

Indian Women in Comedy: An Inquiry into the Perpetuation of Rape Culture on Social Media

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Introduction to Women in Comedy

The most common explanation offered for the justification of gender discrimination involves the utilisation of a supposedly established fact: men are governed by rationality while women, whom De Beauvoir rightly calls the “second sex” in cultural imagination, are suited to operate on emotions. Such manifestations of epistemic arrogance operate on power dynamics created in systems of cognitive authority to produce the privileged episteme as a site of normativity. It is imperative to reiterate the importance of women’s representation in knowledge systems for the comprehension of how women are known and perceived in the popular imagination.

Professional comedy aims to induce laughter by appealing to human emotion and subjectivity. Women are, however, largely denied representation in the field of comedy since it continues to remain a male-dominated profession where tokenism masks the need for gender diversity. In this paper, ‘women in comedy’ is a reference to women who perform stand-up, sketch, improv or alternate comedy; who create humorous content on social media platforms like Instagram; and who work in reality shows on television in traditionally comic roles.

Some popular women stand-up comics include Aditi Mittal, Neeti Palta, Sumukhi Suresh and Kaneez Surka. Vasu Primlani, a queer woman, is another example. Stand-up comedy competitions like *Comicstaan* and *Queens of Comedy* have popularised budding comics like Prashasti Singh, Sejal Bhat, Aishwarya Mohanraj, Urooj Ashfaq, Niveditha Prakasam and Saadiya Ali. Others who have emerged within the comic space include Agrima Joshua, Anu Menon, Punya Arora, Sumaira Shaikh and Jeeya Sethi.

Queens of Comedy was a televised show on TLC to give women comics a platform so that they could unearth their talent and build their audience in a male-dominated industry. TLC has about 161,000 subscribers on YouTube, but only a few hundred thousand views on the videos that feature the contestants of *Queens of Comedy*. In contrast, *Comicstaan*, which premiered on Amazon Prime, has become a household name. Amazon Prime has about 4.03 million subscribers, out of which there are over one million views on videos starring snippets of performances presented in the two seasons of *Comicstaan*.

The reception of the shows has varied due to several reasons, particularly the influence and commerciality of the platform on which they have been broadcast. The women-centred show has dissolved into digital insignificance because of the exponential increase in popularity of *Comicstaan* as a consequence of Amazon's digital marketing strategies and commercial reach. Noam Chomsky believes that mass media's emergence as an ideological institution enables it to carry forward a system-supportive propaganda function by relying on market forces, internalised assumptions, and self-censorship; which is why Amazon's position as a capitalist giant that mediates content and subsequently generates visibility has been critiqued for promoting male domination in the comedy industry, especially after it signed up about 14 male comedians from India for hour-long specials in 2017. The eventual recruitment of Sumukhi Suresh and Neeti Palta—whose standup specials premiered in 2019—can possibly be viewed as an outcome of severe backlash from media, especially after the release of Anupama Chopra's interview with prominent comedians for *Film Companion's* special show titled, "FC Adda."

Comics like Kaneez Surka, Prashasti Singh and Niveditha Prakasam have publicly expressed the burden of performing as a woman on stage. In 2020, in an interview with *The Telegraph*, Surka admits, "women comedians have to be twice as funny as men to be able to be judged as being good." Singh adds, in the same interview, "as a woman, you have to be very, very good to be able to win over your audience, and I say that from experience". Sumukhi Suresh and Supriya Joshi are tagged

in derogatory memes that target their physicality on social media. Suresh recently shared a post with the following comment: “Why don’t you just fucking lose some weight girl!!!!” Tanmay Bhat, in contrast, is not similarly trolled for his weight. Even the weight gain of male comedians like Kunal Kamra and Samay Raina has not produced equally vile comments.

Even Aditi Mittal has been “told” to regulate her appearance on stage because her projection of femininity can lead to her sexualisation and consequently divert attention from her performance. These instances illustrate how a famous woman’s physicality gets subjected to public scrutiny and makes her digital presence a breeding ground of negativity. The reduction of women’s worth in contemporary economic and political systems to their external appearance leads to the neglect of their professional abilities and consequently affects their advancement in their professional careers, which Naomi Wolf argues is a direct consequence of the beauty myth.

