

## “Impact of Stand-Up Comedy towards Social Issues in India”

**Author : Mr. Manish Kumar Jangra ,Assistant Director Youth Welfare ,Chandigarh University.**

**Co-Author : Dr. Agya Ram Pandey , Asst. Professor ,Galgotias University, Greater Noida**

**Co-author: Dr. Anita R Gautam, Director, NIU , Greater Noida.**

**Co-Author : Mrs. Sarika Takhar Badsara**

### Abstract

This research paper aims to find out the impact of popular and prevailing medium of standup comedy with an attempt to throw light on presenting social issues before the Indian audience. Every person is suffering from some or the other stress in this world. In such a situation standup comedy based TV Programs are becoming viewer's favorite pass time. Because of its large viewership such types of programs have the ability to become a strong medium. During such programs and live comedy shows when standup comedians perform, they often happen to include social issues in their scripts as well. But what lies at the back of mind of such comedians before doing so? Any research on the same has not been conducted yet in India. Neither any research keeping in mind standup comedy has been conducted in India, which can explain the extent to which this medium is impactful. To understand social perspective of standup comedy from an artistic point of view it can be immensely beneficial. For this purpose esteemed Indian comedians and comic poets were approached and interviewed. Interaction with such comedians revealed that standup comedy is a strong medium but, it can only be effective if comedy artist use wit and through social change approach develop and elect their content.

### Introduction

In European countries standup comedy has been established as an interesting and prestigious work. Similarly, in India this form of comedy is being appreciated and nowadays even in the TV channels are striving in competition of presenting such comedy shows. Prestigious TV channels like SAB TV, SONY and Colors have created new records in gaining television rating points through such comedy programs. According to an article the Indian comedians like Kapil Sharma (Hindi) charge Rs. 10 lacs to Rs. 12 lacs per show. Various companies are ready to pay even 30% premium amount for comedy programs (Rahul Sachitanand, 2014, Economic Times). Moreover, according to researchers, a large amount of Indian TV audience prefer to watch comedy programs and the main reason for this is to get rid of stress and gain mental peace. Around half a decade ago, Indians were not so inclined in viewing standup

comedy shows. Perhaps, one of the reasons for this is that standup comedy has entered the Indian TV quite late. During the 80's and 90's comedy TV serials like- “Tu Tu Main Main” and “Flop Show” was quite liked by the audience. But standup comedy attained little success when Shekhar Suman's comedy show “Movers and Shakers” got popular. Standup comedy is one of those arts in which the presenter directly addresses his audience. For this reason, this medium is quite influential in reaching the audience. While India, as a country still grapples with unemployment, corruption, social inequality, political instability, our young generation is still dealing with stress. In this scenario of opportunism and competition, comedy is an un-failed medicine that offers relief and relaxation. Today in India standup comedians are garnering a lot of fame and popularity. Many of the comedy programs broadcasted on Indian Television have achieved a feat in themselves. Be it “The Great Indian Laughter Challenge” or “Comedy Nights with Kapil”, every program is tickling the funny bone of the viewers and is being liked by all the

communities of the society. This is one of the areas of research, is through the medium of standup comedy we can convey social issues in the hearts and brains of audience?

### Review of Literature

The findings of the following research papers are related to the subject of this research paper. The study and research provided by these papers sheds an insight to the concept of comedy in relation to the social issues that surround us on global scale.

#### **Comedy and Democracy: The Role of Humor in Social Justice By Nancy Goldman, Ed.D.**

*“The 1960s and 1970s were eras shaped by controversy and were times of great comedic creativity. Richard Zoglin, author of Comedy on the Edge: How Stand-up in the 1970s Changed America (2008), notes how comedy of that time was a commentary on the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement, and the women’s rights era. Comedians let their point of view be known, “They took aim at political corruption and corporate greed, made fun of society’s hypocrisy and consumerist excess, mocked the button-down conformity of Eisenhower America” (pp. 2-3). Comedy during that time emphasized the gaps between our espoused ideals and our harsh realities, and comedians reflected the cynicism and distrust that infected the nation.”*

*“Our development as a nation, as well as our individual growth, depends upon our being aware and informed citizens. Social and political matters impact our daily lives and call upon us for non-partisan information, increased open-mindedness, and self-reflection. Laughing together connects us through our similarities as a species in spite of our social and political differences. Humor that questions the status quo allows us to consider that there are other, possibly better, ways of being. And jokes that challenge our assumptions help us to refresh old ways of thinking. By engaging average citizens in thinking, feeling, and speaking about the ways that we live in the world together, humor can inform societal change. At a time in our history when we are drowning in bipartisan rhetoric and*

*average citizens are disenfranchised and disengaged, humor can be our much needed ally—not only because of the levity it brings, but because it reminds us of our potential greatness as a country.”*

#### **Stand-up as interaction: Performance and Audience in Comedy Venues, By Jason Rutter, University of Salford**

*“In contemporary humour studies, it is the work of Christie Davies that we can most clearly associate with the notion that humour functions to build and maintain social structures. His work on ethnic humour (e.g. 1991, 1988, 1982) is often quoted as proof of the functional value of humour although his work is conceptual rather than empirical. He argues that patterns can be observed in the jokes about stupidity told by various groups. For example, the English tell jokes about the Irish, the Americans tell jokes about the Poles, the Swedish tell jokes about the Finns and the Norwegians, etc.<sup>33</sup> In these jokes, a mythical member of an out group becomes a synecdochic representative of all members of that group, all the Irish become identified with and through the Irishman in the joke.”*

### Background

Standup comedy is one of the improved forms of comedy or rather we can say that it is the commercialized form. If we talk about the origin of comedy saying anything with utmost surety would not be right. But, according to historians it originated during the 18<sup>th</sup> century in United Kingdom. During that time, comedians used to perform through musical groups and through the medium of musical comedy shows, they brought “The Great Indian Laughter Challenge” which broke all records and gave rise to numerous other similar programmes. Today in India many such shows have come up like “Comedy Nights with Kapil”, “Comedy Circus”, “Laugh India Laugh”, “Jonny Alaa Re”, thus proving the rise of comedy shows as great business platforms as well.

