is unfolding against Muslim minorities in the US and India. Trump, with his brash inexperience, threw the frog into boiling water. The cruelty and injustice were clearly visible to the world, and the frog also reacted. In India, the process is much more akin to a slow but lethal raising of temperatures, through countrywide cow vigilante attacks, campaigns against religious conversion, communal election rhetoric, and the demonising of Muslims as terrorists, sexual predators, serial divorcees and irresponsible breeders. Observers are unable to comprehend the enormity of the assault. The frog – for us, the democratic rights to equality and freedom of Muslim minorities in both countries – is gradually being boiled alive."

Another researcher (Thomas, 2015) draws on her doctoral research to offer a case study that points to a forced re-articulation of Muslim identity. She identifies Juhapura, a neighborhood in Ahmedabad, the capital of Gujarat — which incidentally happens to be Prime Minister Narendra Modi's home state, where he was chief minister for well over a decade — as "perhaps India's only true ghetto, a place where involuntary resettlement,

spatial confinement and the denial of public services have produced a unique economy and culture of exclusion and disenfranchisement. Thomas concludes:

"Economic integration is not first and foremost seen as a means to satisfy personal enrichment needs, but rather, in reality, as the insurance needed to stay alive. This feeling is a challenge to the very foundations of the Indian state as the 'ethnicisation' of citizenship involves assigning a greater value to economic integration than to the formal rights supposedly guaranteed by the fact of being an Indian citizen."

As Modi's party, the BJP, consolidates its power nationwide through electoral victories in states like Uttar Pradesh, Muslims are increasingly feeling threatened. Right wing affiliates feels more confident in their identity as cultural police; they feel the election results give them the legitimacy to control minorities as they see fit. In Uttar Pradesh's Jianagla village, whose population includes some 2000 Hindus and 200 Muslims (Huffpost Staff, 2017), just a few days after the BJP won a significant and overwhelming victory in the March 2017 state assembly elections nabbing over 80 per cent of the seats, posters began appearing asking Muslim residents to leave immediately (Rai P. , 2017). The posters, scripted in Hindi, threatened Muslims with "dire consequences" and — speaking to Mander's point — claimed that with the BJP in power at the state level, "Hindus would do what US President Donald Trump was doing to Muslims in that country."

Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay (2017) observes that the BJP did not feel politically compelled to put up a single Muslim candidate in the election despite 19 per cent of the state's population identifying as Muslims, and goes on to write, "India is under the grasp of a majoritarian idea, and while constitutional rights remain, social isolation is

worrying." His argument is that the unprecedented mandate for Prime Minister Modi in the aftermath of the Uttar Pradesh election has further reduced the country's Muslim population to irrelevance.

5.6 A 'CIRCUIT OF COOL' AND THE PERMEABLE BOUNDARIES OF STAND-UP'S POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Mumbai's stand-up comedians have expressed outspoken views in clubs and at other venues on gender politics and the state of popular culture; they have occasionally even treaded on safe political ground by making fun of the soft-spoken politician Manmohan Singh. For at least a year, many comics, from East India Comedy's Sorabh Pant to All India Bakchod's Rohan Joshi, introduced in their material some offhand variant on the idea that the then-Prime Minister of India was reclusive and spoke so softly that it was often difficult to hear what he had to say.

The comic Aditi Mittal told me that Manmohan Singh was a soft target. "Nobody thinks the Congress Party is going to come after a comic for mocking Manmohan Singh. He doesn't inspire that kind of loyalty. He's not some dictator-type. There's no cult of personality surrounding him. He's like a bureaucrat... quite invisible, can barely hear him. Even Rahul Gandhi [son and heir of the assassinated former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and the current President of the Congress Party, Sonia Gandhi] is quite easy to mock, na, because he's never been in power and also because he was born with a silver spoon in his mouth. That is just begging to be made fun of."

To return to the AIB Nayak 2 video, it is a strong example of how stand-up comedians could rearticulate the public's engagement with politics, in a positive, entertaining yet informative way. Suprateek Chatterjee, a journalist and stand-up fan who was working as the Entertainment Editor for Huffington Post India when I interviewed him, echoes Aditi Mittal's opinion when he told me, "Stand-up comedy goes beyond the education system which taught us to think conventionally. Stand-up pushes us to question, to challenge, old ideologies, old ways of thinking. It forces us to think for ourselves... we must confront ideas, not just digest them. I'd say for many urban people it's a new kind of thinking."

Aswin Punathambekar (2015) gives that line of thought a twist, in writing:

"However, our critical perspective, trained to discern the limits and dangers of a decidedly corporate-minded middle-class activism in the political realm, does not adequately recognize how changes in media culture—in particular, the intertextuality that defines digital media culture—have transformed spatial and temporal ties between daily life and politics.

Instead of arguing endlessly about whether popular culture can serve as a staging ground or a terrain for learning and practicing skills that can then, in some stagist fashion, be applied in the realm of formal politics, another way to think about “entertaining politics” is to ask, “How do people entertain political matters?” To pose the question this way is to wonder how talk about political matters gets woven into the rhythms of everyday mediatized lives."

It's about striking a balance. Mumbai's stand-up comedians have shown a sense of purpose in critiquing gender imbalance and other issues related to cultural politics and "the rhythms of everyday mediatized lives." But in all the comedy club and large venue shows I watched, it is an undeniable fact that few comics were prepared to make jokes

about Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Rama Lakshmi writes in *The Washington Post* (Lakshmi, 2014), "Cracking wise about Narendra Modi is risky, not just because of the Hindu nationalist leader's tough, no-nonsense reputation — and his followers' sometimes ferocious devotion — but also because of his sky-high popularity."

