

## Standup Comedies in Hindi and Marathi

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Comedy has played a very important role in literature, theatre and cinema to evoke laughter and to derive pleasure, lighten up and enliven the atmosphere. Humor is packaged in several forms, of which the genre of standup comedy is an interesting evolution of ancient traditions evoking debate and dialogue in societies where means of communicating frankly were limited. This paper looks at how standup comedy, a modern phenomenon in India, has managed to gain rapid popularity as well as enabled to provide a platform to engage in a critical dialogue.

### *Free-Spoken-ness in medieval times (Foucault's parrhêsia and Bakhtin's carnivalesque)*

In the ancient Greek and Roman civilizations and morality code of those times, Michel Foucault has discussed in depth, is the concept of parrhêsia. A great emphasis was laid on the principle that one should tell the truth about oneself. Parrhêsia is "telling all." The parrhêsia is the person who says everything; (anything that comes to mind, anything that serves the cause one is defending, anything that serves the passion or interest driving the person who is speaking) which sometimes makes the parrhêsia a chatterbox<sup>1</sup>, but this is not without risk. The parrhêsia gives his opinion, he says what he thinks, he personally signs, as it were, the truth he states, he binds himself to this truth, and he is consequently bound to it and by it. In speaking the truth one must open up, establish, and confront the risk of offending the other person, of irritating him, of making him angry and provoking him to conduct which may even be extremely violent. So it is the truth subject to risk of violence<sup>2</sup>. The parrhêsia leaves nothing to interpretation. Certainly, he leaves something to be done: he leaves the person he addresses with the tough task of having the courage to accept this truth, to recognize it, and to make it a principle of conduct (Foucault, 1984).

In ancient culture telling the truth about oneself was an activity involving several people, an activity with other people, and even more precisely an activity with one other person, a practice for two (In modern times, this other person could be the psychiatrist, doctor, psychoanalyst, psychologist etc.) whilst in the ancient times, it could've been a professional philosopher, a friend, mentor and so on. The form of this person varied but remains indispensable for telling the truth and may not confine to the institutional or approved dialogue with a 'qualified or certified psychiatrist'. But rather involves a practice, a certain way of speaking, which is called, in Foucault's terms, parrhêsia (free-spokenness).

Mikhail Bakhtin in his works, "Dostoevsky's problem of Poetics", draws up the concept of 'carnival' (translated as *carnivalesque*) which refers to a literary mode that subverts and liberates the assumptions of the dominant style or atmosphere through humor and chaos. Bakhtin traces the origins of the carnivalesque to the concept of carnival. In Rabelais and his

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<sup>1</sup> Not only must this truth really be the personal opinion of the person who is speaking, but he must say it as being what he thinks, [and not] reluctantly — and this is what makes him a parrhêsia. But this is not enough. For after all, a teacher, a grammarian or a geometer, may say something true about the grammar or geometry they teach, a truth which they believe, which they think. And yet we will not call this parrhêsia. We will not say that the geometer and grammarian are parrhêsia when they teach truths which they believe. For there to be parrhêsia, you recall—I stressed this last year—the subject must be taking some kind of risk [in speaking this truth which he signs as his opinion, his thought, his belief, a risk which concerns his relationship with the person to whom he is speaking.]

<sup>2</sup> In the Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle lays stress on the connection between parrhêsia and courage when he links what he calls megalopsukhia (greatness of soul) to the practice of parrhêsia.

World, written by Bakhtin, with reference to the carnival fest, social hierarchies of everyday life—their solemnities, pieties and etiquettes, as well as, all ready-made truths—are profaned and overturned by normally suppressed voices and energies. Thus, fools become wise, kings become beggars; opposites are mingled (fact and fantasy, heaven and hell). Essentially, all were considered equal during the carnival and are not merely a crowd but rather a collective mass defying socioeconomic and political organization (Mikhail Bakhtin, Clark and Holquist 302).