## Objective

- Knowing that if standup comedy is an effective medium to convey social issues to the public?
- Knowing that through these programs if standup comedians intent to only entertain their audience or have an approach towards making public aware on social issues.

## Method

To understand the role of standup comedy in knowing political issues, I have used qualitative research method within which I will be interviewing some famous Indian comedians and through my questions I will be attempting to understand the following:

- How is standup comedy as a medium?
- Can standup comedy play the role of creating a change in Indian Society?
- Are politicians who use comedy and humor, more influential among the public?
- What conclusion can we draw from their experiences?

Keeping in mind such areas, I would attempt to understand if standup comedy rakes the interest of people towards political and social issues. In the beginning of 19<sup>th</sup> century, two corporate houses started club culture wherein live acts were presented. In the same time, Charlie Chaplin dawned and became the favorite of many. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century club culture began expanding and even in India after Independence in year 1959 when TV broadcasting started, comedy was only through way of theatre and films. During that time comedy actors like Mehmood, Kishore Kumar, Jonny Walker created a special place in the viewers heart. It won't be wrong to say that Jonney Walker was the pioneer of standup comedy in India. Around year 1986 Jonny Liver started presenting live shows based on mimicry in Mumbai and across India. Mimicry used to be considered one of the first elements in comedy. In such a form the artist used to mimic other persons voice and their style to make his audience laugh. After that came era of artists like Raju Srivastav who based their presentations on Jonny Liver's style presented mimicry in musical

shows and started earning a living. Beginning of commercialization of standup comedy in India can be credited to Pankaj Sarswat. Pankaj started India's first standup comedy show in 2005 on Star One channel. The reason behind approaching reputed comedy artist and poets is that through experiences of reputed artist in context of this art of standup comedy we can learn immensely. As they are professional comedians and comedy poets, they know different elements and perspectives of standup comedy well because comedy artist and poets prepare their content according to their presentation. Hence interviewing them would be beneficial.

## Discussion

When I spoke to popular comedians on this topic, various perspectives were given to me and upon asking several comedians on how strong standup comedy is a medium to aware people, they said :-

**Mr. Gurpreet Ghuggi-** In the earlier days the prime motive of comedy was to make people laugh only. But today the meaning has slightly changed. Comedian in the present era make people laugh as well as raise the social issues with their creativity in comedy. Comedy has also become a wonderful medium to talk about politics. Even a small satire can put across a big message. If any medium today has the ability to put across a message through stage, it is standup comedy.

**Mr. Khayali-** I believe that standup comedy is a good medium because of its entertainment value. But purpose of a comedian is only to make people laugh. If we put social issues to the

public through standup comedy, it won't affect the public because they want only entertainment and a comedian wants only to make people laugh.

**Mr. Suresh Albela-** Standup comedy is an entrainment medium but political and social issues can be discussed through this platform openly. They go get influenced but the audience will be aware

only If you speak. Public would not know till someone speaks on such issues. If everyone refrains from speaking, who will stand against the dictum? It is responsibility of the poet that he speaks on the system and makes the public aware on the happenings.

**Mr. Mukesh Vohra-** Truly it's a great medium, because our society has a lot of evil deeds happening and if we try to tell anyone that whatever he or she is doing is wrong then they wouldn't accept their fault. But if we tell the same thing in a jovial manner then, he might understand it quickly. If any comedian along with making people laugh also includes issues in his script then along with cheering people, he will be able to convey social message as well.

**Mr. Surender Sharma-** Today people love watching vulgarity because nowadays we can gain TRP's by shedding clothes. We take comedians lightly. Today numerous programmes are being telecasted on TV. People think it is their everyday job. So many years have passed since independence. If this medium would have made any difference then things would have changed by now. Today whichever comedy programmers are being telecasted, they have forgotten the difference between comedy and making fun of others. Comedy is for making people aware and not hurting them.

### Conclusion

Speaking to many popular comedy artists on this topic, I can conclude that standup comedy is an art which has the capability to attract people towards it. But, it depends on the presenter that on what type of subject and topic he chooses. It

is of opinion of comedy artist like Suresh Albela, Gurpreet Guggiand Mukesh Vohra that it is a strong and impactful medium to convey issues to the public. Suresh Albela opines that it is responsibility of every comedian and artist that they use this medium to make people aware. Gurpreet Guggi says that through medium

of comedy we can explain typical and serious issues to public in a very light manner and we can influence the thinking pattern of people through this medium. On the other hand, Mr. Surender Sharma and Khayali feel that standup comedy is only a medium of entertainment and it is not right to expect anymore from this. Surender also says that nowadays TV is flooded with comedy based programmes in which only vulgarity and irrelevant things are presented. In such programs the audiences takes comments lightly and think that it their everyday job. On basis of such things, I have come to the conclusion that standup comedy can prove to be strong medium, but on condition that it is utilized in the right way.

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