Just as there is a reluctance on the part of comics to take on the incumbent Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the BJP government at the center, there is a similar disinclination closer to Mumbai, in taking on shady political figures such as Raj Thackeray whose Maharashtra Navnirman Sena is notorious for "holding Mumbai to ransom" through threats, intimidation and violence (Pathak & Khan, 2016). The same applies to now-deceased, once-notoriously powerful leaders whose specters continue to guide their respective parties; so no jokes about Shiv Sena's Bal Thackeray, AIADMK's J. Jayalalithaa or the Congress Party's Indira Gandhi, a female Prime Minister with authoritarian tendencies responsible for the troubled period of Indian history between 1975 and 1977 known as the Emergency. It could be argued that those last three names are no longer politically relevant, but as Aditi Mittal says: "Many comedians sometimes think, why take a risk when so much material is out there that's not necessarily controversial but still funny?"

This could be viewed as a pragmatic line of thinking at best, and an abdication of social responsibility at worst, but the truth must lie somewhere in between; comedians such as Aditi and Abish Mathew feel stand-up comedy is playing its cards right by focusing on building and sustaining good-will, which will go a long way in helping the scene put up a united front and withstand any backlash when stand-ups gain a stronger

voice and inevitably choose to pick fights with what Aditi called, "those who arrogantly adopt positions of moral, social and political superiority."

To be fair, comics are hesitant to touch any material that could potentially cause trouble for Mumbai's stand-up scene to survive. Sometimes, what the consumer of comedy proposes; the producer disposes: comic Daniel Fernandes, known for his easy-going riffs on Goan Catholics interspersed between pro-women and other culturally significant material, for instance shot down Twitter user Madhur Mahna's request that he do jokes about Muslims, with an incredulous, "Muslim jokes? Are you crazy? Why would I ever do Muslim jokes? (Fernandes, 2016)" It's unclear whether the user meant addressing Islamic themes. While Muslims might be an easy target, given their isolation and marginalization in Narendra Modi's India, and Daniel might simply have been following one of comedy's central tenets — "punch up, never down," as articulated in interviews with me by comedians like Aditi Mittal and AIB's Tanmay Bhat — it is obvious that jokes about Islamic extremism, ISIS and Muslims could also draw unnecessary attention and generate controversies that might undermine the city's comedy scene. "Better to avoid at this stage," was the sentiment expressed by several comedians. (Aditi in particular was at the time working on her own, without recourse to the support of any comedy group, although of course Mumbai's comedy scene has been remarkably protective of its own.)

Consequently, most stand-up comedy shows stick to poking fun at regional differences, accents, marital issues and families (Pandey, 2015). In a magazine article (Mittal, 2015), Aditi makes the tangential point that audiences are not always receptive to

comedy when it offends certain sensibilities: "We Indians have an iffy record when it comes to having a sense of humour. We are accused of having none — the past few months have reminded us that we will muzzle a joke while hate speech flows from the mouths of politicians."

When All India Bakchod came out in November 2016 with an unprecedented, season's worth of political satire for primetime television on Star Plus and Star World channels, Rajyasree Sen (2015) pointed out that AIB was being careful as though it had been advised to tread gingerly. "There were absolutely no BJP jokes and barely a couple of Congress mentions," Sen observed, explaining, "You don't make fun of the government in India. Ever. Whether it's the Congress or Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) or even Trinamool Congress. Our politicians don't like anyone laughing at them. And our entertainment and news channels, in deference to them and to wanting to stay on air, try not to make programmes which will offend them." On Air with AIB has so far tackled everything from whistleblowers to net neutrality, managing to stay politically engaged without necessarily stepping on the toes of India's political heavyweights. It is a huge step forward in English and Hindi language stand-up's evolution as an active participant in Indian democracy.

Tanmay Bhat explains what On Air with AIB is trying to achieve in an interview (Mishra & Nair, 2015):

"We were just looking at how young people were following the elections online, and we can definitely say that if it is done in a medium they are interested in, this is the most engaged that young people have been about issues ever. Not always healthily. A lot of it is just abuse from both sides. But even there, they will be trying and learning more about the issue in the centre, even if it is to strengthen

their argument. The ambition was never to change the mindset of people through this show. But we do our best to inform and entertain them in our way.”

The articulation of the production and regulation moments continues to throw up some interesting possibilities. Another influential stand-up troupe, Aisi Taisi Democracy, founded in 2014 and featuring the satirists Sanjay Rajoura, Varun Grover and musician-activist Rahul Ram from the well-known band Indian Ocean, is similarly filling the vacuum with a traveling stage show that dissects the constants and vicissitudes of the Indian polity. The group has grown famous enough to be featured on journalist Shekhar Gupta's influential TV programme, 'Walk the Talk' (NDTV, 2016). Translated literally, Aisi Taisi Democracy means 'democracy is screwed;' Anna MM Vetticad (2016) calls the group "arguably the most provocative and popular stand-up comedy collective among urban India's consumers of Hinglish entertainment." She writes: "Their USP is unapologetic socio-political satire and their commitment to being anti-establishment. And so from the concept of marriage to family, patriarchy, caste and religion, from Narendra Modi to the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty, the Bachchans, the Army and Jats, there are no holy cows for these three men."

I argue that although Mumbai's stand-up scene has erred on the side of caution in largely refusing to make the current Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi a target and has instead focused mainly on formulating a liberal stance on cultural politics, in the coming years it is likely that that will change, with explicitly political groups such as 'Aisi Taisi Democracy' already touring the country.

Founding member Rajoura says in an interview (Lakshmi, 2014), “I take my anger to the stage. I am angry because the last two decades of economic growth has only widened the social gap. Our inherent patriarchy is now compounded by this runaway capitalism.”

