

Critical Education

Volume 16 Number 3

August 15, 2025

ISSN 1920-4175

Politico-Pedagogical Functions of Humour in South Asia

Ravi Kumar

South Asian University

Rama Paul

Delhi University

Kumar, R., & Paul, R. (2025). Politico-pedagogical functions of humour in South Asia. *Critical Education*, 16(3), 132-147. <https://doi.org/10.14288/ce.v16i3.186950>

Abstract

Humour as a performance has been studied at length from the prism of its relationship to politics. However, there are fewer works that looks at humour as pedagogy. Pedagogy includes every aspect of an individual as embedded in a socio-economic and political order. This embeddedness brings an individual face to face with diverse sources from which it learns. The paper argues that humour in its different avatars fulfils the purpose of teaching-learning in the same way as any other pedagogical tool. By acting as such it ensures its role as working for the status quo as well as for the anti-status quoists. Humour then ceases to be a mundane experience without any relevance but becomes one of the most sources of consensualisation as well as rebellion in contemporary times.



Readers are free to copy, display, and distribute this article, as long as the work is attributed to the author(s) and **Critical Education**. More details of this Creative Commons license are available from <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>. **Critical Education** is published by the Institute for Critical Educational Studies and housed at the University of British Columbia.

Humour: Beyond Laughter, Into Realm of Politics

Watching a film makes one laugh; so does looking at a cartoon or an advertisement whether moving or still. People participate in these acts of laughter via the content of these mediums, which use language, body movements or muscle movements to engage the audience. However, little attention is paid to the social, political or historico-material origins of the whole process, which is called humour. This also calls for going beyond commonsense as Michael Billing says, "...beliefs about humour's goodness do not stand outside of history. What seems natural and so full of commonsense in one era will appear strange in another" (2005, p.02). Methodologically, this also demands that the commonsense is analysed with a 'historical dimension'. Eagleton points to the significance of context when he says that "the paradox, then, is that though laughter itself is purely a question of the signifier – mere sound without sense – it is socially coded through and through. It is a spontaneous physical occurrence (most of the time, anyway), but one which is socially specific, and as such cusp between nature and culture" (2019, p.02). In his work, the politics of humour enters through the idea of disrupting the orderly world. While talking about laughter he argues, "it is quite literally a bodily disorder. We shall see later that this is one reason why an excess of laughter has frequently been censured as politically dangerous" (ibid, p.03).

Geybels and Herck (2011, p. 2) look at humour, following John Tael and Critchley, as "a comical expression or a specific attitude or mode of life". Humans are invited "to become philosophical spectators" of their own lives. A sense of contemplative attitude develops towards the world and whatever happens around us as the familiar gets dislocated by the "unexpected contexts and horizons".

Simultaneously, what humour does is that it "alienates people from their living environment in order that they could subsequently approach it with a greater sense of freedom and responsibility. Therefore, humour may be regarded as an art of life, closely related to that of practical wisdom." Humour is a way of engaging with the world and how "we interact with each other, and what we value. These are issues that cannot be addressed by looking at how humour makes us feel. They are fundamentally social questions involving how we do humour." (Abrahams, 2021, p.81)

Critchley is sharper when he argues that "jokes tear holes in our usual predictions about the empirical world. Humour is produced by a disjunction between the way things are and the way they represented in the joke, between expectations and reality" (Critchley, 2004, p.1). For him the essence of humour lay in the "smile - deriding the having and the not having, the pleasure and the pain, the sublimity and suffering of the human situation - that is the essence of humour" (Critchley, 2004, p.111). Encompassed within all these different ways of looking at humour is the possibility of looking at the politics that lies beneath humour.

Watching detectives Thomson and Thompson in the cartoon series Tintin by Hergé trying to solve a murder mystery or some other crime is more than what appears. The humour invoked by their body movements and language is hard to miss. However, beneath the content of the humorous Tintin, engaged in his adventures with Captain Haddock, there has been a deep seated political meaning wrapped in humour. Its creator, Hergé had right-wing links during the Nazi occupation of Belgium, where he had worked as an illustrator for the Belgian far-right leader Leon Degrelle prior to war in 1920s-30s. His works continued publication even under Nazi occupation. Many of his images carried "a striking level of anti-Semitism" (Frey 2004: 178). Citing some of the comics, it has been argued that "the implication of the imagery is that the suffering of the white,

male, scientists is terrible and metaphorically represents an attack on the 'body' of European and Belgian culture" (Frey 2004, p. 181). Even Susan Sontag suggested that Nazi racism linked sickness or disease to something alien as Hitler used the term 'Jews' that produced "a racial tuberculosis among nations" (Sontag, 1978, p.83). If Frey terms Hergé's narrative "racially inspired anti-colonialism" (Frey 2004, p.185) Montfort found "Hergé's universe... too multivalent and ambiguous, too riddled with puns and ellipses, to be framed in such crude terms" (2012, p.47).

This relationship of politics and humour has been elaborated by Holm when he uses the concept of "political aesthetics" to "refer to the idea that the aesthetic aspect of a text—its form, style, palette, rhythm, narrative, structure and form—can do political work, by which I mean it can intercede in the negotiation, contestation and distribution of power" (Holm, 2017, p. 12). Humour as a "cultural category" is considered central to the modern society and is seen as a "demand" on the citizens and consumers (Holm, 2017, p.08). Holm, through his idea of political aesthetics, necessitates an examination of humour as embodying politics in diverse forms. He lays threadbare what he means by political aesthetics when he says that

At the heart of political aesthetics is the argument that it is not only what texts and artefacts show us about the world, but also the way in which they show us—as well as the priorities and categories of interpretation that we bring to bear—that determine our relation to that world, and the social, cultural and political struggles we encounter there. Aesthetic concerns, such as the way we see, hear and feel the world, determine how we interact with it and the particular sites of potential, tension and trouble we see within it: the political work of an aesthetic quality such as humour thus needs to be understood not as a site of dominance or resistance whose function is determined in advance, but as a cultural terrain whose aesthetic contours determine its multiple possible political trajectories. (2017, p.13)

One definitely then start looking at anything that is humorous as carrying one's anxieties, insecurities, arrogance as well as urge to become violent. There are stereotypical representation of Nepalis, for instance, as security guards, workers in restaurants or househelps. This has been popularised by cinema, advertisements etc. While audience laughs at their portrayal, it reads much more than laughter at individuals when located within South Asian context. It becomes a political statement, even if made by an individual or by an institution such as cinema. In this whole process of experiencing humour an "empathetic, solidarity and communicative enhancement functions of humour" can be seen (Goatly, 2012, pp.308-09).

