

# Humour to Address the Issue of Caste: A Reference to Some Comic Shorts

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Short movies have been increasingly creative and unconventional as a parallel genre to feature films, using narrative techniques. Caste questions in feature films are blurred or ruled out with the blanketing justification of aesthetics. Convenient categories of rich and poor binary replace caste to bend the movies down for suitable consumption. Suraj Yengde, in “Caste in Contemporary Bollywood Movies: An Analysis of the Portrayal of Characters,” observes that Indian cinema as a project has failed to include diversity and inclusion. He adds that even artistic movies that deal with caste issues display only the pain and sufferings of Dalits, preceding the vibrant aspects of their lives. On the other end of the spectrum, comic short movies capture nuances and complexities of the caste system using satire, parody and humour to present Dalit issues in a modern, radical way, countering the pitfalls of caste hegemony. This paper explores three short comic movies made on the Indian caste system to bring out their difference from feature films, which would, to some extent, confirm and proliferate myths surrounding the dominant ideologies of caste. The comic short movie medium, sidetracking the commercial formulas of cult movies, does not avoid portraying disturbing questions concerning caste. Adopting a light, humorous tone, the short movies engage the readers in a lively banter to parody the modern, sophisticated manifestations of casteism. The short movies synthesise diversity and inclusion of marginal cultures instead of presenting Indian society as monolithic. The bleakness and seriousness surrounding caste issues give way to a balanced outlook propped by comic narration.

The function of humour in dealing with weighty issues is an exciting gamut of study. Bryant writes that jokes can go under the radar, act like a valve and offer a way of coping (qtd. in Weaver 34). Marjolein Hart, who studies the correlation between humour

and social protest in the context of some movements like Zapatistas in Mexico and Vietnamese garment workers, establishes the significant role of humour in forming the collective identity of social movements that served as a powerful tool for the weak (1). Witkins defines humour as a buffer against stress, a social lubricant and something capable of diffusing a crisis or situation. The comic vision may help in regaining a sense of control. He believes humour depends on contradictions and surprises and has therapeutic, iconoclastic functions (101). He writes, “Not all humour expresses social criticism or helps people cope with difficult situations. Like other language forms, humour is subject to manipulation by powerful interests. It can also deprecate a group, reinforce harmful stereotypes, or even invalidate its language” (Witkins 103).

Pa Ranjith’s *Neelam Social* has primarily addressed the issue of caste bifurcation in society. Short movies like *Burn*, *Until They Reach You*, *Kadhai Kelu*, *Meow*, *The Voices*, *Pachai Nilam*, and *Aya Mask* deal with serious social issues. The paper’s purview includes Pa. Ranjith’s comic short movies *The Discreet Charm of the Savarnas*, *Share Auto* and *Modi and a Beer*.

## PARODY OF THE SHALLOW SOCIAL CRUSADERS IN *THE DISCREET CHARM OF THE SAVARNAS*

Being Dalit is an experience that deals with discrimination and bias that forms the range of some stark social realities on one hand and the other, involving subtle forms of manipulation and condescending attitudes. Directed by Rajesh Rajamani and presented by Pa. Ranjith through his *Neelam Social*, the short movie *The Discreet Charm of the Savarnas* is a parody of the shallow crusaders of social change. A team of young, budding artists

wants to make a short movie on a Dalit-centric theme, and they need a person who looks like a Dalit. By wanting to find an actor who looks like a Dalit, they intend to find a dark-skinned person with a beaten look on his/her face. In their search, they meet a young, sophisticated, pretty woman who stuns everyone with confidence and urbane suave. The three-person team decides that she is an anathema to play the character. They ultimately decide upon one of them who is more suitable to play the character—a person with a sad, gullible expression on his face. The irony lies in the fact that their understanding of reality is limited to the stereotypical assumptions of Dalit lives, which provokes humour and criticism at the same time. The humour used here is not antagonistic, alienating the main characters representing the upper caste. A Chekhovian humour gently pokes the characters on their ignorance. The movie hilariously features the team's journey to find an actor contrasting their theoretical, populist assumptions about the Dalits. Steeped in the stereotypes concerning Dalit lives without any knowledge about the actual political circumstances, they refuse to accept the dynamic socio-cultural political realities. Being blind to everyday happenings in the city and with shallow perceptions, they hope to create something that would result in the emancipation of the Dalits. This irony forms the crux of the projection of the upper caste people, historically called the Savarnas, in Indian society. Discreet charm is a phrase used by Luis Bunuel to mean "other indifference", "complete complacency", and "complete detachment from reality" of the ruling class. The suggestiveness of the title leads the viewers to the predictable spaces of understanding. The humour directed at the Savarnas also offers a perspective on another dimension of "othering", "exoticisation", and "exclusion" that silently but vehemently carry out the casteist distinctions in the society.