The trio has performed its mix of satirical jabs and song parodies at St. Andrews' Auditorium in Mumbai and several other cities all over India and even taken the show abroad to places like Dubai. At these shows, the performers plead with audiences not to upload any videos for fear of being targeted by "thin-skinned individuals who might then take legal action," writes Pronoti Datta (2015) in a review of Aisi Taisi Democracy's St. Andrews' gig from September 2015, adding the show "lampooned pretty much every farcical move made by Modi and his government, from the Prime Minister's monogrammed suit and his frequent foreign jaunts to the BJP's beef ban and their love for gigantic monuments." A typical joke runs like this: "Swachh Bharat is an oxymoron —" a reference to Narendra Modi's Clean India campaign "— Just like good Taliban. Just like intelligent Rahul Gandhi. Just like happy marriage." The group also makes fun of health fads, the younger generation's obsession with selfies and the ban on pornography in India. Rajoura launches a frontal assault on Narendra Modi's self-proclaimed 56-inch chest when he says during the performance, “For a right-wing party that is opposed to homosexuality, the BJP has been obsessing about one man's chest for months now.”

In a media interview (Ahmed, 2016), Varun Grover explained the kind of material they perform in their show: "We have a lot of topical material such as the current issue of chanting Bharat Mata Ki Jai [a controversy in which the President of the ruling BJP has

called for all Indians to chant the slogan or be labelled anti-national] and how it has become a test for patriotism; the drought situation in certain states and what the state governments are doing about it; and classic issues such as the behavior of corporate people who live abroad and raise kids with certain dogmas."

Rahul Ram, the musician with Aisi Taisi Democracy, who has a PhD in environmental toxicology from Cornell University and has participated in the Narmada Bachao Andolan movement, justifies stand-up's engagement with political matters as a complex articulation of the production moment, not simply with identity but also with the representation and the regulation moments (Pandey, 2015): "Comedy that relies on ethnic differences is limited and limiting. It's true that politics is a minefield but it's a never-ending source of inspiration. So I don't think we would ever run out of inspiration."

Mainstream English language comedians nonetheless face many problems in considering whether and how to address serious political questions, such as, for example, whether the hanging of Kashmiri separatist Afzal Guru, implicated and convicted in the 2001 attack on the Indian Parliament and the ensuing protest at Jawaharlal Nehru University where students chanted anti-national slogans were justified. Political scientist Pratap Bhanu Mehta (2016) pins down exactly what is problematic about what the Indian government is doing:

"It is using nationalism to crush constitutional patriotism, legal tyranny to crush dissent, political power to settle petty scores, and administrative power to destroy institutions... The government does not want to just crush dissent; it wants to crush thinking, as its repeated assaults on universities demonstrate... The BJP does not also understand one subtle point: that unless there is real and immediate violence involved, a democracy that cuts "anti-nationals" some slack is a robust

democracy. For the fact that even people who push the boundaries of expression are safe makes us all feel safe."

The BJP's framing of the freedom of speech debate as having to do with nationalism is something comedians ought naturally to dismantle. But few dare do this because taking on Narendra Modi in this climate is, as every comic I spoke to suggested, unfeasible, if not outright dangerous and akin to shooting oneself in the foot — and head.

Aisi Taisi Democracy have had to deal with accusations that their material stokes meaningless dissent and that controversies such as India's current intolerance debate are manufactured and have little basis in fact. This, despite the ominously fascist opinion expressed by those either in, or close, to the Indian government that those who express dissent are anti-national. Writes Harish C. Menon (2016), "Less than halfway through Modi's five-year term, there has been a surge in hyper-nationalism in India that deems any critical view of the government—its ideology or its actions—'anti-national.'"

Aisi Taisi Democracy co-founder Varun Grover's response, as Anna MM Vetticad (2016) notes, is that the evidence for this kind of ideological bullying is everywhere, even if it is "anecdotal." Vetticad gives context to this assertion by quoting Grover and connecting the rise of Aisi Taisi Democracy to selective bias exercised by the BJP's staunchest followers:

"I've been writing comedy since 2005," [Varun Grover] explains. "For the initial nine of these 11 years, UPA was in power in India, but at that time no one ever came to me and said, '*Yaar bahut brave ho tum, yeh jokes kar rahey ho.*' (You are very brave to crack such jokes.) Yet in the past two years, I've been told this every single week, '*Bahut dum hai tum mein*' (You have a lot of guts) or '*Itna panga kyun le rahey ho?*' (Why are you taking such risks?) I tell them, if at all this is a risk, then I've been taking this risk for 11 years now, yet in the first nine

years I did not get this feeling.” Coincidentally, ATD’s emergence as a group coincided precisely with Modi’s rise to power at the Centre. Their first show was in June 2014, the month after his swearing in. These 22 months have been marked by nationwide discussions on the suppression of free speech under this regime. During this period, ATD’s acidic humour has been aimed at pretty much all the country’s high-profile public figures, privileged communities and news developments. Yet, the heat they have directed at AAP, Arnab Goswami, Asaram Bapu, Baba Ramdev, big corporates, Congress and misogynists faking feminism, pales into insignificance in the minds of BJP followers who troll the group on the Internet for taking potshots at their party.

5.7 CONCLUSION

In this chapter I discuss how Mumbai's stand-up comedy scene, having made bold strides over the past couple of years in tackling issues central to Indian cultural politics, is increasingly engaging with the political sphere and the electoral process. This it has done for example by encouraging people to vote, satirizing softer politicians like Manmohan Singh and through creating viral videos that confer the status of 'cool' on a select group of politicians such as Arvind Kejriwal.