Standup comedy can, however, be viewed as a medium that enables women comics to deploy distinct modes of humour in order to challenge the pervasiveness of misogyny. Kaneez Surka, for instance, utilises dark humour to defy stereotypes that she encounters as a Muslim Gujarati woman born in South Africa. Her performance in the Amazon Prime sponsored “The Marvellous Ms Kaneez Surka” is a brilliant critique of matrimonial alliances in the comedy industry in India. Surka comments that her first name, which translates as ‘slave’ in Urdu, was in fact an appropriate choice because she was married to an Indian man for three years. Here, the focus is not on men or ‘Indian’ men, but rather on the fragility of social conventions and the consequences of such pretensions in the personal and professional lives of married women. Surka explains how her social surroundings increased her consciousness of the significance of marriage in a woman’s life. Her private experience of compromise is, however, an honest warning that proceeds to de-glamorise the unpaid, unappreciated, and—more importantly—undeserved labour that a wife is expected to perform. Her ‘recommendation’ of divorce is an outcry against the systematic inequality of socially sanctioned alliances, a mockery of the romanticisation of conjugal relationships and a denunciation of the stigma

associated with divorce. She claims that divorce can liberate women, since the people who constitute the society have no expectations of success from a divorced woman. A divorce can thus be read as a deliberate divorce from cultural norms that restrain, subjugate and silence the voices and desires of women. Surka ends the performance by asserting that though her name still translates as slave, she is now a slave for herself, thereby implying her commitment to her professional ambitions. Her pronouncement of the problems associated with what is widely called the ‘hustle culture’ in postmillennial parlance clarifies the common objections to the mischaracterisation of the history of slavery and secures her performance from problematic interpretations.

Similarly, Prashasti Singh’s performance in *Comicstaan* ridicules the glamour associated with emotionally unavailable men in heterosexual relationships. As she elaborates on an anecdote involving a millennial artist who conjectures that “responsibilities are dumb,” espouses that “capitalism is a conspiracy,” and firmly believes that “liberation starts with his man-bun;” the unusually prolonged involvement of deceit and pretensions in romantic relationships get exposed from an anti-patriarchal perspective that is rooted in the opposition of millennial masculinist ideals, particularly in the contemporary hook-up culture borrowed from the West. This also uncovers the deep-rooted misogyny that is masked under the garb of flamboyant displays of pretence, for it reminds one of the manners in which men brand themselves as saviours of oppressed communities to appear as viable, intellectual partners for women.

Women content creators whose work resides within the broader domain of comedy are also women in comedy. The phenomenon of content creation for entertainment and other purposes is a twenty-first century development due to the advancement of social media platforms like Instagram and YouTube. Prajakta Koli, Anisha Dixit, Kusha Kapila, Dolly Singh, Srishti Dixit, Sonali Bedi, Mallika Dua and Kareema Barry are demotic examples of women who can be discussed within this categorisation. The comment section of these content creators on Instagram and YouTube is rife with

memes, which, according to Jessica Reyman and Erika M. Sparby, perpetuate negative stereotypes against women and assimilate into violent groupthink and mob behaviour.

The output created by content creators extensively involves cross-dressing and the invocation of gender roles. Prajakta Koli, for instance, often creates and uploads videos on her YouTube channel that seek to reconstruct conversations and events in an Indian family. To increase relatability, she conforms to gender essentialism: Koli, thus, dresses up in a sari, styles her long hair in a braid, and wears a *bindi* to portray the nagging mother figure in her videos. For enacting the role of the brother-figure Monto, Koli instead wears a loose t-shirt and a wig with unkempt hair, and draws an amateur beard and moustache with some black pigment. The totality of the script, props and performance allows the act of cross-dressing to reconstruct the pervasive gender roles that reinstate conventional ideas of sexuality and gender.

Kusha Kapila's videos, in contrast, offer respite from gender conventions at times. While her reliance on the enactment of gender stems from the traditional approach to the creation of relatable and likeable content, her subversion of masculine ideals in Indian metropolises—particularly her denunciation of commonly used slangs and phrases—manages to emerge as a feminist rejoinder to the celebration of abusive language behaviour. In a recent Instagram post, as she conforms to the popular idea of postmillennial jargon and auditory inflection used by young women, she deploys sarcasm to mock the increasing glorification of single-hood that stems from one's failure to find a romantic partner: the approach bears semblance with postmodern stylistic techniques that enable the subversion of popular ideas by adopting and reconfiguring their manifestations.