*Standup comedy: A modern interpretation of parrhesia*

The verbal art of performing stand-up comedy provides the same cultural function as carnival... Carnival is a regulated act of subversion, in that it fails “to do away with the official dominant culture, its licensed complicity” (Stallybrass & White, 1986, p. 19). The evolution of the parrhêsia in the carnivalesque atmosphere in the modern space is what piqued my interest. One of the successful translations or transgressions of this genre blend is the standup comedy setup. It might sound exaggerated for starters, but the more I read about the ancient forms of social dialogue and their settings, the more I am inclined to believe that the genre of standup is a finely evolved platform which defines, according to Victor Turner, “the ways in which a group or community seeks to portray, understand and then act on itself”. Rituals of performance (viz. theatre, standup, etc.) are opportunities for society to explore, affirm, deny and to ultimately change its structures and values.

*Who is a standup comedian?*

George Denis Patrick Carlin, an American stand-up comedian, actor, social critic, and author. Regarded as one of the most important and influential stand-up comics of all time he said, "I think it's the duty of the comedian to find out where the line is drawn and cross it deliberately."

The stand-up comedian, a modern version of the Shakespearean fool character, having the license to defy social norms and accepted behavioural patterns, is exempted from the expectation of normal behaviour. The comedian is defective in certain mannerisms and it is due to these abnormalities that the comedian becomes a marginal character, incapable of ‘normal’ action (Mintz, 74). The comedian ridicules these failings, shortcomings, his socially unacceptable ways, and in a way, to justify his social rejections. Therefore, the ‘superior’ audience, not only laughs at him but is also willing to forgive his incongruences. However, the role of the comedian as a butt of the audience’s humor, is less important, than his role as a comic spokesperson, a mediator, an ‘articulator’ of the culture, thereby adorning the role of the anthropologist (Koziski, 57-76 in Mintz).

The standup-comedian emerges as the quintessential example of social humour. This role adorned by the comedian as the social commentator to speak the ‘truth’ that is politically or socially taboo yet is universally recognised. As Freud interestingly proposed, there is a constant battle between our instincts and the socially developed rules of behaviour, and comedy provides an opportunity for a staged antagonism.

He is that guy amongst us who does and says what most of us wish we dared to say.

### *What comprises of a standup act?*

Simply put, the standup comedy is a solo act in which a comedian comes on stage and delivers a pre-prepared routine, comprising of jokes and stories delivered for the sake of humor. The standup gig is a well-rehearsed performance, a result of practice and careful refinement, finding your presence on the stage and calibrating/modulating your voice to sound authentic and maximise the impact of your jokes on the audience<sup>3</sup>. The standup acts are often performed at “open mic” nights, where absolutely any standup comedian, aspiring or established, performs an act in front of an audience comprising of other standup comedians, agents, talent bookers, casting professionals, film directors and any other type of entertainment professional checking out the “up and coming” comedy talent<sup>4</sup>.

The roots of standup comedy are entwined with rites, rituals and dramatic experiences than simply an encounter between a single, standing performer behaving in a comic manner and/or saying funny things directly to an audience, in a basic setup void of costume, prop or setting. (Mintz, 71).

### *Central element around which a standup act evolves: Humor*

The aspect most central to the art of stand-up is humor. According to Brodie (2014)<sup>5</sup>, humor emerges through the comedian “grounding [the stories] in an experiential, protoethnographic act; reflective, by endeavoring to interpret that experience; perspectival, by taking a particular position for interpretation; critical, by privileging that position; and, above all, vernacular, by locating it in the local rather than the universal.” Instead of external tools and props, the stand-up comedians elicit humor through verbal information, vocal cues and non-verbal expression such as facial displays and gestures. The stand-up comedy is based equally on a theatrical & stylized representation by the comedian which intensifies the verbal content of the jokes themselves (Franklin Jr. & Adams Jr., pp. 509-510).

### *Standup in the modern era:*

In the modern times, standup comedy has been a standard and popular form of entertainment in the United States and Great Britain, which also experienced the rise of the vaudeville and burlesque theatre forms of the early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries<sup>6</sup>.