This short movie exploits reverse discourse to counter casteist stereotypes by using identical signs of an earlier discourse for a reverse semantic effect (Weaver 33). The movie counters both embodied and cultural stereotypes concerning Dalits as it reverses the savagery/civilization dichotomy and sex stereotypes of the upper caste people. Reversal discourse subverts stereotypical depictions of language use, mannerisms and dispositions.

Appropriation of the earlier discourses concerning stereotypical projections counters, but it also tends to reproduce the same. Reverse discourse also adds a comic layer to the discourse. The movie uses the stereotypes concerning Dalits and reverses the stereotypes, adding a further semantic layer to the "basic rhetorical structure of humour" (Weaver 34). Placing reversal in a comic incongruity increases the structural potential for generating semantic movement: "The additional layering complicates the interaction between anti-racist meaning, racist meaning and the rhetorical effect of humour" (Weaver 34). Cantwell affirms, "By parodying the parody itself, will rise above the stereotypes" (*qtd.* in Weaver 35). They also challenge the notions of alterity (Bill Ashcraft), where the represented other is different from the authorial self, "Humour increases its polysemia through the material of reversal, ambiguity increases, fixed meanings become more unlikely to appear and the potential for multifarious political and ethical interpretations map themselves onto the socio-linguistic space" (Weaver 44).

#### REVERSAL OF CIVILIZATION AND SAVAGERY DICHOTOMY IN *SHARE AUTO*

Laughter and smile in some contexts can be offensive, and using them against caste superficialities/hierarchies can be particularly bold. A woman waiting for an auto expresses disdain when an auto stops for her. The odds of sharing the auto with a woman who looked 'different' make the prospect hostile to her. Sweltering in the heat of the midday sun and burdened with luggage, she shares the auto, but not before maintaining a clear apartheid from her. She sits on the edge of the seat, avoiding touching the woman. In a herculean effort to avoid contact with the 'other' woman, the woman sits on the edge of the chair and gets hurt. The other woman, watching the discrimination quietly, takes time to react. She puts on her earphones and then breaks into a smile. She is careful not to be offensive, taking pleasure in someone's pain. The subtle yet overt act of discriminating against a fellow woman and the smile of the other woman who does not want to offend is the reversal of the civilized/savage dichotomy. The smile on the other woman's face is also evocative of repression and unofficial taboo. The smile's critical dimension is unthreatening yet

unmasks the implicit resistance towards discrimination and othering. The smile bridges the two disparate worlds while debunking inconsistencies between the evident and the covert.

In “Caste Indicators and Caste Identification of Strangers”, James M Sebring speaks of caste markers that people in India use to designate lower caste people. The acknowledgement of caste comes with recognizing the caste markers on the body – the skin color, dress code, jewellery, facial features and linguistic traits. The unspoken recognition and treatment are what make the functioning of the Indian caste system covert and complex. People do not speak about caste, and they assume about the caste origins, looking at the traits, which usually backfires most of the time as it does in *The Discreet Charm of the Savarnas*. Suppression of laughter by the woman in the face of ridicule, discrimination and ill-treatment is another reversal of discourse on the savagery/civilization dichotomy.

Through the smile, the subtle, unexpected table turning becomes the weapon to dismantle the discrimination levelled upon her. Here, the humour operates on two levels: for the majority, the message conveyed results in humour and for the oppressed class; it signals resistant effort at the double standards of casteism, its bigoted practices and its egalitarian facade. The restricted smile is also a safe critique of the ludicrous efforts of the woman to maintain her distance, the modern manifestation of sustaining untouchability practice. The smile bespeaks the resilience effort of the woman to cope and endure the hardships of daily life as Witkins gives another dimension to the connecting power of jokes, “The shared reality of oppression among members of a group make the jokes comprehensible” (103).

