

WE DON'T NEED CINDERELLA: CHANGING
GENDER IDENTITIES ON YOUTUBE
COMEDY IN INDIA

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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This paper analyses the emergent voices of young Indians in YouTube comedy sketches. YouTube comedy sketches have become popular among Indian youth for their ability to critique cultural norms, albeit with a sense of humor. Through a textual analysis of shows produced by YouTube comedy groups, this paper will survey the emergent voices in YouTube comedy and how they challenge mainstream Indian media. Comedy YouTube channels offer a humorous take on issues related to street harassment, marital rape, religion and politics. The content and design of the shows are aimed to dismantle existing portrayals of youth in Indian media and question tradition. The sketches usually show women and men redefining their identities and offering new perspectives on Indian issues by employing satire and parody. This paper therefore investigates how Indians are using humor to create traction for various issues and using YouTube as a platform to criticize gender norms.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In *East India Comedy's* (EIC) YouTube video "Fairy Fails" (<https://youtu.be/aTr23PYRc7c>), we see Cinderella, Snow-White and Sleeping Beauty come together to teach an Indian mother a thing or two about setting a better example for her daughter. The three fairy tale heroines accost the mother right after she has read a fairy tale to her daughter ending it with the cliché, "One day you will find your Prince Charming, too." The princesses drag the mother to her living room and stage an intervention for her. The fairy tale heroines call fairy tales, "Propaganda by manipulative male writers, just like religion" (EIC, 2017).

This video is their revolt against the genre that made them household names. Snow-White hates that she has to be agreeable all the time, Sleeping Beauty complains about a 400 year-old diet because she needs to be skinny all the time, and Cinderella is tired of outdated phrases such as "Once upon or a time" and "Happily ever after." Through the course of the video the women take back the narratives of their own fairy-tales and interject them with their own voices.

In the end, the message of the video is that young girls in India need better role-models. The young Indian mother says, "I need to read to my daughter stories of strong, independent women, because what I read to her today will determine the young woman she grows up to be tomorrow." The fairy tale princesses then give the Indian woman a list of real life examples of strong, independent women who she can tell her kids about. The list includes Rani Laxmibai, Madam Curie, Michelle Obama, Kalpana Chawla, Malala

Yousafzai, JK Rowling and Beyoncé. The video ends with all the women in the room singing Beyoncé's "Run the world. (Girls)." *EIC* assumed that the audience that will watch this video is an English speaking, middle class Indian audience who listens to Beyoncé and idolizes Michelle Obama. Within this video lie several messages, the most obvious one is that of female empowerment. The video also speaks to a global identity: the new Indian woman who is impacted by Beyoncé as much as she is by Rani Laxmibai. And above all, the video is trying to break stereotypes of the agreeable woman. There are no fairy tale princesses, only real women and society needs to accept that.

In one sense, this YouTube comedy is only doing what Indian television has done for many years. It is portraying the idea of India, only this time, thanks to the platform of YouTube, the India they are portraying is a younger, urban, economically privileged India with aspirations that are not consonant with those seen on primetime Indian television.

Television and public opinion formation have a long history in India. In the years immediately following partition, Indian broadcast media was considered an important tool for propagating an idea of India to its citizens. The state, therefore used public television "to educate, to inform, to entertain" the Indian masses (Sinha, 2009, p.150).

In 1975, when television entered Indian homes, the Indian government with the help of the United States launched the countrywide Satellite Instructional Television Experiment (SITE). This was the government's attempt to broadcast developmental programmes to 2400 villages in six dispersed states (Kumar, 2004). However, viewers across India were not as interested in educational programs as they were in the weekly commercial feature films that were broadcasted by the government. Commercial

entertainment therefore dominated the airwaves and the imagination of the Indian people (Rajagopal, 2016). This preference also showcased a shift in consumption and production of content. The secular state disappeared. It no longer spoke to its audience about development but was replaced by a new imaginary, that of the Hindu lived experience. In *Afterword: A public sphere turned inside out: A brief global history of Indian media*, Arvind Rajagopal writes:

Hindu culture meanwhile provided the common denominator for box office formulae, purged of overt caste difference and with communal overtones muted. Doordarshan, the government television system, proceeded to revive the mythological, which the film industry thought belonged in the past or to the rural hinterland which seemed to live in the past. The experts in developmental communication had predicted that media would modernize the culture and boost the economy. Hindu tele-epics forged a nationwide TV audience and gave a cultural face to a burgeoning Indian middle class. This was the backdrop to the rise of the BJP and to the political ascendancy of Hindu nationalism. (p. 212)

The India that subsequently appeared on television was a middle-class, upper caste, Hindu India and theirs were the dominant values and narratives showcased by Indian television channels. Another landmark year in television was 1991, when global satellite networks like STAR TV debuted in India and broke the broadcast monopoly of Doordarshan, the state-run network (Kumar, 2004). This was India's moment to reconnect with the world since television now brought the world into the living rooms of Indians. However, the entry of various channels did not necessarily mean more nuance or

diversity as far as content was concerned. Shows still spoke to a middle-class Hindu audience.