The new wave of comedy, is a more socially and politically satiric insightful act and presents the comedian as informal, casually dressed, using fewer punch lines but improvising spontaneously and engaging in a repartee with the live audience seated in front whilst simultaneously criticising the current popular culture, political and conventional social behaviorisms. One of the major causes that the open mics have gained popularity is the changing society and the urge to speak up. Linking it to the concept of parrhêsia, standup could be considered as opportunities for society to explore, affirm, deny and to ultimately change its structures and values can. These social structures and values are debated and

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.backstage.com/magazine/article/become-standup-comedian-2468/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.realfirststeps.com/568/comedy-open-mic-ready/>

<sup>5</sup> Brodie, Ian. *A Vulgar Art – A New Approach to Stand-Up Comedy*. University Press of Mississippi, 2014.

<sup>6</sup> A type of entertainment popular chiefly in the US in the early 20th century, featuring a mixture of specialty acts such as burlesque comedy and song and dance. A typical vaudeville performance was made up of a series of separate, unrelated acts grouped together on a common bill. Types of acts have included popular and classical musicians, singers, dancers, comedians, trained animals, magicians, strongmen, female and male impersonators, acrobats, illustrated songs, jugglers, one-act plays or scenes from plays, athletes, lecturing celebrities, minstrels, and movies.

questioned by the comedian in today's times. Naturally, given that social structures differ in different societies around the world, the subject matter of the standup act also varies. Therefore, a stereotypical joke on blondes and perhaps Ivanka Trump's clothing sense can evoke a lot of laughter or hoots in the US but may not have the same effect in South Africa.

#### *The Joke as a nucleus of the standup act:*

Set of jokes comprise as the subject matter of the standup act. A joke essentially is made up of two parts: The setup/the building of the story/context and the punch line, a surprise, which comes at the end. The art of gliding from one punchline into another seamlessly and simultaneously canvassing through diverse subjects (from individual idiosyncrasies to politics) determines the quality of a good standup act. The jokes use techniques as classified by Schwarz (2010) into four classifications. The classifications are; Paralanguage (intonation and body language), Ridicule (display impoliteness and aggressiveness), Satire (make fun of people superior to oneself), Power, Solidarity and Politeness. Then, she also classifies the figurative language in standup comedy; Wordplay, Puns, Ambiguity, Implication and Allusion.

The subject matter of the jokes broadly ranges around:

- Sexism: Male/ female/ (sensitive) trans
- Family & Society: Family as a complicated microcosm of any society and the impact of social trends and pressures on families, relatives.
- Regionality/Topicality, for e.g. globalised jokes (global context with a local flavor) or jokes typical to a region, often delivered in a local language to maximise impact.
- Religion & Race: a very sensitive area and often standup comedians require to be careful not to "hurt sentiments".
- Politics: Political satire is a subject area that has always existed since societies formed structures with a governing head. Standup acts function as mouthpieces to voice and critique the establishment and the established order. However, with a distinct rise in autocratic powers all over the world, standup acts are now emerging increasingly political and fearless in content. There are standup comedians who pride in delivering politically incorrect acts because of a certain responsibility they take on as the voice of the common man. Often, they are subject to death threats and political bullying which can act as a dissuasion. Ironically though, these threats also symbolize that there is some truth in their content. More on this later.

#### *Standup Comedy in India*

Where one has established names in the standup comedy business in the US and UK, viz. Jerry Seinfeld, Eddie Murphy, Chris Rock in the 90s and the new wave of immigrant / mixed race standup comedians like Russell Peters, Hasan Minhaj in the recent years (and many more), the development of standup comics in its current form India is quite a recent phenomenon. But, a country which prides on 'freedom of speech' as a fundamental right and where communication to the masses for the masses (although predominantly philosophical and religious discourse and dialogue) has been a tradition since centuries and has been present in the Indian regional fabric as frank mode of dialogue. Standup up has indeed been existent

at the regional level in North India or the Deccan in the format of a *mushaira*, a distinct part of an Indo-Islamic culture that took root and grew in India right from the Mughal era<sup>7</sup>. A Mushaira is poetic symposium, where poets would gather to read their compositions crafted in accordance to a strict metrical pattern, agreed upon beforehand, even while meeting a certain loftiness of thought and is regarded as a forum for free self-expression<sup>8</sup>. Closer to my home in Maharashtra, the name P.L. Deshpande, fondly called as PuLa, a Marathi writer and humorist from the 1960s was also an accomplished film and stage actor, script writer, author, composer, musician, singer and orator. He made the Marathi population laugh at their foibles and follies, helping them retain their faith in humanism, pluralism and democratic values<sup>9</sup>. Nevertheless, these remain catering to “a” geographic population in India.