Finally, the category of women in comedy also includes women who work in reality shows with traditionally comic roles or participate in comedy competitions. Some popular names in the industry include Bharti Singh, Sumona Chakravarti, Rochelle Rao, Sugandha Mishra, Aarti Kandpal and Rasbihari Gaur. Kandpal was one of the first women to have been selected for the *The Great Indian Laughter Challenge* in Season 3. The first two seasons did not feature a single woman or queer

person. Competitions like *The Great Indian Laughter Challenge* and *Comedy Circus* eventually paved the way for the emergence of reality shows where various artists performed sketch comedy.

Comedy Nights with Kapil is one of the foremost successful reality shows that infused sketch comedy with celebrity talk show. Out of twelve performers, the four women performers—Sumona Chakravarti, Upasana Singh, Roshni Chopra, and Sugandha Mishra—were included in supporting roles where their enactment of traditionally accepted stereotypes with femininity was encouraged as well as mocked. For instance, Chakravarti's characterisation as Manju Sharma, Bittu Sharma's wife, often became a comic opportunity to mock her emotional dependence and spousal need for validation. *The Kapil Sharma Show* is another successful stand-up comedy and talk show. Female sketch comedians, argues Yael Kohen in *We Killed*, are overshadowed by both stand-up comics and male counterparts. Chakravarti's role as an annoyingly persistent Sarla, for instance, reinforces popular stereotypes associated with femininity. Rochelle Rao's enactment of a woman called "Lottery Akela" leads to the exploitation of her body for the creation of a visual spectacle. That the female body itself becomes a means to achieve comic climax supports the supposition that women whose physical features are considered traditionally appealing are bound to be secondary tools for male performers in Indian comedy.

Popular standards of beauty get associated with Rao, which excludes other actors who either identify themselves as women or cross-dress as women for comic purposes. The stereotype that continues to dominate Indian television, *The Kapil Sharma Show* in particular, can be traced back to Wolf's theorisation of the beauty myth. Wolf claims that appearances, especially on television, emphasise visuality and other aspects of physicality, and impose on women a set of social codes. She adds that the media's obsession with 'whiteness' explains why women of colour are seldom portrayed as role models unless they have virtually Caucasian features. Beverly Johnson is a case in point. Wolf's thesis elaborates that beauty is a "currency system" that forces into action the reality of "colonised female consciousness" (18; 22). The ubiquity of cosmetics exploits women's guilt for

their pursuit of liberation by making them believe that objections to makeup are disproportionate to other fundamental feminist goals such as suffrage and equal pay. The show positions Rao as the epitome of beauty, compels its viewers to desire for the embodiment of her attractiveness, and creates a system of masculine institutional power. All women on *The Kapil Sharma Show* remain secondary characters that are unable to make substantial contribution to the realm of comedy. Women in comedy are, thus, typecast into standardised roles that restrain them from exploring their potentialities in the industry. In contrast, married characters like Kapil Sharma, who find themselves attracted to Rao, maintain the sociobiological assertions of innate male polygamy despite its refutation by anthropologists like Elaine Morgan and Evelyn Reed.

Further, the performativity of gender identity in occasional recreations of Bakhtin's carnivalesque in the show fails to challenge biological assumptions. Judith Butler avers that gender is not constituted coherently because its intersection with other modalities prevents its separation from "the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained" (41). Yet the show mirrors Prajakta Koli's adherence to gender essentialism and fails to utilise cross-dressing as a means to challenge political assumptions of gender.