Mumbai's comedy scene may have found great success in addressing abstract social evils such as gender inequality but it has struggled to tackle ideologically divisive political figures with fiercely conservative moral-political agendas. There remains, as I demonstrate, a great reluctance on the part of many of Mumbai's comics to take on powerful politicians who trade on the cult of personality — figures such as Prime Minister Narendra Modi and MNS's Raj Thackeray remain difficult to criticize because their supporters make physical threats and use legal challenges to try and make life difficult at a practical level for comics. I show in this chapter how a nonsensical, over-the-top video from a comic like AIB's Tanmay Bhat has the potential to transform into a

juggernaut of bad media publicity drawing the ire of politicians that nonetheless manages to keep Mumbai's comics in the public eye for many months.

I discuss how such controversies deflect attention from systematic hate speech directed towards minorities — a regular practice adopted by different politicians, which some stand-up collectives like Aisi Taisi Democracy are cautiously beginning to explore as a potential theme. There is a long way to go before Mumbai's stand-up comedy scene can claim to have stepped up adequately as a whole to the political challenges facing Indian democracy (starting with the basic matter of freedom of expression in an ideologically repressive climate); but equally it is heartening to see groups like Aisi Taisi Democracy recognizing that there is a space to fill and showing the will to take on the might of regulatory authorities and political parties across the spectrum, especially those in power. Finally, I show that although Indian political parties across the board have sought to trivialize and pull the stand-up scene into meaningless disputes thereby undermining the latter's status in the public sphere as a serious mode of political dissent, some acts like Aisi Taisi Democracy and All India Bakchod (to an extent) among others are increasingly gaining traction in the media by successfully satirizing the pathetic state of political discourse in the country.

All in all, this is transformative in a cultural and generational sense, and a significant moment in Indian history. The 1980s, pre-liberalization era generation, given to cynicism about politics and corruption, has given way to a more optimistic millennial population that is participating more widely in political culture. The country's political culture has long been viewed as staid, with older male leaders generally dominating the

field, despite occasionally powerful female politicians like Indira Gandhi or her daughter-in-law, Sonia Gandhi taking charge of India. But stand-up's endorsement of figures like Kejriwal is helping rearticulate the public's perception of politics. Politics might still be widely derided as 'dirty,' but many of my respondents regarded participation as voters in elections as 'cool,' which is a seismic shift for India.

This degree of youth participation in the political sphere is unprecedented in India's recent history as a republic (BBC, 2014), and speaks to the larger point I am making in this dissertation about youth culture. Such an enthusiastic engagement with the political sphere bodes well for the future of Indian democracy. Stand-up's role in effecting this change is growing to be rather remarkable, given it's still a young and entirely bourgeois cultural entertainment medium in India. I'd go so far as to say it contributes to an altered sense of public culture. As Punathambekar (2015) observes, "in a conjuncture marked by a thoroughgoing takeover of news media by various corporate-political alliances, satire and parody have emerged as vital communicative forms for thinking and caring about politics."

Chapter 6. Conclusion

I have demonstrated through this dissertation on Mumbai's stand-up scene that there is no such independent thing as 'cool' existing in isolation as such, and in fact it is a series of meanings, "birthed," constructed and emergent through articulations between producers (involving both the stereotypical 'genius artist' and a more traditional bourgeois corporate setup), consumers and regulators, out of which, dynamic kinds of identity organically arise. I examine articulations of 'cool' in different moments by exploring controversies surrounding stand-up, and how the scene engages in general with questions of gender, cultural and electoral politics; perturbations in society and, other general ripples in the fabric, so to speak, In doing so, I map out a circuit of 'cool' in the context of 'glocalization' and 'habitus' — and this emerges as my theoretical contributions to the field.

During the course of my research I found that 'cool' is produced in Mumbai through a particular combination of certain kinds of audiences. In the context of consumption, it's critical to acknowledge who is left out of this process: I do not, for instance, talk about regional comics, while English language comics choose not to engage with material that would speak in transgressive ways to marginalized communities such as lower castes and Muslims in particular. Another aspect worth considering is that while access to the Internet is steadily increasing in India, especially through the use of cell phones, and aspirational Indian segments will be able to access English language content better, their participation has so far proven limited. Their appropriation as audiences will

influence the kind of content being produced, which will rearticulate the meaning of cool in other moments.

My dissertation, I reiterate, followed three main lines of argument:

1) Stand-up comedy in India went mainstream after the release of three milestone videos, all made by the increasingly influential, Mumbai-based comedy collective, All India Bakchod. Those videos in chronological order are: the September 2013 “It’s Your Fault” video, the Alia Bhatt ‘Genius of the year’ video from August 2014 and 'The Comedy Roast of Ranvir Singh and Arjun Kapoor.' The edited video, which received eight million hits on YouTube, courted an unprecedented level of controversy and brought Mumbai's comedy scene plenty of publicity and notoriety.

2) These viral videos drew on the cultural power of the Hindi film industry. Bollywood, by turn, an industry in the midst of its own reinvention, sees an opportunity to appeal to a new generation of fans. The articulation between stand-up comedy and the Hindi film industry is shaping into a symbiotic tie.

3) The city's stand-up comedy scene participates in the rearticulation of 'cool' and interacts in concrete ways with cultural and electoral politics. This has facilitated middle class audiences' engagement with the Indian public sphere in ways previously never encountered. Stand-up comedy makes it ‘cool’ for audiences to engage positively with the public sphere where citizens from previous generations felt thoroughly disconnected. Yet, while the stand-up scene has found great success in challenging normative ways of thinking about issues like women's rights, it has taken a more cautious route when it comes to satirizing Indian politics.