From the early 2000s until 2016, soap operas and reality shows dominated television screens in India (Chadha & Kavoori, 2012). These soap operas were female oriented, but whether they were emancipatory is debatable. The characters in these shows were strong women who were “completely ensconced in the home and within the extended joint family,” (Chakrabarti, 2014, p.233)

The 2000s were a more conservative period in comparison to the previous decade. In the late 1990s, the state-run channel had begun depicting Indian women who ventured out of the house to build their own careers and reclaimed their own sexual identity. The new soap operas titled Saas-Bahu dramas (mother in law-daughter in law dramas) also did not engage with issues related to caste, religion or economic inequality. They showcased a new India, one that experienced economic progress but did not lose touch with its tradition. The characters on these shows were rich Hindus who faced challenges in their everyday family lives. The women, although strong had to be contained by their houses as did their aspirations (Chakrabarti, 2014).

Today, family dramas and reality television remain the mainstays of Indian television, which caters to the average Indian family. Television’s popularity is still at an all-time high with 675 million having TVs in India (Dasgupta, 2016). But while popular television upholds tradition, YouTube comedy video offers content to a younger, more modern India.

A welcome break from routine television, YouTube comedy in India speaks to a new generation. The narratives on these shows speak to a global India, an India that lives

in a connected world. This global Indian's notions of public and private life are constantly changing in a world driven by social media. Shanti Kumar (2010) writes:

In postcolonial India, the convergence of television with cinema, computers, cell phones and the like has engendered new mediated spaces of public life, where colonial distinctions of the public and private are being contested and transformed. What has emerged in this contested terrain, is a hybrid notion of publicness which is partly defined by state-sponsored ideals of citizenship; partly dictated by market-oriented ideologies of consumption; partly determined by the technological convergence of film, television and other electronic media; and partly driven by the diverse desires of culturally distinct audience groups in India and in the Indian diaspora (p.24)

If one were to survey the kind of videos uploaded by YouTube comedy groups online, one could see that the 'hybrid notion of publicness' (Kumar, 2010, p. 24) dominates the discourse.

In 2016, four out of the top ten videos on YouTube in India belonged to the genre of comedy (John, 2016). These videos were generally a mix of stand-up comedy or short video sketches produced by start-up comedy production houses. The interesting thing about the narratives in these videos is the way they dismantled the meaning of being Indian. These videos vary significantly in range, from dealing with the latest political and economic development in the country, commenting on social customs, to parodying mainstream media in India, these videos are concerned primarily with the notion of being

Indian. Due to their mobile nature and brevity (usually under fifteen minutes), they are viewed by millions of people. YouTube has about 180 Million video viewers in India (Chaturvedi, 2017).

The India shown in these comedies belongs to its millennials. This is the audience the video is catering to. A typical viewer of these videos would be someone who appreciates the mobile nature of YouTube. Someone like the office-going Indian youth who can access a YouTube video on his commute to work. In many ways, these are residents of globalization. They did not grow up with Gandhian austerity, but are products of a consumer culture unique to India (Lukose, 2009).

In these videos, family politics are replaced by humorous work place situations, men and women are shown as friends instead of life partners or siblings, and conversations around sex are no longer taboo. The language spoken in these videos is usually a mix of Hindi, English or Hinglish, the set-up is usually urban, mostly a metropolis like Mumbai or Delhi, and the views expressed diverge sharply from what has been shown in Bollywood or Indian television. This is a familiar setting for the audience these videos are made for.

If mainstream Indian television sanitizes social customs for the audience, YouTube videos parodies them. *All India Bakchod* and *East India Comedy*, two prominent YouTube comedy production houses, have both used comedy to criticize the idea of the big fat Indian wedding. While Bollywood uses song and dance to hide social issues, YouTube comedy parodies music to address issues related to dowry, class and patriarchal views expressed within the institution of marriage itself.

According to YouTube, 2014 was the year when users started shifting to the platform and became more mobile even in terms of consuming content. The active internet user base grew from 120 million in 2012 to 343 million in 2015. At the same time, smartphone usage increased from 42 million to 240 million (Goyal, 2016). As India turned to the smartphone for content, the creators of the content also started experimenting and pushing their own creative boundaries. This was edgy content available to many people (Goyal, 2016).