As pointed out, humour is not an individual affair and it involves a collective, which is cemented through the use of language and a common allegiance to a historical context. Ross gives a lot of importance to language in humour because humour involves a response to whatever is said or done. "There is a strong social aspect to the way people respond to humour" (1998, p.01). The social aspect is reflected in the sense of collective that it involves because "humour is a way in which people show their allegiance to a group. If someone signals their intention to say something humorous, the listeners are immediately ready to laugh. People often laugh when given this sort of cue, regardless of whether they even got the joke" (Ross, p. 1). If people want to distance themselves from a joke due to its content they don't laugh. There is a social as well as historical context to things that are humorous. In fact, it is rooted in *time* and *space*. What would have made someone laugh in the medieval times may not invoke similar response in the 21st century. Similarly, we have come across differing sense of humour across regions and nations based on their own historical experiences.

Another significant example of *context* of humour can be the way a patriarchal society has huge number of jokes about women. And it is not merely women who constitute the subject of the humour but it is also the opposite – women ridiculing men. This can be illustrated through the practices of songs that women sing about the family members of the groom during marriages in some parts of India. These marriage rituals being an occasion when they get freedom to express their anger, angst as well as liberty to express repressed sexual feelings allows women to target men and their family members with the most obscene abuses containing explicit sexual details. Goatly (2012, p.309) through work of Elliott Oring brings forth the possibility of humour as "a theory of release or liberation from the psychological tension between the subconscious desires or the id, and the control over these by the superego". Further using Freud they suggest that "much humour targets the sacred, the taboo and the disgusting, because these are normally topics which we repress our feelings about. Humour, then, resembles a temporary carnival, a form of rebellion against normal prohibitions. Jokes may also be ways of expressing aggression, even if our motive remains disguised by humour".

Janet Holmes, who did her fieldwork in government departments of New Zealand, shows that,

humour may be used by those in authority and control while containing to appear collegial, and by the repressed to license a challenge which subverts that control. Humour may be used by those in authority as a repressive discourse device, concealing the authority structures or power relations involved in order to gain the addressee's compliance... Alternatively, humour may be used by subordinates in an asymmetrical power relationship as a critical discourse device, functioning to facilitate a challenge to the positive or negative face needs of the addressee" (Holmes, 2000, p.179).

This would imply that not only the social context – that of hierarchies of different kind – but also institutional contexts, where vertical hierarchies endowed by positions of 'power' owing to different reasons, make use of humour as a political tool of repression and revolt.

Billig distinguishes between "disciplinary humour" and "rebellious humour". While the former "mocks those who break social rules, and thus can be seen to aid the maintenance of those rules" the latter "mocks the social rules, and, in its turn, can be seen to challenge, or rebel against, the rules" (2005, p.202). The disciplinary humour is conservative in nature while the rebellious humour has an element of radicalism. Billig cautions as well because these two forms of humour are not straightforward. He says that

"...one needs to be cautious about describing disciplinary humour as being unambiguously conservative, and rebellious humour as being objectively radical. It is not quite so straightforward. Denial, self- deceit and self-righteousness can all be at work. This is particularly so in an ideological climate that favours the rebellious over the disciplinary" (Billig, 2005, p.204).

Later on, other scholars like Tsakona and Popa point to how humour have twin aspects of rebellion as well as status quo. Tsakona and Popa show through examples how "humour serves mainly two functions - it conveys criticism against the political status quo and it recycles and reinforces dominant values and views on politics". While the criticality is evident in forms of political satire, political cartoons, etc., there are different ways in which the system creates a hegemonic humour. In fact, they argue that "recent research has claimed that, being a very popular

communicative resource, humour sometimes manages to enhance commonsensical views on political affairs rather than to promote radical thinking" (2011, p.2). A close look at the way polity works in South Asia one can see the play of humour among political adversaries. In this whole play

humour is not only a means of critique and a rhetorical weapon against the political adversary, but *a symbol over which the struggle for political power takes place*. Politicians, media people, artists, common people, all engage in political humour in their effort to symbolically control the discourse produced on politics... (Tsakona & Popa, 2011, p.272).

Humour, therefore, becomes an instrument of disrupting a system, an order of things, which has its own hierarchies, its hegemonies working in different ways – from how to behave to how and what to speak and what to consider sacred and what becomes profane. Though meanings of these diverse aspects of human life change over a period of time they, in their own *moments* of existence, are part of certain orderliness and humour disrupts that order. Women, in the above example, are socialised by patriarchy and end up reproducing it in the end, are nonetheless disrupting it in a way because their curtailed movement, speech, language are challenged by their songs.

“It would be possible to develop a semiotics of laughing or smiling, showing how each genre of laughter or style of facial expression has its place within a complex signifying system. You can, in short, treat laughter as a text, or as a language with so many regional accents”, writes Eagleton (2019, p. 7). The above would imply that Eagleton is looking at the social and economic context of humour/laughter as well. Different kind of people laugh in different ways. There are particular positions in society which allow you to laugh in particular ways. The chief of a big financial institution and the daily wage worker laugh in different ways and maybe on different subject matter, not only on account of their socio-linguistic world being different but also because they have not been trained/socialised to view the world in same ways. The meanings and implications of humour for them will also be different. However, one is also witnessing the *resistance potential* of humour through forums such as stand-up comedy today.