A study in the UK exhibits gender imbalance in the representation of women in various comedic panels. India's comedy space, beginning with cinema, has also witnessed decades of male domination. For instance, famous comedy films in the 1990s including *Andaz Apna Apna* (1994), *Raja Babu* (1994), *Hero No. 1* (1997), *Judwaa* (1997), *Ishq* (1997) and *Dulhe Raja* (1998) only feature men in leading roles. Even the 2020 remake of the David Dhawan directorial *Coolie No. 1* casts the lead actress, Sara Ali Khan, as a secondary figure that enables the advancement of the conflict associated with the central masculine character. Actresses in Hindi cinema have generally been denied adequate representation in comic roles, which is perhaps a consequence of what Debashree Mukherjee calls "levels of embodied precarity across classes of female cine-workers" (33).

Polemics of Abuse on Social Media

The inauguration of social media platforms on the Internet has permanently shifted the mode, meaning, and quality of human interactions. Social media was earlier perceived as a tool of empowerment for feminist advocates since it was effectual in connecting them in local as well as global contexts. Visual and audio-visual content was actively posted across various platforms to enable women to fight sexism, sexual violence punctuated by gendered differences, and gender inequality. It allowed women from various geographical terrains to speak out against gender-based injustices and formulate a social movement to position feminist practices on digital media within contemporary postfeminist culture. But the digital space has now become another powerful agent that reinforces gender stereotypes and creates an unsafe platform for women.

In 2012, for instance, an Icelandic woman named Thorlaug Agustsdottir discovered a Facebook group that was titled “Men are better than women.” After locating the picture of a young woman whose naked body—bruised and bloody—was chained in what appeared to be a concrete basement, she wrote a Facebook post on her page in outrage. In the comment section of the post, she found an image of her face that had been graphically altered to appear bloody. The existence of the group aptly supports Christa Hodapp’s assertion that platforms like online blogs, message boards and social media enable men to connect and realise through “these connections that other men were [are] just as angry as they were [are]” (4).

An article by Catherine Buni and Soraya Chemaly reported that the post with Agustsdottir’s edited picture was populated with misogynistic comments, including “Women are like grass, they need to be beaten/cut regularly” and “You just need to be raped.” This is one example that illustrates how the barrage of violent threats directed against women on social media form an assault on their psychological bandwidth that further affects their digital freedom and mental health. That the

comment section itself became a masculinist utopia of trolling and spamming shows how online manifestations of the men's rights movement reject any possibility of constructive engagement "with the current 'gynocentric' culture" (Hodapp 5).

Any attempt to take legal action will cost women legal fees, necessitate the purchase of online protection services and hamper their professional lives. Since platforms like Facebook are hosts, they are exempt from being legally liable for the publication of content by users. Yet Reyman and Sparby firmly argue that platform providers, technology developers and media companies ought to become accountable by offering powerful tools for the moderation of online aggression. They further suggest that if an individual has been blocked on Twitter for inappropriate activity, they should be blocked from all online platforms. Social media harassment can also be reported to the police, but this excludes the plethora of misogynistic comments that sexualise or ridicule women by placing emphasis on their physical appearance rather than their content. Agrima Joshua, for instance, was forced to upload a video in which she had to publicly apologise for her supposedly offensive remarks. Such instances not only reflect the existing power imbalance between men and women, but also play an effective role in maintaining the gender hierarchy on social media platforms.

Hanna Rosin, in contrast, claims that digital occurrences that lead to women's harassment can be viewed as a cause for celebration: if women have digital influence, then they can utilise their power to "gleefully skewer the responsible sexist in one of many available online outlets." This implies that women who face harassment on social media should respond "gleefully" by exposing the responsible individual's identity to get support from her digital followers. However, Rosin neglects two important aspects in this discourse: first, the endeavour is likely to fail if the said woman does not have influence on social media; second, Agustsdottir's example demonstrates the potentiality of failure of the enactment of such an action. Further, online harassment is an act of violence that cannot be viewed as an opportunity and such idealistic presumptions often ignore the reality of the ramifications of online violence on women and their mental health.

The global network provided by the Internet has become central to contemporary human experience, but women's freedom of expression on social media has been inhibited by the constellation of threats as well as ineffective action by companies and law enforcement agencies during investigation. That is why the reliance of fourth wave feminist movement on digital networks negotiates with contradictory impulses: it aims to utilise technology to create a transnational community for social protest against what Alissa Quart calls "hipster sexism," but it cannot do so without being complicit in the propagation of capitalist systems that promote classism and ableism. The resultant failure to combat the pervasiveness of misogyny enables men to reduce the digital world to the terms that suit masculinity. A cursory analysis of the interactions on social media and digital abuse will expose patriarchal metaphysics, which makes it a 'phallogocentric' platform that is critical not of the female, but femininity itself.