For several decades in India, it only made market sense to make films and TV shows in regional languages although English counts as one of the country's official national languages. A few half-hearted attempts were made to create shows in English in the midst of the cable TV revolution of the 1990s (eg. 'A Mouthful of Sky', circa 1995 for the state broadcaster, Doordarshan) but original content made in India for Indians has overwhelmingly been restricted to Hindi and the other regional languages. Part of the reason is that during the nascent years of the Internet explosion, English was not as widely spoken in the country except by the upper and educated middle classes, as it is now. Cultural proximity — the idea that audiences prefer media in one's own language — was another obvious factor. Game show hosts like Amitabh Bachchan in *Kaun Banega Crorepati* in the early 2000s acted as a bridge linking two language cultures, and occasionally sprinkled English in their banter but Hindi was usually the dominant channel of communication.

The larger effect was that Indian popular culture's hybrid expression through the 1990s and the early 2000s, before social media made its presence felt, was unsatisfying in its boundary-pushing to many Indian youth like me, who existed in an English-saturated bubble and longed for entertainment that was geared to speak to us. It was left to Western English language movie productions like *Monsoon Wedding* (2001) and *Bend it like Beckham* (2002) to fill that hole. We also took refuge in other media. The 2003 novel *Shantaram*, written by an Australian, Gregory David Roberts shed light on Mumbai's underworld, validated our sense of Indianness by showing us that our dark side was worth being written about, and spawned a genre that The New York Times labeled

'Bombay noir.' 2008s *Slumdog Millionaire*, an Anglo-American venture whose narrative was set in Mumbai featured Dev Patel playing an Indian character, whose English sounded absurdly British to my ear. And that was precisely the problem all along: Indian culture was at the mercy of the West; we weren't in control of our own stories, our identities and representations.

The only way that would happen was if Indian films were able to step up as an inclusive voice. Bollywood — the popular collective name for Hindi cinema productions — was granted industry status in 1998. Bollywood's main center of operation is Mumbai, on the Western coast of India. It is the country's dominant film industry, although many regional centers of movie-making are thriving. Bollywood's funding is sourced from a mix of private equity players and banks such as IDBI (Sinha, 2009). Since that era, mainstream, big budget Bollywood films have grown more glamorous and cosmopolitan; films like *Dhoom* (2004), *Krrish* (2006) and *Don* (2006) have spawned multiple sequels that target the urban multiplex crowd. Song and dance sequences aim to dazzle with the sheer complexity and professionalism of the choreography involved. Virtually any song routine featuring gifted dancing stars such as Hrithik Roshan, Katrina Kaif, Priyanka Chopra and Shahid Kapoor, and newer actors such as Tiger Shroff and Varun Dhawan, will grab the public's attention.

Since the Indian cable TV revolution of the early 1990s, domestic middle-class audiences have grown familiar with Western programming: particularly American series. Before that, during the late 1980s, the state broadcaster Doordarshan would transmit British comedy shows like *Yes Minister* and *Fawlty Towers*. My father was a fan of *Yes*

Minister and encouraged me to watch English rather than Hindi shows, demonstrating to me the significance of cultural capital and how being acquainted with English shows was viewed culturally as cooler, more prestigious. Then when I was a teenager, I learned that a favorite middle-aged aunt of mine who lived in Bangalore, another urban Indian center, was addicted to two shows: *The Bold and the Beautiful* and *Santa Barbara*. She was famous within the extended family for it. It seemed to intimidate some that my aunt preferred English shows to regional ones — more than once I heard it whispered that she was a 'show-off' — while other relatives saw it as a mark of upper class taste that she watched English language soap operas.

Among the younger generation of that era, *Friends* was perhaps the first American show that truly caught on in our imagination. But the true impact of *Friends* is measured by the idea that it may have triggered the rise of coffee shop culture in India. As one of my interview subjects, Nikhil, said to me in passing, as we enjoyed a beer on the lawns of the Press Club of India in Mumbai, the evening before we were supposed to attend a stand-up show featuring the Indian-Canadian comic Sugar Sammy: "Before *Friends*, who would have wanted to go out to a shop and pay Rs. 50 or 100 for a cup of coffee (about \$1-2, when coffee was previously available for one-fifth the price)? I think coffee shops became a viable business in India because, and only after, we all watched *Friends* and realized hanging out in cafes was a thing." He suggests "hanging out in cafes" as a moment of articulation between hybrid Indian identity and its representation in the media.

When I identified my research project in early 2012, English language stand-up in India was still an exotic cultural practice on the margins. I had almost made up my mind to contextualize Mumbai's stand-up scene in a subcultural theoretical framework. My project began as an ethnography of a subculture, but midway through, Mumbai's stand-up comedy scene exploded into the mainstream, as I've discussed in this dissertation, on the back of involvement of popular actors from the Hindi film industry. The transition from subculture to mainstream occurred as I was studying it and was in the middle of interviews. I had to adapt my argument quickly to recognize the fact that by engaging with cultural politics Mumbai's stand-up scene had found relevance.

The transition from subculture to mainstream is occurring at a time when the city itself is transforming, and growing to integrate suburbs differently. I was in my early thirties when I began collecting material for my dissertation. As a fully independent adult, my sense of Mumbai's geography has evolved. My generation has long resented the political decision in the 1990s to change the city's name from 'Bombay' to 'Mumbai;' but I found that that opinion has become unfashionable — as irrelevant as dinosaurs to mankind — and that today's college-going kids don't truly care to fight such battles: their concerns are different, and they have grown to embrace the contemporary name. With the introduction of the Eastern Freeway and alternate travel modes, often air-conditioned, such as the Metro and Uber, things are changing at a very physical level. Whereas in cities like New York, taking the Subway to get from point A to point B is relatively uncomplicated, traveling across Mumbai used to take hours, and constituted an adventure in and of itself, at the end of which one was likely to arrive in a sweaty mess. The

Comedy Store was a good hour and a half away; I needed to take a crowded suburban local with no air-conditioning to Wadala and then take a non-AC 'kaali peeli (black and yellow)' cab across Parsi Colony, over the flyover to the Palladium Mall in Lower Parel. (Uber hadn't yet tapped into the Mumbai market.) I would often arrive at The Comedy Store thoroughly drenched and grateful for the club's air-conditioning.