The standup genre in its current mainstream form in India can be attributed to two origins:

1. Opening of the British Brand Comedy Store, a standalone comedy club in Mumbai in 2010, its subsequent closure due to shareholder disputes and reopening as the now famously known Canvas Laugh Factory. The location offers open mic nights where one gets an opportunity to perform, mostly in English or “Hinglish” (Hindi+English). The crowd here is primarily urban and predominantly young and therefore it is not surprising that the content caters to a limited city-bred, middle-upper class comfortable in conversing and with a flair for the English language.
2. Commercialisation and consequent popularization of the Hindi standup comedy act through the television show the Great Indian Laughter Challenge, first aired in June 2005 which was aired for five seasons until 2017 and has produced some of the most renowned Hindi standup comedians of the day.

The standup genre is rapidly gaining popularity and criticism especially amongst the young who are becoming socially and politically aware and who believe in voicing their opinions without being censored. India being a diverse country with plenitude of cultures and languages, one of the crucial unifying factor for the country remains the Independence struggle and a persistent remnant of the colonial past: the English language which has evolved as its own variety, namely, Indian English, a pidgin variety of the British English. However, there is one more occurrence that has had and is having a deep impact on the Indian population. Over the last seven odd years ever since the right-wing government has taken over the reins of Indian politics, the country has been deeply polarized and opinionated like never before, which oddly has also bound and “distracted” the Indian youth and diaspora today. Needless to say, the exploding of the Internet and smartphones within India is making the Indian population thirsty and almost belligerent to know more and to be updated with the latest information and global trends at their fingertips. (The number of smartphone users in India was estimated to reach over 760 million in 2021, with the number of smartphone users worldwide forecasted to exceed to 3.8 billion users in 2021<sup>10</sup>.)

With exposure to Internet, the increasing Indian middle class is exposed to social media channels such as Facebook and YouTube, open mediums with a plethora of options to watch

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.sundayguardianlive.com/culture/mushaira-culture-throes-new-awakening>

<sup>8</sup> [https://preetk.wordpress.com/2013/09/05/for-the-love-of-poetry-mughals-mushairas/?e\\_pi=7%2CPAGE\\_ID10%2C1260630951](https://preetk.wordpress.com/2013/09/05/for-the-love-of-poetry-mughals-mushairas/?e_pi=7%2CPAGE_ID10%2C1260630951)

<sup>9</sup> [http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/66674448.cms?utm\\_source=contentofinterest&utm\\_medium=text&utm\\_campaign=cppst](http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/66674448.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst)

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/467163/forecast-of-smartphone-users-in-india/>

and voice your opinions freely on. These are portals that help one to speak up and speak out on the existing social patterns as comedian Anu Menon calls: a 'sweet knife' (Someone who makes a cut, hurts but softly); though these come with a danger of distorted and contorted facts that have the ability to set off and spark debates with no proof of grounding or no viable and truthful origins. But over and above, as Quirke describes, the idea that stand-up comics move moral boundaries to aid the creation of a performative 'safe space,' sees taking shape and adapting to the Indian context.

Especially in the pandemic times, where live audience standup gigs are not possible, YouTube, Amazon Prime and Netflix have come up with options and shows for stand up artists giving them the lucrative opportunity to perform and record bite sized videos in front of a virtual audience, thereby defying geographical boundaries. These new avenues have enabled regional standup comedians, to engage with audiences beyond their physical reach. Comedians, that come from humble and middle-class backgrounds, I'd like to name a few, Zakir Khan, Sanjay Rajoura, Varun Grover, have over the years managed to touch the nerve of the Hindi audiences. Their topics range from dark skin, fatness, stereotypical looks, basically physical characteristics prevalent in the Indian social and gender contexts to voicing political opinions critiquing the government. Notwithstanding, they do differentiate and distinguish themselves from the English Indian standup scene which often has the comedian coming from a good, educated background and catering to the urban, upper middle-class audience.