The usage of misogynistic language and abusive words aggravates the gender hierarchy on social media. Linguists like Saussure believe that the role of language as a system in linking thought and sound contributes toward the construction of social behaviour. Linguistic behaviour is indicative of covert feelings that transgress conscious thought, which implies that since language, too, shapes thought as much as thought shapes language, the incorporation of gendered slurs and slangs in daily speech can lead to the alteration of one's outlook. Robin Lakoff aptly points out that the acceptance of male as the norm compels the manipulation of language to exclude women. For instance, the construct of women-centric films suggests that most films, the ones that do not belong to the aforementioned bracket, are dominated by men. This is effective in making male-dominated films the norm and segregating films that emphasise building the characterisation of women by the formation of a separate category: accordingly, *Dabangg* (2010) is a film whereas *Thappad* (2020) is a women-centric film.

Besides, the commonality of sexist language in everyday speech, as can be viewed from the examination of the reception of women comedians in digital spaces, affects the stereotypical

assumptions associated with women and femininity. Terms like “baby,” “girl,” and “chick” infantilise women to reduce the extent of their autonomy by shifting the dynamics of power to the male counterpart. Other labels like “gorgeous,” “beautiful,” “precious” and “sexy” often reduce women to their physical appearances: these developments further diminish their persona to construct the outlook that women’s physicality and their capacity for procreation are ultimately their biological destinies. The comment section of Urooj Ashfaq’s Instagram account is rife with such terminology. In one post, she was asked to take “boob lessons” informed that wearing revealing clothes does not suit her, and given compliments on her “nice melons.”

The examination of language politics also becomes a focal site in the assessment of the perpetuation of violence and abuse directed toward women on social media. Besides misogynistic slurs, the chauvinistic influence of commonly used cuss words is also effective in creating a lasting impact on social interactions on digital media. Chi Luu’s article exposes why abusive slangs in Western culture perpetuate chauvinistic stereotypes and prevent the advancement of feminist thought: she argues that while “abusive language directed at women might encompass unladylike sexual behaviour,” insults for men stem from “allusions to weakness and femininity, either from references to women or stereotypically feminine men” (2020).

In *The Female Eunuch*, Germaine Greer rightly points out, “All the vulgar linguistic emphasis is placed upon the *poking* element; *fucking*, *screwing*, *rooting*, *shagging* are all acts performed upon the passive female” (44). Abusive language in Hindi is effective in subconsciously perpetuating chauvinism in common parlance, thereby affecting the micro or the individual level as well as the macro or the social level. The etymology of these profane terms—which are commonly used to deride Supriya Joshi—reflects their patriarchal origins and their constant usage in popular culture reinforces casual sexism.

What it creates is a network of communication pathology. Misogynistic language that perpetrates sexual violence transgresses the trans-lingual process because aggressive masculine

imperialism over the female body continues to remain a commonality in spite of the absence of a geographic or linguistic habitation. Continual usage of such profane and violent terms has particularly corrupted the Indian subconsciousness in popular culture, which has been effective in exacerbating sexism and gender inequality in the comedy industry.

Rape Threats and Abuse: A Social Media Disaster

The popularity of women comics makes them an easy target to digital abuse on platforms like social media. The extent of abuse that they encounter in the comment section of their posts is unmistakably gendered: their physical appearance, relationship status, religion and femininity get targeted. A well-known example is the online harassment that Agrima Joshua faced for a clip of her standup video. In the aforementioned clip, Joshua discusses Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaja's upcoming statue in the Arabian Sea. She cracks jokes on a Quora post that deliberates on the significance of the statue. The performance is an endeavour to mock the content of the post and the comments posted by others in response to the post. Joshua does not explicitly—or implicitly—insult Shivaji Maharaja or make a direct reference to political commentary.