Billig sounds warning bells when he says that “where conformity to the ‘market’ dictates constant revolution, the conformists can appear to have radical jokes. Today, many of the big controversies about comedians going too far are not about left-wing comedians” (2005, p. 241). The problem does not lie with the fact that “the left-wing comedians are insufficiently humorous, or that the right-wing has stolen the best gags” (Billig, p.242). The problem, in fact, may lie with the idea that a rebellious humour is also rebellious in actuality. It is relevant to bring here the way contemporary capitalism works, which Billig hints at but does not go into details. The contemporary capitalism has an enormous capability to commodify each and every dimension of our existence. In fact, it has the unprecedented capacity to accumulate with the help of the anti-systemic/capitalist voices, be it humorous or non-humorous and the social media is a perfect example of it. Under such circumstances how would humour act as an anti-systemic language or have the capability to subvert remains a vexed question to answer.

Critical Pedagogy as Pedagogy Beyond Classroom

As mentioned above there is a social and political context of humour. There may be disagreements about how effective is humour as a rebellion but it is well established that it emerges out of particular contexts and is not only its expression but also a desire, a hope to transcend it as

well as an intent to keep the system going by strengthening its ideas. The other aspect that also needs attention is the way the dominant/hegemonic system uses humour as a pedagogical tool – strengthen the dominant status quoist voices. This paper focusses on this aspect of humour as a tool used by the hegemonic classes towards attaining their political goals.

Pedagogy does not have a singular definition and has been looked at differently by many. Someone like Watkins and Mortimore prefer to use it in a much safer sense: “any conscious activity by one person designed to enhance learning in another” (1999, p. 3). I will use it in a general sense because the vast expanse of researches point out that there is not one single source from where we learn and which teach us something or the other. In other words, *pedagogy includes any process of teaching and learning within formal institutions as well as outside of it*. These re/sources are endless. Scholars like Giroux reflect on pedagogy in contemporary context where democracy is in danger. “Pedagogy... makes a space available for an argument about the responsibility of the present for a democratic future” among the teachers as well as learners for someone like him (Giroux, 2007, p. 1). It “cultivates” a “healthy skepticism about power” (Giroux, 2007, p. 1).

What Giroux describes above is a huge responsibility on those engaged with the pedagogical praxis. Though one can find views of education amounting to such conceptualisations in works of Gramsci and others but it was after Freire that pedagogy experienced a significant break. A new framework developed challenging the traditional vision of looking at pedagogy in context of schools and classroom, rigidly with reference to state managed curriculum and ways of teaching. Freire through his critique of ‘banking education’ opened up possibilities of reimagining education by introducing the ‘critical’ element into it (Freire, 2005a). By now even this has a wide and varied corpus body of work. There are numerable scholars and approaches within the larger rubric of critical pedagogy but, as McLaren argues, “...what draws critical educators together despite their many differences is an abiding commitment to creating engaging and vibrant spaces where students—adults and young people alike—are encouraged to question dominant epistemological, axiological, and political assumptions that are often taken for granted and often prop up the dominant social class” (2015, p. 8). McLaren writes that critical pedagogy

“is essentially a *plaidoyer* for the claim that education is not a neutral activity and that all knowledge is a form of ideological production. Critical pedagogy, as I attempt to formulate it, possesses many vocabularies of self and social formation, but is essentially a Freirean approach to *reading the world and the word* dialectically” (emphasis mine) (2015, p. 8).

The relationship between the world that humans inhabit and the humans themselves needs to be recognised to learn and teach, as Freire wrote:

Men relate to their world in a critical way. They apprehend the objective data of their reality... through reflection-not by reflex, as do animals. And in the act of critical perception, men discover their own temporality. Transcending a single dimension, they reach back to yesterday, recognize today, and come upon tomorrow” (Freire, 2005b, p. 3).

Recognition of their existence in *time* makes humans different and gives them a sense of historicity as well as context (social, political, cultural and economic) to their context. Freire had put it in a better way when he said: “Men exist’ in time. They are inside. They are outside. They inherit. They incorporate. They modify. Men are not imprisoned within a permanent “today”; they emerge, and

become temporalized" (Freire, 2005b, p.04). Freire was constantly reminding us about how "teaching cannot be reduced to the one-way transmission of the object of knowledge, or a two-way transaction between the teacher and the student, but is rather a form of dialectical transformation of both the teacher and the student..." (McLaren, 2007, p. 301).

It is important to understand that formal pedagogies are created to impart the ideas that do not run counter to the system that establishes and runs these institutions. This is also the relationship of education and pedagogy with the larger world – the system that brings it into existence. Following Althusser one may argue that this relationship between the larger whole (the system) and the education system enables reproduction of the system. Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) through their analysis were drawing connection between the education system and class relations (the larger whole, the *apparently* outside system). They showed us how education system works towards reproducing the class distribution of cultural capital. What these scholars are doing is to demonstrate that the autonomy of formal institutions is a myth, an illusion, which is created by the system to ensure that the rule of hegemonic interests is perpetuated.

Critical pedagogy runs counter to this purpose and function of schooling. The formal education system teaches what it wants the students-*to-be* (labour power) and creates a teaching ambience, which is divorced from the realities of out-of-institution world. This insulation of students within formal institutions is done with the purpose of not letting the pain, suffering, anxieties of the world enter their classrooms.

Critical Pedagogy connects classrooms to social relations. Classrooms are organised in a way "to mirror what students and teachers would collectively like to see in the world outside of schools" (McLaren, 2007, p. 310). In this sense, the classroom and the outside world are conjoined as well as separated. It is the separation of the two - the classroom and the outside world - that has not allowed teaching-learning to factor in what happens outside the classroom as pedagogical. It is, in fact, more powerful than what happens within the classroom. Humour, in this sense, through films, advertisements and social media platforms become important sources of pedagogy – for both the status quo as well as the anti-systemic forces.