However, while these channels showcase a new aesthetic to the Indian audience, it is still a resolutely middle-class aesthetic. While the fairy tale princesses try to make the mother read better stories to her daughter, which India are they speaking to and speaking about? If on the one hand they are talking about female empowerment, why is it framed by a western aesthetic? With the advent of YouTube as an access point for content, it becomes imperative to understand how these videos are contributing to identity formation in India. At the core of this lies the very nature of YouTube. Even though YouTube is a potential site of ‘cosmopolitan cultural citizenship’ and a space that offers individuals a chance to express their own unique identity, it is only truly accessible to a particular segment of society, those who have adequate cultural capital and technical know-how (Burgess & Green, 2009, p. 81)

This thesis’s main aim is to understand how identities are formed through YouTube. In some ways, YouTube comedy has brought attention to matters ignored by mainstream media. It has helped further the discussion of women’s lived experience and it has reconfigured the way women view themselves and are viewed by others. It poses challenges to mainstream narratives of propriety and femininity. But does this extend

beyond gender? The purpose of this thesis is to analyze the voices of Indian youth online and how these voices interact with caste, class, citizenship, gender and sexuality. Who are the people the channel is talking about and who is it talking to? How are gender and class tackled by YouTube? To what extent do these YouTube videos represent India in terms of more intersectional identities?

CHAPTER II

BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

In India, dissent and comedy have been allies for a long time. Laughter and satire were important tools for writers and social reformers in ancient India. Comedy was one of the eight genres in the *Natyashastra*, the ancient Indian treatise on theories of drama and used as a critical tool for expressing dissent. (Kumar, 2015). In his paper, *Contagious memes, viral videos and subversive parody: The grammar of contention on the Indian web*, Sangeet Kumar writes that:

Lee Siegel's erudite survey of more than 150 Sanskrit texts (*Laughing Matters*, 1987) enumerates countless examples where comedic juxtapositions such as idealization/righteousness with degradation/corruption, religious piety with hypocrisy, and the yogi's chastity with sexual temptations were deployed for trenchant critiques of seemingly proscribed objects such as religious texts, the priestly class as well as the secular royal warriors (*kshatriyas*). (p. 236).

This irreverence has been a constant in Indian comic tradition and was further bolstered during the colonial era when satire was deployed as a form of resistance and has continued into the present day to critique politics and society (Kumar, 2015). This tradition of satire and parody found its place more prominently in theater rather than Indian literature. It was in Indian theater that parody was used to comment and criticize systems of power. Parody in theater became, "a critical device explicitly aimed at subverting or destroying the dominant structures and norms voiced by the parodied" (Montaut, 2011, p.22).

One can also trace satire and political commentary to the days of the British Raj when the Indian press used humor as a form of resistance to British rule. Political cartoons for example were used as tools of protest and peaceful revolution (Kumar, 2012, p. 82). From its birth in English language newspapers, satire became an important part of political commentary, even making its way onto Indian television. Today in the digital age, one sees satire used as a form of political and social commentary on YouTube. However, as a genre, YouTube comedy shows differ from genres that preceded this form of entertainment. While newspapers focused on caricatures and television media employed song and dance for comedic effect, Indian YouTube comedy uses humor to make a point.

On television, social satire and news parody shows such as “The Week That Wasn’t,” “Gustakhi Maaf,” “The Great Indian Tamasha,” as well as stand- up comedy shows such as “Comedy Nights with Kapil,” “The Great Indian Comedy Show,” “The Great Indian Laughter Challenge” created a culture of “satirical critique” (Kumar, 2015, p. 238). The Comedies of *East India Comedy*, *All India Bakchod* and *The Viral Fever* therefore function within this space of a social and political culture of satire (Kumar, 2015). These videos are aiming their criticisms at Indian society. They look at various facets of Indian society, social, political, and culture to comment on the flaws within each. YouTube offers video producers a chance to challenge traditional portrayals of the experience of being Indian and living in India. As a medium, YouTube offers people across Tier 1 and Tier 2 cities a chance to watch content that mirrors their own lives (Chaturvedi, 2017). The cultural milieu seen in YouTube comedies is inspired by life in Indian metros. However, the perspective is more widespread, if *All India Bakchod* and

East India Comedy's sketches showcase a level of comfort and familiarity with living in Indian metros, TVF's comedy looks at the experience of living and working in India from the perspective of an outsider.

Women on the Indian Screen

Most literature on the representation of women in India analyses how women on the Indian screen have been tied to tradition. In nineteenth colonial discourses on sati, women were neither the subject nor the object, but were the “ground” for discourses of tradition and modernity. The ideal Indian woman was constructed by society, as either a goddess or a mother, which “served to erase her sexuality in the world outside the home” (Chatterjee, 1993, p. 131)

Women have been portrayed on Indian television as emblems of tradition. In the early eighties and nineties, discourses of sexuality articulated in shows such as *Buniyaad*, aired on Doordarshan, as well as other women-oriented narratives tied the daughter to middle class and upper-caste respectability (Mankekar, 1999).