I couldn't find a Hindi clip with English subtitles touching on the political scene in India, but I would like to show a short excerpt from the documentary on Indian standup comedians, *I am offended*, directed by Jaideep Verma in 2016. (Beginning with Sanjay Rajoura, end with Varun Grover 28:48-30:08)

In these 2 minutes one notices several underlying conceptions and opinions on:

1. English vs Hindi language drifts in India
2. Corrupt government and Terrorism
3. Religious intolerance in Indian audiences
4. How the sense of humor, an ability to laugh at oneself is still in the process of evolution amongst the Indian masses.
5. Most critically, a revolutionary voice against curbing of a democratic voice and hinting at the Freedom of Speech, a fundamental right of every democracy.

Political standup comedy is a standalone topic for research, and I would, for now, prefer to focus essentially on standup as a genre for entertainment as well as to address social stereotypes and taboos from an Indian context. For today's purpose, I had to choose a clip with English subtitles for the sake of convenience. The clip is from a Sikh standup comedian, Angad Singh Ranyal, who performs in Hinglish. The clip is about 'losing weight'. Noticeable stereotypes he touches upon with suave and humour:

1. Indian mothers force-feeding their children, for them to not be compared with African (therefore hungry, poor, homeless) kids.

The stereotyping here of the African as a country, with dark skin as an under-developed region, and in recent years, association of Africa with famine, war, AIDS, poverty and political corruption<sup>11</sup>. Ironically, India is also very often stereotyped as one huge country where people speak Indian and live in jungles with elephants and snakes and where women are raped every day. However, it is a common misconception amongst Indians that Africans are worse off than Indians and the dark skin complex from which Indians suffer, thanks to colonization for e.g., are applied to Africans liberally as they may have a darker-toned complexion than Indians.

2. Sharing of material resources amongst relatives and family. Pretty much no private space.

We are talking of a country with a current population density of India in 2021 is 423.88 people per square kilometer<sup>12</sup> which is steadily growing (China in 2021 is 151.02, Germany in 2021 is 234.63). Also, the concept of private spaces comes from countries with lesser population and a core of individualistic values. Personal zones vary across cultures, professions, personal preferences and affluence (more affluent persons demand more personal space). Also, those living in densely populated environments (India) tend to have smaller space requirements<sup>13</sup>.

3. Getting a job, Marriage and as a result gaining weight are defined as “settling down” for an Indian man.

- Studies have shown that a weight gain of about 20 pounds is average among people who get married as after the wedding, lifestyle patterns change, leading to more food consumed and less activity.<sup>14</sup>
- In India, this is also considered as a sign of prosperity, in a sense symbolizing that there is no dearth of food to consume.

So, literally within two minutes, the standup comedian has not only touched domestic topics as well as international misnomers and has managed to deliver these in a language that is understood and empathized by the audience.

From here, we move on to the Marathi standup comedy, an even more nascent cousin of the Hinglish and Hindi Standup scene after the P.L Deshpande literary era. I'd like to introduce the BhaDiPa (Bharatiya Digital Party) portal, and as per their website: They are a completely non-political, undemocratic & politically incorrect, so it's a Party! BhaDiPa is a collective of creators on the cutting-edge of Marathi language content. We make fresh, original, and global-minded stories and live events.<sup>15</sup>

Some of the creators infact belonged to the same school and college that I went to in Pune, in Maharashtra and have emerged extremely popular by sarcastically commenting on the Marathi middle-class attitude which differs and somehow struggles in an inferiority complex from the Mumbai English-speaking classy and sassy population.