Recent times have presented to us a new world - a world run by and through social media. Democratic circuses of electioneering are won and lost through who controls the social media and the kind of performance that one puts on it. Mobilisations happen through social media in both the cases - the status quoist forces as well as anti-systemic forces - as shown by the 2020 riots in Delhi (Kumar, 2020). As pointed earlier, these social media sites have become places where humorous memes are in abundance; You Tube channels of stand-up comedians draw huge crowd and so on. Humour has a new place to live - the virtual world. These sites are also pedagogical sites because teaching-learning takes places in these places. The very act of mobilisation is about convincing people about a certain idea to such an extent that they immediately act around those ideas as WhatsApp coordinated violence in Delhi had shown (Sengar & Dwivedi, 2020; Scroll, 2020).

It is obvious from above discussion that pedagogy is something which is more than what happens in classroom or other realms of learning which are under control of formal spheres. As a teaching-learning process and act it not only owes its particular character to the system, which gives rise to it but it is also a constant battlefield where the ruling classes are engaged in an exercise of consensualising masses towards sustaining its hegemony along with the counter-hegemonic pedagogies struggling to build their own hegemony. The expressions of these are not found in only one place but also in places such as theatre, music, cinema, classroom teaching, advertisement

hoardings, etc. Everything is engaged in the constant act of teaching/conveying/advocating something/some idea as people constantly consume them. It is in this sense that humour is seen as pedagogical act/resource. It teaches, we learn from it – the laughter that is generated through jokes rooted in social and cultural contexts creates a tacit support for those ideas (and hence the social relations) or against certain ideas (and hence offering alternatives to the dominant social relations).

Pedagogy, Context, Performance and Humour: The Context of South Asia

We have by now seen how humour is rooted in context and how pedagogy encapsulates each and every aspect of world that we inhabit and each and every moment of our life. Pedagogy is in a certain sense also about performance and vice-versa. McLaren through his fieldwork showed this relationship between the two when he analysed that “rituals may also be understood as gestural and rhythmical models which enable students to negotiate between various symbol systems which have been nurtured by the wider society and augmented by the dominant culture” (1999, p.03). There is an inseparable connection between performance, context and humour.

The link between the life of audience and performance is intertwined in more than one way. While performance teaches it is at the same constituted out of the social relations. Performance such as theatre is extensively emphasised as a pedagogical tool in modern times within formal as well as informal settings. It has been seen as “an experience for children that will be intensely absorbing, challenging, even provocative, and an unrivalled stimulus for further work on the chosen subject in and out of school” in formal education (Jackson, 1993, p.1).

Much later the Brechtian theatre retained what Boal calls "the unbridgeable gap" between the audience and the stage. The words were still chosen by the dramatist and not the citizen. Though some of his poems tried to do away with this gap but the dramas did not. Boal makes the departure and calls for the audience to become characters.

The audience mustn't just liberate its Critical Conscience, but its body too. It needs to invade the stage and transform the images that are shown there. To transform is to be transformed. The action of transforming is, in itself, transforming (Boal, 2008, pp. xx-xxi).

This was a demonstration of how powerful theatre as a medium can be and we know that genres influenced by Boal and later on different formats of street theatre have played an important role in teaching people what the formal hegemonic ideological machinery did not allow. Theatre no longer remains a place with passive audience. It is either completely transformed in its constitution or at least takes the form of continual merging of the audience and the actor. Through either of this there is a pedagogical function that the performance plays.

The pedagogical role of performance in general or theatre in particular is not a new phenomenon. It always existed as one of its functions, which was inbuilt into the very structure and thought of what a theatre or performance entails. It has always been embedded in the social relations. This is evident in the way even the ancient documents and literary works talked about it. If one looks at the South Asian context one of the oldest documents (written anywhere between

200 BCE-200 CE) on dramaturgy and histrionics, *Natyasastra*¹ provides a detailed insight into how theatre (which is pedagogical as already discussed) looks at humour (or *hasya*). It explains how “the comic (*hasya*) sentiment has as its basis the dominant emotion of laughter” and it “is created by determinants such as showing unseemly dress or ornament, impudence, greediness, quarrel, defective limb, use of irrelevant words, mentioning of different faults, and similar other things”. The comic sentiment was of two kinds – “self-centered and centred in others. When a person himself laughs it relates to the self-centred (comic sentiment), but when he makes others laugh it (the comic sentiment therein) is centred in others (Ghosh, 1950, p. 110).

What is relevant in *Natyasastra* is the way it connects dramaturgy in general to social context (not in a critical sense but as rooted in the hegemonic caste/class/patriarchal discourse) showing how the relationship between the performance or cultural forms and social contexts have always existed. Comic sentiment, which is expressed through “uncouth behaviour” and “words and dress and strange movements of limb”, is attributed to “women and persons of the inferior type” (Ghosh, 1950, p.110). *Natyasastra* talks of six varieties of comic sentiment: “Slight Smile (*Smita*), Smile (*casita*), Gentle Laughter (*vilasita*), Laughter of Ridicule (*upahasita*), Vulgar Laughter (*aphasia*) and Excessive Laughter (*aitihasikta*)”. These varieties, as the text explains is attributable to different social strata. “To persons of the superior type belong the Slight Smile (*smita*) and the Smile (*hasita*), to those of the middling type the Gentle Laughter (*vihasita*) and the Laughter of Ridicule (*upahasita*) to those of the inferior type the Vulgar Laughter (*aphasia*) and the Violent Laughter (*atihasita*)” (Ghosh, 1950, p. 110-111). So one finds that the comic sentiment to be represented in the *Nataka* (*theatre/performance*) has to have a facial expression, with every facial muscle detailed, according to the socio-economic stratification of the character represented in the *Nataka*. Humour, here, involves use of the body to convey different sensibilities.

