

OPINION FROM TOI PRINT EDITION Democracy's handmaiden: Humour: In today's India, we need more of a funny bone in our public life

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In these dark times, there is no harm in easing up with some sharp humour. Like the coronavirus, humour is infectious, but can spread much needed joy. The world over, social media is lighting up with witty memes around the pandemic. Bumbling politicians have been prime targets, and especially President Donald Trump. "Calm down, everyone," reads one meme, "A six-time bankrupted reality TV star is handling the situation."



But that is the US, where comics can get away with a lot, without political backlash. Where in fact, politicians themselves can create the humour.

In 1985, I was lucky to be a reporter in Grand Rapids, Michigan, where former President Gerald Ford hosted a three-day conference on 'Humour in the Presidency'. Ironically, Ford was hardly known for his sense of humour. When asked why he had hosted a conference where he himself might be the butt of many jokes, he disarmingly said, "I thought a look at the lighter side of politics may help us to realise that perhaps sometimes we take ourselves too seriously."

This is the crux of the issue, then and now. When politicians take themselves too seriously, and when the public takes its politicians too seriously, unintended yet harmful consequences can emerge. Imagine if more people had laughed outright at the self-important demagogues of the past century. Could that have prevented some from taking their own absurd and dangerous ideas to fruition? We don't know, but it is worth thinking about.

The Ford conference was a refreshing change after the humourless years of the Nixon presidency, where America had perforce to look into the dark soul of its politics and its president. There was a steady stream of jokes about US presidents, with Ronald Reagan, Jimmy Carter, and John F Kennedy as the favourites. Conference speakers remarked on how the smarter politicians would make self-deprecating jokes before others could mock them.

President Kennedy had the best flair for it. Criticised for bankrolling his campaign with his father's money - he retorted, "I just had a telegram from my famous Daddy: Dear Jack. Don't buy a single vote more than is necessary. I'll be damned if I am going to pay for a landslide." Similarly, Reagan was very skilled at winning over crowds and critics with his jocular manner. "I'm not worried about the deficit," he famously said. "It's big enough to take care of itself."

In today's India, perhaps we need more humour in our public life. Are our politicians able to joke about themselves? Or do they mainly use ridicule? And what about us? Do we lack a political funny bone?

India has had a long, strong history of political satire. The kingdoms of India appointed court jesters or vidushaks to lighten the atmosphere. They would take pot shots at the public, at visitors and sometimes at the king himself. Remember the stories of Tenali Ramkrishna, Birbal, Gopal Bhar and Gonu Jha? Their job was to bring wit and humour to expose oppression and injustice.

Through India's freedom struggle too, there were many lighter moments. Sarojini Naidu's descriptions of the Mahatma as Mickey Mouse and Little Man did not anger him. Instead, he signed off as Little Man in his letters to her.

Today, too, we have a burgeoning number of stand-up comics, especially in Hindi. At increasing personal risk, they take sure-fire aim at our politicians, who manage routinely to generate great material for satire. But in India, this is still a cottage enterprise compared to the full-fledged industry in the US, now in full spate through Trump's term.

Arguably, today, there has been a chilling effect on our humorists. Cases of sedition have been initiated on cartoonists and others, for criticising the government or the ruling party. Intensive trolling and threats have inundated those who raise important issues in jest. Certainly, today's humorists have to be braver than their profession should require them to be.

As citizens, we should renew our understanding of why political humour is critical to society. Historically, too much power and secrecy has often coincided with a lack of tolerance for satire, leading to a breakdown of trust between the public and the government. Humour can provide a safety valve when social pressures are building. It can inform us about social relations.

Concentrated power without feedback loops is dangerous. We all know the story of the emperor's new clothes. When they mock elites, humorists can hold leaders accountable. They create safe space for us to think through things, to question our beliefs and to change our minds.

That's precisely why governments and politicians don't like humorists. They hate to be challenged. But it is also why the samaj must support humorists. We need mirrors held up to us; we need new ways to refract reality.

Of course, there is a Laxman Rekha that is crossed at great peril to both humorists and society. Comics need to practice both restraint and sophistication. They need sensitivity to local histories and culture. But offence is taken, not given. Even if some humour makes people in power uncomfortable, it may simply be because the truth sometimes hurts.

The best example often comes from the top. At the White House, when Eleanor Roosevelt, wife of President Franklin Roosevelt was asked where the President was, she said, "Where the laughter is."

Would that we could say the same, here, and soon.

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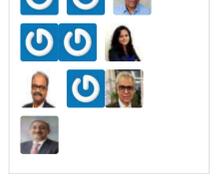
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