Roughly two years since the clip was first posted, a man named Shubham Mishra uploaded a video on YouTube in response to Joshua's standup on the statue and the Quora post. Mishra rejects the proclamation of comic relief in Joshua's performance and proceeds to threaten her with rape. He implies that Barack Obama has raped her mother, which has caused her to be born as a "niggi." The continual usage of misogynistic, racist, and abusive slurs proclaims the intimidation inherent in existing gendered stratification on digital media. Mishra's reaction is neither reasonable nor justified.

He then goes on to give graphic descriptions of his potential act of sexual violence: he tells her that "when I [he] fuck you from behind," his "cock will go like snake" through her "arteries, pancreas" and will finally come "out from your [her] mouth." This disturbing visualisation acts as a

reminder to the popular Nirbhaya rape case of 2012, in which a 23-year-old woman was beaten, gang-raped, and tortured by six men in a moving bus. Nirbhaya (translated as “fearless”), the popular epithet for the rape victim, suffered serious injuries to her intestines, genitals, and abdomen; one of the accused even admitted that he saw her intestines being pulled out by other assailants.

The video posted on Mishra does not emphasise the act of sexual intercourse because consensual coitus would not be a just punishment for Joshua’s supposed blasphemy. By painting a concrete image of sexual violence, Mishra clearly elucidates that the objective of his enterprise is the act of rape in an attempt to control, use and dissect her body. He utilises the garb of defending Shivaji Maharaja to bring her to paroxysms of sexual and mental capitulation. In fact, there appears to be an urgent need to stress and document the violence that his intended act will entail so that he can simultaneously preach his version of didacticism. What Mishra wants through this act of cheap publicity is the public establishment of his heroism for being the avenger of his religious system. In his imagination, he is the purveyor of religious morality and a hero who has successfully preached the significance of defending historically glorified men by publicly threatening a woman comedian with rape. This supports Gayatri Spivak’s claim that nationalist discourses place women in reproductive heteronormativity.

Mishra’s video has managed to gain sympathy in spite of his overtly offensive comments. The usage of his penis as an instrument of chastisement is apparently justified by self-proclaimed judges on social media as a means to discipline immoral women like Joshua whose speech endangers the contemporary reception of history and social sub-consciousness. Kunal Kamra, Varun Grover, Mohit Morani and other men in comedy who make explicitly political jokes do not receive the violent rape threats that women comics do. The targeted sexual violence against women necessitates the evaluation of the prevailing outlook on gendered violence and the role of social media in contributing toward the facilitation of gendered threats. Mishra’s supporters have proven that non-compliant

women can indeed be moralised by sexual acts of violence like rape. Here, the conclusion is founded upon the hypothesis that female genitalia can be utilised as a means of humiliation.

Rape is, within the context of Mishra's threat, representative of a crime against property. It is the patriarchal assertion of right over a woman's body for the firm establishment of masculine hegemony and the perpetuation of ideas that suit the hegemonic construct. The sadistic overtones utilised in the video serve to monumentalise Joshua's transformation into a victim after the delivery of the threat. This implies that even in the absence of the translation of the threat into reality, Joshua will continue to be identified as a victim due to the fictions of male power created by Mishra's discourse: the act of victimising a woman indefinitely because she encounters the threat of sexual assault leads to, according to Kanika Gandhi, the sexualisation of rape.

His verbalisation of the threat also aims to reiterate and reconstruct the gender roles that have been prescribed by a traditionally patriarchal society. As the spokesperson of the threat, he achieves heroic glory: his endeavour to supposedly protect a historically validated heroic king emerges as another heroic defence of Brahmanical patriarchy. The strategic manoeuvre of using a social media platform and proclaiming a threat that is masked beneath a veil of free speech works for Mishra in this context because of the broader problem of gendered vitriol that exists online, as has been outlined in the last section. The examination of the incident is more problematic in India because cultural perceptions equate a woman's dignity with her virginity. A rape threat is, therefore, a means of violent penetration and simultaneously an attempt to 'rob' the victim of her dignity, if not her virginity. The association of women's honour with her chastity augments the degree of the threat and enables it to emerge as a symbol of masculine aggression and power.