The text also makes it very clear that the language use is defined through their representation, which is always linked to the stratification system, different class and caste having different languages. *Natyasastra* shows how “the super-human language is for the gods, and the noble language for the kings” and “these have the quality of refinement (*samsara*) and are current over the seven great divisions (*dvipa*) of the world”. The “common language” has many forms and “contains [many] words of barbarian (*mleccha*)² origin...”. (Ghosh, 1950, p. 327). This ancient text, which is brahmanical³ and which sets out parameters of reproducing social and economic inequality and injustice, clearly and blatantly demonstrates the relationship or performance with social and economic context.

It makes its aim clear when it says that “there is no wise maxim, no learning, no art or craft, no device, no action that is not found in the drama (*natya*)” (ibid). The author/s consider its aim to provide “good counsel... will give guidance to people of the future as well in all their actions” (Ghosh, 1950, p.4). While this ancient text outlines its ideological underpinnings it also, simultaneously, tells us the implicit pedagogical role of humour in performances. And this has certainly not changed with course of history. It became more overt when theatre outlined its

¹ The first complete production is supposed to have appeared somewhere between 200BC-200AD. It is ascribed to someone called Bharat Muni but the authorship has been contested (Ghosh, 1950).

² Even people outside of the caste system were referred to as *mlecchas*.

³ Brahmanical refers to a discourse and way of life advocated towards preserving the oppressive nature of caste system, in which Brahmins are at the top of hierarchy.

political function and political groups began using it for their own ideological and political purpose (Ghosh, 2012).

Performance, Advertisement, and Pedagogy

Performance, as one of the most significant components of humour is aimed at teaching, at conveying meanings about things, which the creator of humour believes in. This creator is part of the social relations, takes sides and colours his humours in particular ways. This turns pedagogical significance of humour into a political project. Hence, when a theatrical production or an advertisement uses humour, it is a cultural production replete with meanings, purposes and functions.

Tavin argues that we are bombarded by advertisements, which "play a significant role in the symbolic and material milieu of everyday life" by shaping and often limiting "perceptions of reality." He argues for critically investigating what advertisements do such as it may "reveal how these particular forms of visual culture help to socially and culturally construct a normative vision of the world." (Tavin, 2002, p.38). Advertisements are "commodity narratives, ideological texts, and sites for affective investment, that is, locations for pleasure and desire." (Tavin, 2002, p. 39). Douglas Kellner talks of modernity as "the best and worst of things" in the sense of "its progressive advances" as well as its emphasis on "democracy and freedom" in different ways. However, it has also been critiqued for being repressive, violence and dominating. (1988, p. 31) Images have become important components of our lives as messages get communicated through them as advertisements which can be overtly political to very subtle carriers of messages and understanding about social relations. Kellner argues that "education should attend to the new image culture and should teach a critical pedagogy of reading images as part of media literacy." This will be a "radical pedagogy that attempts to get at the roots of our experience, knowledge, and behaviour...". He shows what does it mean to read images. It is about critically "learning how to appreciate, decode, and interpret images, concerning both how they are constructed and operate in our lives and what they communicate in concrete situations" (Kellner, 1988, p.34).

Funes (2008, p.159), on the other hand looks at advertising as "an enemy of the classroom" because of its pedagogical function. The television "commercials are cultural texts in which dominant ideology is codified in order to influence the audience's social representations of reality and their problems". They become powerful ideological tools "of social control. Born of, and focused on, the emotional aspect of the audience, they present value frameworks and models of homogeneous behaviour with the singular aim of driving willpower toward the market." (Funes, 2008, p.160) Advertisements become significant sources that discourage or promote lifestyles and ideologies. (Funes, 2008, p.160). They are an ideological practice and impose a "certain system of representing the world" and assign "specialised behavioural rules to people, rules that are condition by the underlying social structure of that system of representation itself." (Funes, 2008, p. 164) In order to achieve its ends what advertisement does is to produce "an informational dynamic that allows one to see certain aspects of reality while at the same time blocking other aspects from view. Its visible side is a discourse about objects, but its hidden face legitimises an entire social system" and it achieves its aim quite easily because it is "anti-dialogue" (Funes, 2008, p. 163)

Funes tells us that as a pedagogical discourse advertising includes three types of practices: "semiotic, ideological, and economic" (164). "The selective use of certain elements (framing, lighting, colour range, the location of elements within the frame, camera movements, etc.,)

provokes selective learning...” (Funes, 2008, p.164) After all, advertisements try to achieve their goal through the audiences to whom access is gained through images. And images teach us how the world is (hence, it is an interpretation), how it can be (telling audiences the good and bad of the world) and why things are the way they are (again interpretation). This whole exercise becomes an elaborately designed pedagogy. They become pedagogical tools and though they might be selling a commodity (at and *apparent* level) they, at the same time, are conveying an ideology through the images.

Humour, Politics and Pedagogy – The Case of Amul Advertisements

One of the ways in which advertisements with still photographs catch our eyes is how humorous its textual or photographic presentation is. Amul is the brand name of milk and milk products produced by the Gujarat Cooperative Milk Marketing Federation Ltd (GCMF), which had an annual turnover of around US \$7.3 Billion in 2023-24. It is the apex umbrella organisation of dairy cooperatives of Gujarat and is India's largest exporter of dairy products. The origin of Amul lies in the idea of cooperative as an alternative to the "exploitative trade practices followed by the local trade cartel". The farmers, angered and fed up with the "manipulative practices" of the local traders, had "approached the great Indian patriot Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel for a solution." They were advised to "get rid of middlemen" and form their own cooperative, which would fulfil all the roles - from procurement to marketing (Amul, undated). There was a milk strike against the cartel by the farmers in 1946 and it was supported by Sardar Patel, Morarji Desai and Tribhuvandas Patel. The same year a cooperative was formed. Verghese Kurien was entrusted with the task of running it from 1950. Lal Bahadur Shastri decided to take this approach to national level and in 1965 National Dairy Development Board was set up under Chairmanship of Verghese Kurien to set up the same model across India. It was in 1966 when Amul's mascot girl made its public appearance on hoardings. The girl is kneeling in prayer, with one eye closed and another on a pack of butter. The advertisement has words, "Give us this day our daily bread with Amul Butter". Amul advertisements have been adorning newspapers, magazines and hoardings on roadside for decades now.