For me personally, it was a pleasure during the course of my research getting to explore parts of the city that I'd never truly known. While conducting research for my media ethnography, I stayed with my parents in Vashi, an Eastern suburb just outside Mumbai's city limits, for a few stretches of time, the longest of which lasted six months. I have a mixed relationship with Vashi. Vashi has changed parallel to Mumbai, with the rise of mall culture, but at some fundamental level, there's nothing 'hip' about it. Back in my late teens, the college I attended, St. Xavier's, had a reputation for 'cool,' and people like me were widely teased for living so far away from 'town' — the uppity, Southern part of the city (one of the themes that Mumbai's stand-up comics use to warm up crowds, as I discuss early on). Occasionally attending comedy performances in South Mumbai served to remind me how much I've missed historic eating joints like Tea Centre (permanently closed as of 2016, perhaps waiting to be resurrected out of a sense of nostalgia in another age?), and the old money vibe of 'town.' It became a way of recapturing my brushes, as someone who wanted to feel like an insider but was viewed by many as an outsider, with Mumbai's 'cool' culture. But now the Western suburbs of Bandra and Lower Parel were a revelation, with their mix of malls, hip bars and restaurants with world-class ambience (Pali Village Cafe became a particular favorite, which I aggressively introduced to my

modest, somewhat easily intimidated middle-class parents). Having returned from America, my origins in Vashi no longer bothered me so intensely as they once did. My project, it must be said, helped me make peace at long last with my drive to climb socially.

To return to my broader point, the physical development of Bandra and Lower Parel has resulted in a completely transformed entertainment landscape, most notably with The Comedy Store (now known as The Canvas Laugh Club) bringing stand-up to Mumbai (Akbar, 2009) and blueFrog functioning as a world class venue for live music for nine years. The latter however was forced to shut down in 2016 because its music model is arguably not independently sustainable (Shah, 2016)— though it's interesting to note that blueFrog sought to overcome its financial woes by hosting stand-up gigs. As far as the reformed Indian entertainment scene is concerned however, it seems apparent that the setback to the Indian indie music world has not registered as a crippling failure in the cultural consciousness.

Mumbai's comedy scene is growing, unimpeded by such setbacks. In fact, this year-long carnival has got so big, I expect future mappers of the comedy circuit will face challenges in inserting themselves effectively enough in the scene. Getting in touch with comics and convincing them to have a long chat with you is actually harder than one would think. This is especially true for lowly media anthropologists engaged in documenting Mumbai's stand-up scene. Fans of individual comics might even on occasion have better luck, especially when connecting with content producers online. The cult of celebrity and the whiff of Bollywood adds to the aura of 'cool,' and with it comes

distance. Some like the in-demand Bollywood actor and comedian Vir Das, whom I reached out to several times after shows and on Whatsapp, didn't seem interested enough in a research project that wouldn't bring him widespread media attention. Some comics, both young and old, seemed to have short attention spans and couldn't focus long enough to make any real difference to my project. I also made the elementary error of approaching another top comedian, Anuvab Pal (whose credits include writing for the classic American sitcom, *Frasier*), too early in the course of research. He granted me a couple of interviews but seemed uncomfortable with my open-ended questioning and expressed his preference for a specific discussion.

I ended up doing interviews lasting several hours with three or four of the comics — people like All India Bakchod's Gursimran Khamba; India's best-known female comic, Aditi Mittal; East India Comedy's Sapan Verma. I initially contacted Aditi in 2012 on social media through a common friend, after surprisingly finding it a challenge to directly connect with comics. At that stage, comedy was still a small field. Aditi, who likes to field-test jokes she's working on without people knowing she's trying variations of her material on them (and certainly did so all the time with me), put me in touch with a few others. I attended more than eighty shows, including performances by major comics like Vir Das, Mittal, All India Bakchod, Varun Grover, some of whom I came to rely on heavily as interpreters of Mumbai's culture of 'cool.' I hung out in green rooms with comedians as they watched performances on a small television screen before walking out to perform themselves.

Jealousy and rivalries stay hidden for the most part, although I did hear comics in one-on-one interviews mock others for their material's ideological underpinnings and pass it off as a joke. While one or two comics griped about how some of a Delhi-based stand-up superstar's material was plagiarized, Mumbai's scene presents a relatively united front. In one of the more serious cases of a fracture, one of the female comics I interviewed accused a well-known comedian of sexual harassment. On the whole I found Mumbai's comedy scene to be tight-knit, though I anticipate that could change as the scene explodes in the mainstream with Netflix and Amazon Prime commissioning specials — the scene could grow divided between those who thrive financially and reputationally and those who don't, those whose image as 'cool' soars and those whose brands tank.

I sat in the front row on purpose and got picked on by several comics who didn't yet know me, I watched shows from the back row to watch audience reactions. I spoke to other cultural participants in this rearticulation of cool, including producers and behind-the-scenes figures. I sat in the producer's booth watching sound engineers modulate microphone volumes. Comedy audience members like the journalist Tunali Mukherjee and Anisha Sharma hooked me up with several other participants in this project. I attended an insiders' party in the course of my ethnographic investigation which allowed me to meet some of Mumbai's coolest young people.

