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Comedy Cubs

A friend heading to India asked if there were any comedy clubs or stand-up acts he could ease into on a free evening. Not to my knowledge, I regretted; he could try therapeutic guffaws in the morning at a 'laughing club,' but when it came to late night chuckles, the scene in the ground zero of globalization was grim. We have writers in India who tickle the humerus, but none who can stand up and deliver.

No such problems in the west, where desi comics, mostly second generation ABCD types, are letting it rip. There are enough new acts here for the desi gang to slap together a "Gurus of Comedy" national tour last couple of seasons, an event that looks set to have us grinning year to year. At a recent gig, Rajiv Satyal, a Cincinnati-based stand-up, kidded, "Some of you white folks in the audience must be wondering, are we outsourcing comedy to India now?"

Stand-up is a high-wire act. It is a comedic art form where the performer is at the mercy of a live audience. He has to elicit non-stop laughter from an expectant crowd with a stream of jokes and one-liners across uncertain boundaries. Actor Will Ferrell calls stand-up comedy a hard and lonely profession. The best attain iconic status – Woody Allen, Bill Cosby, Richard Pryor, Steve Martin, Jay Leno among them. It's not something an ethnic group known for its brains -- and not so much for wit -- is expected to master.

But they are giving it a shot. Most desi comics choose the safe haven of self-deprecating humor for material, avoiding politics and sex. Their minority background and immigrant foibles offer a rich lode of gags on dysfunctional families, strange accents, racial discrimination, arranged marriages, cross-cultural mishaps and lately, outsourcing. They even make fun of their own success. "My boss asked me why we win so many spelling bee contests,"

comic Paul Singh jokes. "I told him you would win too if you had names like Subramanian Venkateswaran Chandrasekhar."

The prince among desi comics is Russell Peters, a Canadian of Anglo-Indian origin, whose monologue typically began with a jab at his father's conservatism. "Why shouldn't Indians be gay?" he asks, relating his father's shock at seeing Indians at a gay parade. "Heck, we have a population crisis in India. We need more gays (laughter). I got bigger worries than same sex marriage... like arranged marriage (laughter). But imagine a same sex arranged marriage...(mimicking a thick Indian accent) 'We have to look for a nice boy for him!'"

Many young desi comics like Raj Sharma, Vijai Nathan (the lone female), Dan Nainan (who is Indian-Japanese) have followed Peters into the toughest act in entertainment. Satyal, who has a day job with Proctor and Gamble, has opened for the legendary Dave Chappelle. Texan-Malayalee Paul Varghese made it to NBC's Last Comic Standing. There are even fresh off the boat comics like Tapan Trivedi and Muslim comics like the Bangladeshi stand-up, Aladdin. Many have performed at clubs such as Improv, Funny Bone and Go Bananas.

Their ethnic background gives them a unique perspective. Joking about the debate in the U.S about creationism vs evolutionism, Varghese asks his audience: But what if God is monkey and monkey is God? Comic Mark Saldanha makes fun of post 9-11 paranoia with a gag about a white guy asking him the time at an airport. "I told him I don't have a watch, but I got a clock in my suitcase..."

Would stand-up comedy work in India? I doubt it. We are way too prickly and prissy.