The 'incident' also critiques the contingency of fourth wave feminist developments on technology considering the emergence of digital media as a site of masculine aggression. In *Postcolonial Literatures in English*, Bartels et al. cite Ursula Biemann's establishment of a connection between repetitive sexual violence and the high-tech culture in industrial capitalism. The

fact that Mishra's video was uploaded and glorified in the digital space of social media reinstates the contribution of capitalist networks in mediating sexual exploitation and women's invisibility. Thus, media images function, according to Margaret Gallagher, to augment women's invisibility by grounding their representation in misogynistic biases.

Many celebrities like Swara Bhasker, Pooja Bhatt, Richa Chaddha and Kunal Kamra reported Mishra's video on social media platforms. The National Commission for Women (NCW) also sought immediate action from the Gujarat Police by writing a letter to the Gujarat Director General of Police. Mishra was produced before a judicial magistrate's court a day after his formal arrest, but was granted bail. The police reported that his mobile phone had been seized to investigate whether he had made such abusive videos in the past. But Mishra's past record cannot be used as a determining factor to absolve him of his perpetuation of rape culture on social media. While his action needs to be evaluated within broader paradigms of digital misogyny in the context of feminist studies, individual acts of granting bail to perpetrators like Mishra cannot be ignored because of their consequent influence on the popular culture.

Besides, Joshua issued a public apology in the form of a video in which she apologised to several political parties including the NCP, Shiv Sena, MNS, and Congress. The instance is indicative of the extent to which misogynistic discourses prevail in the popular imagination. Joshua's compliance is the ultimate victory for Brahmanical patriarchs like Mishra whose attack on feminine carnality has accomplished its goal of ensuring submission. It materialises in Indian comedy industry and politics Lisa M. Cuklanz' assertion that mass media exploits representations of women where they become objects to be handled, used and abused. Notwithstanding the legal mechanisms and uproar of digital criticism against Mishra, Joshua was still forced to release her video to ensure that the rape threat does not get materialised into reality by Mishra or his followers.

Emma A Jane's 'Random Rape Threat Generator' is a computer program that restitches fragments of real-life online rape threats to illustrate the formulaic nature of the existing misogynistic

discourses on the Internet. This reveals that the structures of gendered violence that persist in the digital world follow a similar pattern with slight appropriations, thereby exposing the transnational similitude in the objective, language and expected outcome of rape threats. Mishra's threat is, therefore, not an isolated example of the advocacy for gender-based violence on online platforms, especially social media. In an interview with *Media India Group*, Vipasha Malhotra, a musician and comedian, confessed that she received abusive comments and rape threats after she posted a comic video. She added, "I don't think it was because of my content but because I'm a woman. And people here can't digest that I was speaking my mind. With the number of death threats that I had received, I was scared that someone might attack me inside my home."

Women in comedy occupy a precarious space in the industry since they continue to face online harassment, bullying, rape threats, and death threats. Their sexualisation on online platforms shifts public attention from the quality of their work to their physical appearance. The provision of anonymity on some social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook further enables individuals to create fake accounts. While trolling has now become a digital phenomenon, the ramifications are worse when a woman speaks her mind. Many of these individual slights effectively coalesce within academic discourse to reveal a miasma of harassment that has lasting effects on mental health and professional advancement. Women in comedy in India are likely to revise their existing content or leave the industry, if their parents continue to remain unsupportive due to the farrago of rape threats directed at them online. Shifa Fatima, an aspiring woman comic, is one such example.

The public has extensively targeted Fatima for her political jokes. As part of a religious minority, she is also forced to deal with the plethora of abusive comments concerning her religion. Her parents have asked her to reevaluate her content and avoid supposedly controversial themes like religion, culture, or country following the persistent rape threats that she has received online. Thus, the issue of abusive comments on women's bodies on various digital platforms is a component of a global nexus of patriarchal ideals. The absence of regulation of abusive content on social media has,

therefore, made digital gendered hate a transnational phenomenon that has now become the common denominator for globally uniting individuals to ensure the perpetuation of digital abuse against women. While a hybrid of feminist activism is necessary to accomplish required changes in legislative reforms, the social issue of gendered hate on digital platforms remains a larger problem because of its transformation into a normative cultural practice.