In fact, the post-independent Indian state had included cooperatives as an important area of work, "as an instrument of democratic planning, combining initiative, mutual benefit and social purpose " (GoI, undated). On the ground the desire for cooperatives emerged from different material conditions. There was unrest and discontent and the post-independent India had paved way for certain aspirations, which were hampered by the moneylenders, trading cartels and the remnants of landlordism. Hence, it was quite a progressive and forward looking imagination on the ground among people. The welfarist state handled encouraged such a move and that is how the idea of co-operative milk production came to forefront. Amul cooperative must be seen in this larger perspective.

The initial advertisements of Amul were not overtly political but largely expressed the dreams of hopeful and aspiring post-independent rural India. Shyam Benegal's film *Manthan* was a generic take on these issues in the backdrop of White Revolution. Later on, its footage was used in the TV advertisements by Amul. The asserting women, the improving well-being of the rural masses and so on were engraved larger on those images. The iconic Amul girl advertisements and hoardings have been termed as capturing "the pulse of India". It made commentaries on a variety of issues such as violence against women when it came up with the advertisement after December, 2012 rape case in Delhi.

One advertisement said in huge font '*Delhi Bully!*' With a subtext of '*Amul: Arresting flavour*' while another one said '*Please remember, it's Mother India!*' With a subtext of '*Amul: Nirbhaya Bano*'⁴. It had commented on moral policing as well through the famous lines of Bollywood song - '*Pyar hua ! Inkar hua!*' (Love happened but it was denied by society!). And a subtext of '*Amul: No Opposition*'. Its effort at engendering was visible when, way back in 1979, it came up with a poster saying '*The Indian virgin needs no urging*' after an Indian school teacher was asked to go for virginity test at Heathrow Airport. The advertisement was hastily removed as British government had undertaken these tests to curb illegal immigration of women. The round eyes of the Amul girl and her partner or the caricature it makes of the policemen/women are aimed at provoking humour but at the same time also making a commentary. This commentary was strongly made when it remarked on Sanjay Gandhi's mass sterilisation campaign by saying '*We've always practised compulsory sterilisation*' and the Amul girl dressed as a nurse was holding butter in her hand. It took advantage of Anna⁵ Hazare's popular delhi stint as a protestor and had the Amul girl offering Hazare bread with butter and the poster read: '*Kha na, Hazare!*'⁶ with a subtext of '*Amul: Lokpriya makhan*' (Amul: The Popular Butter!).

While it travelled through the decades of contemporary Indian history it has clearly adopted a political idea and a position vis-a-vis what has been politically happening as seen above. Its imagery has always been that of humour expressed through the young Amul girl on the poster - her round eyes, her body language and the accompanying images from contemporary developments with short slogans. Recent times have seen explosion of nationalist sentiment across media after the right-wing political forces acquired dominance. Nationalism from an occasional mention became the excuse for the State to push any agenda and programme and it permeated the academia as well as general life of people. This permeation through the general life of people has been facilitated by the popular representations of humour such as advertisements. Amul has been no exception located within these circumstances. The political underpinning of nationalism beneath the humour of Amul advertisements go much earlier in past as well. It celebrated the Pokhran nuclear tests with the Amul girl lying on the cloud generated by nuclear explosion and caption reading '*Arms janata ka favourite!*' (Arms is people's favourite) while the subtext read '*No sanction needed*'. It also sent the message that no sanction was needed for its nuclear tests because it represented the popular will.

It celebrated the Indian attack by armed forces across border through a poster with text saying '*SURIGICAL STRIKES!*'⁷ (the font was coloured in a way and the spellings changed to show the place, Uri, where terror attacks took place) and then in a corner the subtext says '*Amul: PAKS A PUNCH!*'. The correlation that the advertisement seeks to establish through celebration of an act of army in an environment of tension between countries with a food item that one consumes daily not only tries to generate a sense of humour through spelling 'PACK' as PAK but

⁴ Literally translated it will be 'Become Fearless' and it also refers to the fictitious name of Nirbhaya given to the gang rape victim of Delhi.

⁵ Anna Hazare sat on protest in Delhi against corruption demanding framing of legislations to curb it.

⁶ This can be interpreted as Please Eat Hazare !, Don't Eat Hazare!, Food Hazare (as two words *Kha* and *na* put together would mean Food). The most acceptable interpretation will be Please Eat Hazare!

⁷ This refers to the attack by Indian Air Force in Pakistan territory (Balakot) in 2019 as a response to the terrorist attack on Indian Army camp in Kashmir.

it also routinises the act of war as a normal affair. It allows for normalisation of war like situation and within that a celebration of masculinity.

The Balakot attack by Indian Air Force⁸ was celebrated through an advertisement which said '*Air Farz!* (meaning its duty of the air force) with sub-text of '*Amul: Desh ka Dish*' (Amul: Food of India). The Amul girl is shown saluting two air force personnel walking away from their plane. Amul also tweeted "Congrats to our IAF pilots for their skill and bravery!" The Amul advertisements have demonstrated a continuity in terms of how humour becomes a part of political context within which they are located contributing to the making of the context. Its advertisements have frequent references to Pakistan and reflect the tension between the two countries. In a poster it spells 'Pakistan' as '*PakiShaitan*' (*Shaitan* means Devil) with a sub-text in the corner saying '*Amul: For trustworthy neighbours!*' When Pakistan tested nuclear weapons it came up with a poster saying '*Panic istan!*' with a sub-text of '*Amul: Test this Butter*'. One of its advertisements said '*This Pak can be licked easily*' showing a soldier sitting with a gun and in full war gear with barbed wires (perhaps the border) in background. This was statement of Indian armed force's ability to take on Pakistani armed forces. Amul's campaign joins the gamut of other imageries present in memes and countless other advertisements which contribute to the making of a nationalist discourse.