#### DIFFERENCE AS A POINT OF OPERATION IN *MODI AND A BEER*

This movie, *Modi and a Beer*, banks upon wit to drive home the layers of hierarchies in Indian society. The production team calls this movie to be a tragic-comedy. A girl and a boy come together for love. At first glance, they look like two youths in their twenties, with no remarkable differences that set them apart. The short movie, directed by Dhinah Chandra Mohan and presented by Pa. Ranjith, begins with the girl in the film trying to make the bottle of

beer her man drinks his last. Shruthi, acting as a caring girlfriend concerned about her fiancé’s drinking habit, makes Arun swear on the bottle that he would never drink again. The boy’s readiness to oblige seems like a leap of faith done in the relationship’s best interest, for the girl and himself. They also seem to partake in a world imprinted by shared faith and love. At the boy’s request, she orders chicken wings. When he enquires with the waiter if beef chilly is available, the disapproving expression on the girl’s face temporarily shatters their shared world and splits it into two. The talk about love, their efforts to convince their families, and their marriage only magnify their differences in an ugly fashion. She casually comments that it is not a big deal that the boy’s family agreed to their marriage, but it was an absolute miracle that her ‘tam-brahm’ family agreed. The discordant notes ring with this claim, as the boy demands to know why their families are different. The seemingly same world they both inhabited that made them act in faith shows deep fissures of differences as their identities get the better of them. In her defense, the girl relates her identity to her family, gender, caste, community, political leadership and ideology allegiance. This self-identification of the girl in the background of her affiliations mirrors him as somebody disparate in his food habits, family, cultural background, caste and class. The point of departure for the boy’s behavior towards the girl starts at this level when the girl claims her superior difference.

At this juncture of the movie, it is easy to make any simplified analysis of the power dynamics of two polarities created by caste, class and culture. However, Arun is not meek to be the victim of their unequal relationship. From the conversation between the duo, it becomes apparent that he belongs to one of the backward yet dominant communities. The anti-Brahmanical stances are loud in his thoughts shared with the girl. He talks about reservations, criticizes community pride, and condemns food politics. He is unsure of his family encouraging an inter-caste marriage if his sister were to marry a man from a lower caste. Though he projects himself as liberal, feminist (as claimed by him), and informed, he betrays himself as a misinformed misogynist. The antagonistic reaction of the boy takes on more than caste or class, as he becomes toxic masculine. He challenges the cultural rift that his food preferences

may create. He questions the girl about her texting, male friends, outings, and travelling, leaving a suspicious net on her morality, upbringing and character. He transforms into a nagging boyfriend, grilling her about her late-night chats, WhatsApp last seen time, her friendship with another man, and her frequent travels. What begins as an act of faith and love is a power game involving many other complex factors. The movie ends with the girl breaking up with him, asserting her morality, and the boy seems to be in deep trouble over the situation that overpowered his control.

The movie begins with a quote from Periyar E Ramsamy, “The way a man treats a woman is much worse than the way high caste treat the low caste and the landlords treat servants.” Instead of looking at the quote from the point of view of the movie’s representation of male oppression of women, it can be a lens to understand different nuances of hierarchy. Thrown into an unexpected circumstance where the couple has to deal with prodigious issues connecting intricate segments of their identity, they willingly look beyond the things that connected them in the first place and brought them close to marriage; they instead claim their differences in a way to sabotage each other in their penchant for bloated sense of superiority.

Comic short movies analyzed in this paper function by working on the micro realities of the more extensive system that could reflect the general behavioral patterns of people. They hold the mirror up to the whole society, projecting the minute ways in which they engage with the world. The comic mode allows grey areas of contradictions, paradoxes and inconsistencies. They offer a massive space for negotiations and flexibility. Despite dealing with the caste system, the movies also provide travails of existence. They do not exhibit a sense of discomfort while coping with the weighty issues.

On the other hand, serious short movies on caste present a stereotypical representation of the world, evoking predictable responses from the viewers. Comic shorts are warm, embracing, and satirical. The characters are not devoid of agency and act as autonomous humans who are not subalterns.

However, two aspects of comic shorts can be counterproductive in their role in reversal discourse. First, the danger of appropriation is that it reaffirms the hierarchy’s legitimacy by directing discourse on

them. This process problematizes when the set cultural paradigms will absorb into the critical confrontation and legitimise the artistic practices that paved the way for cultural domination/imperialism. There is a danger of acknowledging while trying to displace cultural centrality. Secondly, as Witkin remarks, “Humour can co-exist with the serious, but not with the sombre” (104). Does humour have a place in dealing with bleaker issues like caste murders, rapes and atrocities? In “Taking Humour Seriously”, Stanley L. Witkin argues that humour risks making light of severe problems in the context of social work. The short movies probed in this paper show only subtle, refined manifestations of the caste psyche that prompt us to think if humour can embrace casteism’s raw, cruel manifestations. Jocularly in treating grave issues is possible, but it might invoke the possibility of making them seem ludicrous and out of place. Like many possibilities of humour, it can submerge violence by highlighting the absurdity of situations and characters, the solid tropes from which humour can spring. The criminality of the characters is exposed, yet can the comic mode also endear the criminality projected by characters to the audience? Further research in the area could substantiate this.

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