Along the way I committed some missteps; chief among them a series of actions several months into my research that led to a misunderstanding and breakdown in communication that nearly ended in a severing of ties with The Comedy Store. I had let

the owner Charlotte Ward know that I wanted to make audio recordings material on-site, but one of the managers was convinced I was doing this on behalf of a rival organization and temporarily confiscated my recorder until I smoothed things over with The Comedy Store's chief troubleshooter, Tom Course.

Circumstances changed, The Comedy Store itself changed hands. As my dissertation began to take shape, I began to focus more in any case on All India Bakchod's YouTube videos and how they became an entry point to study the interactions between various elements in moments. I settled on YouTube videos because they'd been produced by Mumbai stand-ups, and reached a much wider audience numbering in the millions, which automatically afforded English language stand-up comedy greater presence, making it culturally relevant and significant. My focus on slickly-produced media artifacts simultaneously freed me up from the need to exclusively focus on stage performance (and its mainstream media coverage). I was able to observe the interactions between producers and consumers not only at venues, but also trace their communication with each other online, and gain a deeper understanding of how representation and identity are continually constructed and reconstructed.

My theoretical framework derives from The Circuit of Culture to create a Circuit of 'Cool.' I found it to be a useful metaphor to capture the interrelated processes and articulations that arise from different moments. My Circuit of 'Cool' allows me to get a clearer sense and handle on how the cultural process of stand-up tangibly works. For instance, in the context of the Comedy Roast, one of the possible articulations leads us to examine the tensions arising between the creative and regulatory aspects of the process.

Another articulation of the representation and production moments gives us insights into how Bollywood superstar Shah Rukh Khan is using All India Bakchod's cachet of 'cool' to reinvent himself for a younger audience that has grown up knowing him as an actor beloved by their parents' generation.

While conducting interviews with producers, consumers, club owners and regulators in Mumbai over nearly two years, I discovered that the scene had expanded into a year-round carnival that was at once bourgeois in its appeal – commercialized and hailed in the English-language media as an entertainment medium distinct from Bollywood and theater – and distinctive enough from commercial Hindi cinema in its sensibility to satisfy a certain kind of audience that craved a product that appealed to their hybrid Westernized-Indian tastes. Stand-up has diversified to include other comedy formats such as improv, viral videos and talk shows. Abish Mathew's *Son of Abish* is shot at Canvas Laugh Club in front of a live audience. Concurrently there exists strong connections among Mumbai's English language stand-up scene, the mainstream Hindi film industry, and newer humor-oriented television talk shows like *Koffee with Karan* and *Comedy Nights with Kapil*, which support and sustain each other's presence in popular consciousness.

Like other creative artists, standup comedians are in the privileged position of being both consumers and producers of cultural artifacts. They are influenced to varying extents by other comedians working both in India and abroad in countries like America and Britain; also their sense of humor may have been shaped by their exposure to diverse elements such as sitcoms, novels and other media products. Because they are working

within the constraints of a business model, their work must inevitably be “regulated” (in the sense that du Gay et al. (1997) use the word), by a measure of corporate and social control, and they must consciously include hybrid elements which would speak directly to various segments in the audience at once. An especially interesting aspect to all of this is that comedians are in a constant tussle with their audience. They are accountable to actively participating viewers (who are themselves intensely familiar with the codes of comedy). A standup comedian who gets booed off the stage arguably experiences a more visceral sense of failure than say a sitcom writer. Notwithstanding all of this, their status as local arbiters of ‘cool’ affords them prestige and access to cultural capital.

It used to be a lot easier to dismiss English language stand-up comedy as an upper class fad that made no real social difference. During the exploratory phase of my project, when I was doing the rounds of comedy clubs, building rapport with comedians on the circuit like Kunal Rao and Sapan Verma, they were still establishing themselves. They were a minor presence. In our conversations, they'd get quickly defensive about English language stand-up's place in the city's entertainment culture. Comedians like Sapan and Anuvab Pal — nowadays two of the biggest, most famous acts in India — expressed minor anxiety when I was first getting to know them, over whether stand-up would fade the way pool parlors had over time during the 2000s after having emerged as the 'cool, new thing' during the 1990s. "I think stand-up is here to stay," an ultimately optimistic Sapan told me over a coffee in Mumbai's Palladium Mall, which hosts the Canvas Laugh Club (formerly The Comedy Store), the biggest and most prestigious comedy venue in the city.

English language stand-up comedy might be bourgeois entertainment in Mumbai, with comedians preaching to the choir, but with its wide coverage in the media, stand-up has gained relevance because it recognizes the importance of expressing an opinion on contemporary, vitally important socio-political issues. For instance, many Indians remain obsessed with skin color; and the Bollywood actor Shah Rukh Khan problematically endorsed a brand of skin fairness creams as recently as 2013. Elizabeth Segran (2013) observes, "Khan tosses a tube of fairness cream to a young fan, telling him that fairness is the secret to success in life... While racism runs deep in India's history, its roots intertwined with caste and colonialism, in today's India, it finds expression in consumer behavior and corporate advertising." Quite promptly, comedy groups such as Schitzengiggles have grabbed the opportunity to satirize fairness cream products. Schitzengiggles has a video that hawks 'Gore Gote' — a fake brand, purportedly India's Number 1 Testicular Fairness Cream (SnG Comedy, 2014).

Stand-up, as AIB's Gursimran Khamba told me, must resist getting appropriated by consumerist culture, or risk losing its freshness and, critically, its distinctive reputation for rebelliousness. While every comedian I spoke to hesitated to label their work as activist, and preferred to see what they did as pure entertainment, many like Gursimranjeet Khamba and Anuvab Pal accepted that their work, at its most successful, made audiences think significantly deeper about issues.