Sarang Sathaye, one of the co-founders of BhaDiPa, is one of the content creators for standup scene in Maharashtra. I'd like to show this third clip by him, where he speaks

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.thoughtco.com/common-stereotypes-about-africa-2834943>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/IND/india/population-density>

<sup>13</sup> [https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/personal-space-proxemics/articleshow/2252840.cms?utm\\_source=contentofinterest&utm\\_medium=text&utm\\_campaign=cppst](https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/personal-space-proxemics/articleshow/2252840.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst)

<sup>14</sup> [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/marriage-weight-gain\\_n\\_2688106](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/marriage-weight-gain_n_2688106)

<sup>15</sup> <https://bhadipa.com/about>

about how provincial Pune is and how lazy people from Pune are, and carry an arrogant attitude of being the best because they do not know better. (Jagaat Bhari video, 2:28-3:48).

What highlights and conceptions of Pune are addressed as per this clip:

1. How Pune and people of Pune are provincial in nature: This symbolizes a certain arrogance that has emerged in Pune over time, due to several historical reasons.
  - From a historical perspective, Pune has played an important role in shaping the political landscape of Maharashtra, especially during the rule of the Peshwas in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The Peshwas, the first brahmin rulers in Maharashtra also established the Marathi language of Pune as the “standard language” and a centre for rich cultural and heritage. Today it is considered as the “Cultural capital of Maharashtra”.
  - Under the British rule, in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Poona, as it was then called, became the “Monsoon Capital” of the British Presidency where also a large military cantonment was established, and which exists until today.
  - The 1800s also witnessed tremendous activity in setting up schools and colleges by early nationalists. Currently, the renowned Pune University has 811 affiliated colleges making it the second largest in India. According to a news article, of all the foreign students travelling to India for education, 45% come to Pune<sup>16</sup>. With more than hundred educational institutes and nine universities, Pune is well known for its literary circuit and has been considered as the ‘Oxford of the East’.<sup>17</sup>
  - The colonial era also saw the opening of schools for girls and the Untouchable castes. The pioneers in this task were the husband and wife duo of Jyotirao Phule and Savitribai Phule, who set up the first girls' school in Pune in 1848. The first university for women in India, was founded in Pune by Dhondo Keshav Karve in 1916.<sup>18</sup>
2. An unspoken but competitive spirit with Mumbai, the commercial capital of the country and the capital city of Maharashtra.
3. Given the above reasons, citizens of Pune or Puneites boast of an inherent spirit that values and honours critical and scientific enquiry, giving them a cut above the rest and who consider everything, however trivial, as the “World’s best” that one can experience.

According to the standup comedian, therefore, development and growth cannot happen in Pune due to this arrogance and complacency that comes along with it. These topical and historical references are easily understood mainly by people of Pune, specifically and Maharashtra, in general and may get lost in translation to someone from, for e.g. Delhi or Kolkata. These are also most effectively communicated in Marathi, and interestingly, the Marathi of Pune, as Sarang belongs to Pune and in fact belongs to the Brahmin caste. Within 120 seconds, he criticizes openly, not only the city of Pune, but mischievously, also his suburb Sadashiv Peth, a predominantly Brahmin neighbourhood in the old city. Not surprisingly, he takes a jab on Pune, not in Pune, but in front of a Mumbai audience!

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<sup>16</sup> [http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/25196438.cms?utm\\_source=contentofinterest&utm\\_medium=text&utm\\_campaign=cppst](http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/25196438.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst)

<sup>17</sup> <https://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pune>

<sup>18</sup> Forbes, Geraldine (1999). *Women in modern India* (1. pbk. ed.). Cambridge [u.a.]: Cambridge Univ. Press. p. 53

*Conclusion:*

So let me now link what we had initially started with: the concept of parrhêsia, Parrhêsiaisthai, as a concept of telling all or free-spokenness. An ancient method to create awareness and comment on people and behavioural patterns for societal change is being adapted in modern times. Using the weapon of comedy to initiate a critical dialogue and communicate openly and sometimes crudely is nothing but parrhêsiaisthai in action: The comedian switches away from a formal style in which ideological pronouncements are delivered to the audience to an informal style in which anger is expressed among those who know each other well (Glick, 301). Making people laugh and making people think about themselves! In India, women have taken to the stage to comment on disparities at all socio-political levels as well as on existing without mincing words (because stand up is about being vocal). An bold endeavor to make the audience not only laugh at their quirks or idiosyncrasies but to encourage thoughts that niggle even after the lights are out and the exit signs go up.