In 2018, when Mahima Kukreja, a woman comic, joined the #MeToo movement by exposing the sexual advances made by Utsav Chakravarty, a well-known comedian in India's comedy circuit, the public was amazed to know that influential men like Tanmay Bhat, the co-founder of AIB, didn't take any action. After similar allegations of sexual harassment against members of AIB, Bhat was demoted from the post of CEO. The normalcy with which such instances are perceived in the industry threatens the emergence as well as the professional advancement of women comics. Aditi Mittal concurred with Kukreja and further revealed that Chakravarty had slut-shamed her as well.

Another example of online abuse is the roast on Kusha Kapila, a popular woman in comedy who chiefly uploads content on Instagram, by two YouTubers, Elvish Yadav and Lakshya Chaudhary. In their supposedly funny videos, Yadav and Chaudhary mock Kapila's appearance and proceed to claim that women who follow her heterodox principles of drinking and smoking are against the tenets of the Indian culture. Their claim is not simply an observation, but rather an implicit assertion of supremacy of the cultural ethos of India and the subsequent indictment of women who refuse to follow the convention.

In an article, Simran Dhawan points out that the American Friar's Club asked the consent of its guest when it hosted the first public roast in 1947. The contemporary continuation of the roast culture on social networking sites like YouTube has now transformed because the artists' primary concern lies with the commercial reception of their videos. The transformation of roast culture into a bitter vehicle for promoting misogyny is unfortunate. The videos uploaded by Yadav and Chaudhary exemplify the appropriation of the roast culture for contemporary audience: they are filled with

misogynistic slurs, transphobic terms and ideas that promote the necessity of toxic masculine approbation of women's bodies and idealised femininity. When Kusha Kapila uploaded a video in response to online abuse, she addressed the farrago of comments made on her physicality, appearance and cosmetics. Men like Yadav and Chaudhary monetise by creating controversial content on social networking platforms, but they neglect the material consequences of their promotion of transphobia and misogyny. Such content creators create idioms of self-articulation predicated on a modified version of roast culture that allows them to feign innocence under "guise of gender essentialism and freedom of speech" in comedy (Hodapp 44).

While the demands of the popular culture influence the production of popular literature, including cinema, theatre and digital content, consumers cannot be solely blamed for their choices since their decisions are made on the basis of factors like content variety, popularity of content etc. The generation of responsible content has and will continue to, influence the choices of the mass culture. That is precisely why content creators like Yadav and Chaudhary need to evaluate the potential consequences of their content before they upload a toxic video that their audience emulates.

It is precisely because of these threats that most women in comedy either refrain from utilising jokes on Indian politics or make references subtly. Kaneez Surka, for instance, once made a passing remark where she explained how she didn't know anybody who has a problem with Muslims in Gujarat. Here, she was implicitly referring to the Prime Minister of India, who was accused of initiating the violence as the then Chief Minister that eventually led to the 2002 Gujarat riots. The awareness with which Indian women in comedy have to perform jokes on Indian politics must encourage scholars in the academia to protest against the patriarchal culture that contemporary media has actively strengthened.

The oral formulae of misogyny used on digital platforms forms a network of abuse that accompanies workplace discrimination and unequal opportunities, which actively function to discourage women from pursuing a career in comedy. Megan Koester explicates how a comedic

authority conveniently discarded the contributions of women comics in his book on the history of comedy. She adds that the screening of rare clips by the aforementioned figure made a passing reference to Minnie Pearl, Elaine May, Lily Tomlin and Lucile Ball without any significant addition to the contributions made by these women comics. This leads to the interrogation of contemporary gender biases that pervade the process of documenting history. The relegation of women artists to the footnotes of history by successful men in contemporary times challenges the power structures that create histories and anticipates the failure of historiography, since the document is inherently misogynistic.

Literary attempts of documentation not only monumentalise masculine narratives for future generations, but also shift the perceptions of contemporary popular culture. The normalisation of misogyny constructs the dialectics of cultural perception of women as well. It is, therefore, pertinent to evaluate the existing inequalities in the professional space of comedy that continue to subjugate women and inhibit their advancement. The consequences of social interactions on digital platforms affect the reception of women comics and also shape cultural perceptions that further impact the psychology of women in comedy. The perpetuation of rape culture on social media and other spaces on the Internet needs to be calibrated in popular and academic discourse for the creation of an inclusive space for women in the industry.

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