It made its political position clear when a man and women on shikara share bread with butter under the caption '*Union ke har territory mein*' (In every territory of India!). This was after the abrogation of Article 370 of Indian constitution, which provided special status to the province of Kashmir, and its subtext read: '*The real article!*'. It's contribution to the discourse critical of China during spread of corona pandemic could be seen through poster which showed people getting out of a plane including the Amul girl. It reads '*Wuhan se Yahan le Aaye..* (Have Brought here from Wuhan..!)' with the sub-text of '*Amul: Homecoming Snack*'. It established the anti-China sentiment fuelled by social media. This was further given an impetus when it came up with a poster with the Amul girl daring a dragon and text read '*Exit the Dragon?*' with the sub-text of '*Amul: Made in India*'. The advertisements, such as the ones shown above, contributed to the creation of discourses that existed at different moments in history. It is never a linear, objective image. It is always a political statement thrust at people for consumption. It is a text like any other text playing its own pedagogical role in the making and unmaking of societies and social relations.

Conclusion

Advertisement in general and the humour engraved on them in particular have become important cultural symbolisms of our time. They are instruments of public consensualisation in a way. McLaren observes that "a theory of cultural analysis -which I refer to as cultural cartography - must go beyond the superficial level of locating penises in the ice cubes of liqueur advertisements or marvelling at the reasons why Arabs like to stand closer than Americans during informal conversations" (1999, p. 255). If humour is about disruption, as mentioned above, of the orderly sphere it involves, in this sense, a possibility of rupture as well - the possible birth of a new order can also be seen when it challenges the status quo. This happens when images provoking humour - through laughter and satire – take an anti-status quoist stance. However, this works the other way when laughter is invoked by the status quo itself, which can be seen in cases of patriarchal violence

⁸ Indian Air Force planes bombed Balakot in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa area of Pakistan on 26 February 2019.

and different kinds of chauvinist tendencies. When the status quo works through humour it becomes a signifier of its ideological position. It strengthens the ideological basis of the ruling class and its politics as a pedagogical instrument with far reaching impact. Rupture and destruction of order no longer remains the function of humour in such a situation. Rather it cements the strength of the status quo. It plays a crucial role in creating a new common sense because through humour it becomes easily acceptable among people without much effort. It routinises an idea, through its easy to absorb symbolism, through laughter and humour, it becomes acceptable among the masses. Ranging from overt political manifestations to deeply embedded politics of variety of social relations humour offers an enormous landscape of pedagogical functionality that await deeper explorations as sources beyond classrooms, in the private as well as the public arena.

References

- Abrahams, D. (2021). The Social account of humour. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 51(2), 81–93. <https://doi.org/10.1017/can.2021.7>
- Amul (n.d.). *About us-The Amul Model*, available at <https://www.amul.com/m/about-us>
- Billig, M. (2005). *Laughter and ridicule: Towards a social critique of humour*. Sage Publications.
- Boal, A. (2008). *Theatre of the oppressed*. Pluto Press.
- Bourdieu, P. & Passeron, J-C. (1990). *Reproduction in education, society and culture*. Sage Publications.
- Critchley, S. (2004). *On humour*. Routledge.
- Eagleton, T. (2019). *Humour*. Yale University Press.
- Frey, H. (2004). Contagious colonial diseases in Hergé's *The Adventures of Tintin*, *Modern & Contemporary France*, 12(2), 177-188, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09639480410001693043>
- Freire, P. (2005a). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Continuum.
- Freire, P. (2005b). *Education for critical consciousness*. Continuum.
- Funes, V. S. (2008). Advertising and consumerism: A space for pedagogical practice, *Counterpoints*, 338, 159-177. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42979227>
- Geybels, H. & W. Van Herck (2011). Introduction. In H. Geybels, Hans & W. Van Herck (Eds.) *Humour and religion challenges and ambiguities* (pp.1-10). Continuum.
- Ghosh, M.(1950). *The Natyasastra: A treatise on hindu dramaturgy and histrionics, (Vol.I, Chapters I-XXVII)*. (Ascribed to Bharata Muni). Translated by Manomohan Ghosh. Asiatic Society of Bengal.
- Ghosh, A. (2012). *A history of the Jana Natya Manch: Plays for the people*. Sage Publications.
- Goatly, A. (2012). *Meaning and humour*. Cambridge University Press.
- Government of India (undated) *First five plan*. <https://niti.gov.in/planningcommission.gov.in/docs/plans/planrel/fiveyr/index1.html>
- Holm, N.(2017). *Humour as politics: The political aesthetics of contemporary comedy*. Palgrave McMillan.

