

The Jokes' On Us

For desi stand-up comedians in America, self-lacerating humor is the way to go as they mine their own milieu for gags, writes Chidanand Rajghatta

The way Russell Peters tells it, here is how zero was invented. Indians, he says, are legendary for their cheapness, but eventually their miserliness has benefited the whole world. One Indian in a marketplace in ancient times was looking at the numeric table which at that time consisted only of the numbers one to nine. None of them were amounts he wanted to pay. A friend walked up and drew a circle.

First Indian: "What's that?"

Friend: "Nothing."

"What's inside it?"

"Nothing."

"What's its value?"

"Nothing."

First Indian (sobbing emotionally): "I love it. Let's call it jeero."

Peters, a second-gen immigrant whose Anglo-Indian parents migrated to Canada from Calcutta, is today the acknowledged guru among a new brat pack of South Asian stand-up comedian in what is considered a high-wire act in entertainment. Fast becoming a Canadian icon, his shows are sold out even at high prices (up to \$ 50 a ticket) from Toronto (his home town) to Dubai

to Sydney, to audiences that are ethnically diverse, and typically, culturally agnostic, even heretic.

Russell's specialty is "ethnic humor," loosely, a brand of slapstick that lampoons racial stereotypes – especially his own Indian lineage -- with offensive hyperbole. In fact, his shows come with a caveat, a warning that "some material may offend your heritage." And the cheapness of Indians is one of his favorite opening acts.

"Look at you cheap Indian bastards," he jibes at an ethnically diverse audience in U.S, with significant number of Indians. "You are pained that you had to PAY to come and watch another Indian. You are telling yourself (mimicking an Indian accent) 'I should have stayed at home and looked at myself in the mirror.' You cheap bastards!"

The audience roars in laughter, and the mood is set for a stream of racial and ethnic self-laceration, from mocking their hairiness (by referring to his own hirsute body) to their hygiene, from their lack of social graces to their modest physical endowment (or to put it bluntly, small penises).

While Peters is what Maclean's magazine called the "King of Multi-Culti," lampooning every ethnic group (Chinese are his other favorite), there are now at least a dozen stand-up comics of South Asian origin on the U.S comedy circuit, mostly milking the growing Indian-American population for laughs. Last month, one group set off on a coast-to-coast Slumdog Comedy Tour

(evidently to capitalize on the Slumdog cachet) following up a similar Gurus of Comedy tour couple of years back. They derive much of their material from their own ethnic milieu, a self-deprecating act that not only speaks of growing up in America but also builds bridges with other ethnic minorities with similar issues, and also the native White population trying to understand them amid their growing ubiquity.

So if Pakistan has its three existential A's -- Allah, Army, and America -- no South Asian stand-up worth his salt will sally forth on stage without jokes on their three A's -- Accents, Arranged Marriages, and Automobiles. Mimicking parental accents, from Mallu to Bong, from Punjabi to Gult, is the foundation of many of these acts. More recently, they have mined Bollywood, the outsourcing issue, and the image of Indians as super-achievers, for material.

Most stand-up folks having been born in the west, mocking their parents (lovingly) for their social, economic, and cultural foibles and hang-ups are part of the shtick. Dan Nainan, a former Intel executive who gave up his corporate job for the love of stand-up, often opens with an ethnic gag. "You're asking yourself, 'what the hell race is this guy?' Well, my father is Indian and my mother is Japanese," he tells the audience. "Which means I get my sushi at 7-Eleven."

Now if you need to be told that 7-elevens (and similar franchises) in the U.S are typically run by Indians (and thus have the joke dissected), or that Indians are frequently found in the motel and taxi business, then you just don't get it -- and are probably FOB (Fresh of the boat) if you ever got on one. Most desi stand-up jokes are derived from the cross roads of the ABCD's Indian experience in an American milieu and they would be lost on many native Indians -- like for instance jokes derived from the American NRIs' passion for fuel-efficient Japanese cars with good resale value.

Indians would also see some of the jokes as offensive or disgusting because of their scatological overtones (Russell, for instance, is liberal with copulatory nouns and verbs). Jokes that work well in Boston or Baltimore just don't work in Bombay or Mumbai, especially if the joke is on Mumbai. Russell has his Indian-American (and western) audience in splits with his take of landing excitedly in Mumbai, stepping out of the plane, and reeling back from the overwhelming stink of a city that he says is perpetually awash with shit and urine. Don't find that funny? Then listen to his hilarious take on the proclivity of Indian males to walk hand-in-hand...

Many of these ethnic and cultural rituals and rites-of-passage (for e.g the use of hair oil, appreciating over-the-top Bollywood scenes, urinating in public) are funny for the ABCD crowd even if they appear normal for Indians. And with the growing second generation immigrant population abroad and increasing western

familiarity with the riotous life and time of India and Indians, it is easy to see why Peters became the first South Asian comic to fill such hallowed grounds as New York's Apollo Theater and Madison Square Gardens. Seriously folks, the Joke's on us.