Yet, as I demonstrate in the previous chapter, comedy's rigorous and attention-grabbing engagement with Bollywood, gender equality and cultural politics has obscured the fact that in the era of the BJP government, Narendra Modi and the rising might of the

right, censorship presents a real test for Mumbai's stand-up scene in the coming years. The media is currently obsessing over inconsequential conflicts between stand-up comics like Tanmay Bhat and 'moral policing' regulators bent on teaching him a lesson for his part in the Comedy Roast and for disrespecting a couple of Indian cultural icons. Yet there is much Mumbai's stand-up comedy scene can do in terms of political engagement. Comedy can challenge the hegemonic order of things through satire's engagement with popular culture, which is why it is critical for political comedy in India to find its voice and articulate opposition to any kind of political excess.

In India, right wing political groups have long advocated a return to what they regard as 'Indian' values. Their aggressive posturing sets up a conflict not simply between old ways and new, between old media and new media, the global and the local, or even conservative and modern ideologies. Across India, vernacular media frames the debate differently from English media, and their concerns are very real and different; urban and rural distinctions are critical (Udupa, 2015). Class issues permeate through such conflicts, and access to cultural capital through the Internet complicates the landscape further.

My dissertation mainly discusses the work of Mumbai-based stand-up comics and those who have performed extensively in Mumbai; some of these, and others, have taken their shows on the road and found audiences across India the rest of the country, which is how The Comedy Store's Charlotte Ward envisioned it. Hinglish comedians who mix English and Hindi in their acts, and have one foot in the Mumbai scene, have met with great success, Aisi Taisi Democracy being the most prominent example. English

language stand-up's focus on gender issues is a great start, but comics have some catching up to do with their political material, if they are to remain consistently relevant. Now is not the time to hesitate, but as comics like Kunal Rao and Aditi Mittal reminded me, it is far more dangerous to life and liberty to make jokes about a powerful political figure like Mayawati in the somewhat lawless heartland of Uttar Pradesh, than to stand up and make jokes about her in Mumbai — and in Maharashtra comedians never underestimate the foolhardiness of mocking Raj Thackeray or Modi. "The difference is between being thrown in jail and losing your life," Rao observed dryly.

I am reluctant to generalize my findings regarding Mumbai's English language stand-up scene to the rest of India because the cultural conditions vary vastly and people speak hundreds of different languages. That said, the rapidly transforming Hindi film industry has made significant inroads all over the country, including even in the South where dubbed versions in regional languages are gaining in popularity (Srinivasan, 2015). And South Indian films like *Baahubali* and its sequel, *Baahubali 2* — now the most expensive and also the highest grossing Indian film franchise of all time (Bhushan, 2017) — are showcasing the increasing power of the South Indian film industries, which are so distinct from Bollywood (Hu, 2017). We live in times of cultural interpenetrability. Bollywood's unparalleled superstar for the ages, Amitabh Bachchan, feels films bring nations together (Press Trust of India, 2015).

Hindi language stand-up comedy, which lies entirely outside the purview of my dissertation, has gained a large independent following as well. Its biggest superstar, Raju Srivastava, has dabbled with political material (Headlines Today, 2012) but his

independence is questionable, given he has joined the BJP (Firstpost, 2014). Nevertheless Hindi stand-up's role in propagating a culture of 'cool' outside the major metropolitan cities is something worth considering.

Meanwhile, in South India, Evam used to be a major theater production company; sensing an opportunity, they've entered the comedy space in a big way (Nath, 2015). "Evam Stand-up Tamasha is an ideal ice breaker for product launches, corporate events, sales conferences and even weddings," the company's website (<http://www.evam.in/entertainment/est/>) proudly states. Comedy culture across the country is changing not just in the big cities, but in also tier-2 cities like Coimbatore where a strong comedy culture has taken root.

Compared to cinema, stand-up comedy might be a relatively young format in the country but already, comics are finding an audience across urban Indian cities and towns. More specifically, Mumbai's stand-up scene operates in a constantly changing media landscape, with new comedians performing new routines all the time. There is the risk that my dissertation will become quickly outdated. My ethnographic examination of Mumbai's stand-up comedy scene offers the context to further explore all the issues I have touched upon in my conclusion. Other scholars of media anthropology could pursue similar lines of investigation.

I conclude by once again engaging with the relevance of 'cool' as a research subject. I argue in different ways through the length of this dissertation that 'cool' is an extremely pertinent point of distinction between social and cultural classes that, notwithstanding structural limitations of one's habitus, is eminently bridgeable. Whereas

using financial markers to define the notion of a 'middle class' would prove restrictive, explorations of 'cool' while acknowledging those who get left out permits me to view cultural participation in an optimistic light. Besides, when producers and consumers feel able to define themselves as 'cool,' it breeds in them the desire and confidence to engage with culture more productively, potentially helping them in some small but significant way to achieve the financial, emotional and cultural validation that they seek.

Indian comics have found ways to glocalize stand-up, to appropriate and articulate this global format in local ways, without merely aping the West. They use stand-up comedy as a forum to both set the cultural agenda, and debate and contest meanings on a routine basis. This gives birth to a specific kind of public sphere that is capable of sustaining both profundity and nonsense in the same cultural moment. Even in cases like *The Comedy Roast*, I show the effect has been to shock Indian culture out of its stultified state and foster conversations, pressing together modern against old-fashioned, young versus old, the haves against the have-nots. The wheels are creaking into motion; there is no going back. India is transforming culturally in the era of social-digital media and in all of this, Mumbai's comedy culture — the epicenter of the burgeoning stand-up scene — is playing a small yet decisive part in rearticulating the meaning of 'cool.'

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