- Holmes, J. (2000). Politeness, power and provocation: How humour functions in the workplace, *Discourse Studies*, 2(2), 159-185. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461445600002002>
- Jackson, T. (1993). Introduction. In T. Jackson (Ed.) *Learning through theatre: New perspectives on theatre in education* (pp.1-14, 2nd Ed.). Routledge.
- Kellner, D. (1988). Reading images critically: Toward a postmodern pedagogy, *The Journal of Education*, 170(3), 31-52. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002205748817000>
- Kumar, R. (2020, 5 March). Barbarity in the name of religion: Delhi violence and a pedagogy of hate. *Newsclick*. <https://www.newsclick.in/barbarity-name-religion-delhi-violence-and-pedagogy-hate>
- McLaren, P. (2015). *Life in schools: An introduction to critical pedagogy in the foundations of education*, (6th Ed.). Paradigm Publishers.
- McLaren, P. (2007). The Future of the past: reflections on the present state of empire and pedagogy. In P. McLaren & J. Kincheloe (Eds.) *Critical Pedagogy: Where are we now?* (pp. 289-314). Peter Lang.
- McLaren, P. (1999). *Schooling as a ritual performance: Toward a political economy of educational symbols and gestures* (3rd Edition). Rowman & Littlefield.
- Montfort, P. (2012). Yellow skin, black hair...Careful, Tintin': Hege and Orientalism, *Australasian Journal of Popular Culture*, 1(1), 33-49. https://doi.org/10.1386/ajpc.1.1.33_1
- Ross, A. (1998). *The language of humour*. Routledge.
- Tsakona, V. & Popa, D. E. (2011). *Studies in political humour: In between political critique and public entertainment*. John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Scroll (2020, January 6). JNU: WhatsApp messages planning attack traced to ABVP activists, *Scroll*. <https://scroll.in/article/948899/jnu-whatsapp-messages-planning-attack-traced-to-abvp-activists>
- Sengar, M. S. & Dwivedi, S. (2020, January 11). 37 People identified in WhatsApp group linked to JNU Attack: Sources. <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/jnu-attack-identified-37-in-unity-against-left-whatsapp-group-say-cops-2162377>
- Tavin, K. (2002). Engaging advertisement: Looking for meaning in and thorough art education. *Visual Arts Research*, 28(2). 38-47. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20716062>
- Sontag, S. (1978). *Illness as metaphor*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Watkins, C. & Mortimore, P. (1999). Pedagogy: What do we know? In P. Mortimore (Ed.), *Understanding pedagogy and its impact on learning* (pp. 1-19). Paul Chapman Publishing Ltd.

Authors

Ravi Kumar teaches Sociology at South Asian University, New Delhi. His areas of specialisation include politics of knowledge production, social movements, social theory in general and Marxism in particular, political economy of identity formation and South Asian studies. His works include [2023] *Contemporary Readings in Marxism: A Critical Introduction*; [2022] *The New Republic: Populism, Power and the Trajectories of Indian Democracy*; [2020] *Organising Against Capitalism: Remembering Rosa Luxemburg*; [2019] *Neoliberalism, Critical Pedagogy and Education*. He co-edits book series titled *Social Movements, Dissent and Transformative Action* (Routledge: Delhi).

Rama Paul teaches at Department of Germanic and Romance Studies, University of Delhi. She has studied at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi and University of Salamanca, Spain. Her works include 'La poesía escrita por mujeres hispanoamericanos en el siglo XX' (Co-authored, 2007, JNU) and translations of sociological texts on Argentinian crisis, latin American literature, and literature produced in times of fascism. Her areas of specialisation are Gender, social movements and literature in the Hispanic world.

Critical Education

criticaleducation.org

ISSN 1920-4175

Editors

Sandra Mathison, *University of British Columbia*

E. Wayne Ross, *University of British Columbia*

Associate Editors

Abraham P. DeLeon, *University of Texas at San Antonio*

Adam Renner, 1970-2010

Co-Founding and Past Editor

Stephen Petrina, *University of British Columbia*

Editorial Collective

Wayne Au, *University of Washington Bothell*

Jessica Bacon, *Montclair State University*

Jeff Bale, *University of Toronto*

Grant Banfield, *Flinders University*

Dennis Beach, *University of Gothenburg*

Kristen Buras, *Georgia State University*

Paul R Carr, *Université du Québec en Outaouais*

Lisa Cary, *Murdoch University*

Antonio J. Castro, *University of Missouri*

Erin L. Castro, *University of Utah*

Alexander Cuenca, *Indiana University*

Noah De Lissovoy, *University of Texas at Austin*

Ardavan Eizadirad, *Wilfred Laurier University*

Gustavo Fischman, *Arizona State University*

Derek R. Ford, *DePauw University*

Four Arrows, *Fielding Graduate University*

David Gabbard, *Boise State University*

Rich Gibson, *San Diego State University*

Panayota Gounari, *UMass, Boston*

Keith Heggart, *University of Technology Sydney*

Dave Hill, *Anglia Ruskin University*

Nathalia E. Jaramillo, *Kennesaw State University*

Richard Kahn, *Antioch University Los Angeles*

Gianna Katsiampoura, *University of Athens*

Harper Keenan, *University of British Columbia*

Kathleen Kesson, *Long Island University*

Ashwani Kumar, *Mount Saint Vincent University*

Ravi Kumar, *South Asian University*

Saville Kushner, *Drew University*

Yulong Li, *The Chinese University of Hong Kong*

John Lupinacci, *Washington State University*

Kevin R. Magill, *Baylor University*

Alpesh Maisuria, *University of East London*

Curry Stephenson Malott, *West Chester University*

Gregory Martin, *University of Technology Sydney*

Cris Mayo, *University of Vermont*

Peter Mayo, *University of Malta*

Peter McLaren, *Chapman University*

Shahrazad Mojab, *University of Toronto*

João Paraskeva, *University of Strathclyde*

Lana Parker, *University of Windsor*

Brad Porfilio, *California State University, Stanislaus*

Marc Pruyn, *University of the Sunshine Coast*

Lotar Rasinski, *University of Lower Silesia*

Leena Robertson, *Middlesex University*

Sam Rocha, *University of British Columbia*

Edda Sant, *University of Manchester*

Doug Selwyn, *SUNY Plattsburgh*

Özlem Sensoy, *Simon Fraser University*

Patrick Shannon, *Penn State University*

Steven Singer, *The College of New Jersey*

Kostas Skordoulis, *University of Athens*

John Smyth, *Federation Univ. Australia*

Hannah Spector, *Boston Psychoanalytic Society & Institute*

Marc Spooner, *University of Regina*

Inna Stepaniuk, *Simon Fraser University*

Paolo Vittoria, *University of Naples Federico II*