Even today, the Indian screen has a strict list of accepted social behaviour, kinship relations are sacrosanct (one must respect their kins, especially their elders), and there is an emphasis on “controlled sexuality.” Since the 1980s, chastity for heroines is not of paramount importance, but casual sexual liaisons are still not acceptable (Thomas, 1995, p. 165). Indian women therefore tread ground between the categories of empowerment and docility. Over the past two decades there has been a growing trend towards portraying women as liberated yet traditional, as persons who still bear the responsibility of nurturing and caring for others — in other words, there is an indigenously developed

sense of modernity with corresponding notions of the 'New Indian Women' (Munshi in Das, 2011).

However, this new Indian woman cannot be too modern or too westernized. She occupies a precarious position. Female sexualities are viewed as dangerously transgressive. Contemporary understandings of sexual practices in India employ Gandhian perspectives on sexuality, largely concerned with ideals of renunciation (the necessity to overcome desire) and ethics of self-control (Bose, 2008, p. 42).

Indian films also tie the honor of the family to the daughter of the house, therefore honor and virginity have always been linked together in Indian movies (Uberoi, 2006), Along with the weight of honor, the weight of progress, too, lies with the daughter, since educating the woman was seen as an activity that would enhance the upward mobility of the entire household as well as the nation.

However, these narratives on television also reflected an ambivalence toward this new-found emancipation. Even though educated, the Indian woman on television had to be a home maker too, a narrative enforced even today in Indian mainstream media, where the woman's role at home is privileged over her career (Mankekar, 1999). Mankekar also writes that if daughters were discriminated against and expected to juggle house-work with studies or career, daughters-in-law were further marginalized by the politics of the extended family. In her ethnography of women in India, Mankekar noticed that Doordarshan programs would provide a discursive space in which women would talk to each other about their families. The themes of these shows ranged from women's space at home to their aspirations outside the home. Studies also suggest that women on Indian television represent urban India and are considered more emancipated than those in rural

India. This seems to accept attitudes within India too where they become more amenable to modern notions of gender and sexuality (Scrase in Jensen & Oster, 2009).

Mankekar writes that all the programs that propagated the “uplift” of women’s status devoted a fair amount of time to the issue of women’s formal education. *Yugantar*, a serial based on the novel *Sei Samar* by Sunil Gangopadhyay, dealt explicitly with women’s formal education and the position of widows in the nineteenth century, depicting the crusades of social reformers and other male members of the nationalist elite for widow remarriage and the formal education of women. The serial was unequivocally nationalist: anticolonial struggles formed the mise-en-scene for the portrayal of “women’s issues,” and commentaries about important events of the anticolonial struggles were inserted throughout. Here again, educating the woman was seen as an activity that would add to the upward mobility of the entire household as well as the nation.

This paper is therefore interested in understanding the construction of gender within YouTube comedy videos produced in India and how these challenge and diverge from more traditional portrayals of women in television and film in India. To address this, the following research questions are proposed:

R1: How are YouTube videos providing a platform for re-articulations of gender in India?

R2: What are the ideological frameworks in these videos through which class and caste are represented?

As a genre, YouTube sketch comedy is in a state of evolution. There are short ten minute videos, episodic videos, parodies of songs, vox pop videos, as well as videos with a single anchor speaking to the audience. These videos are shared mostly on Facebook

and Twitter and viewed by millions of viewers. The aesthetic and language of these videos are distinctly urban as they are almost always set in Indian metropolises like Mumbai or Delhi. The locations reflect the life of the urban youth in India, usually the work place, a restaurant or bar or a cozy apartment. The language in these videos range from English to Hinglish and Hindi.

Class and media

Scholars have long maintained that the national elite form part of English-speaking India and they become the bearers of the agenda of modernization (Rajagopal, 2001). The vernacular media catered to a more rural, traditional India concentrating on topics related to religion and in opposition to the liberal urban Indian (Kumar,2009).

YouTube videos tend to speak to an urban audience and a lot of the humor stems from references to American pop culture. For example, *Girliyapa* videos are mostly produced in Hinglish, but the pop culture references are western which we see in the title and opening sequence of *Girliyapa's* video, "How I raped your mother," inspired by the American television show, "How I met your mother." In the video, there are multiple reference to the English erotic novel : Fifty Shades of Grey" whenever sex is discussed, this not only showcases reading habits of an English-speaking elite portrayed in these videos, but also the tacit consent given to violent sex, because of a western novel.

In *East India Comedy's* video on Indian festivals, the group parodies Miley Cyrus's pop song "Wrecking Ball" by calling the video "Wrecking God." The video is a commentary on the mess Indian festivals make and how rowdy people get on the streets, but by using the words "they," a distinct other is created. This other is the Indian man on the streets, the one who lives in slums and harasses office going-women and annoys "men

in cars” who are stuck in traffic jams because of the carnival on the streets. These are the believers -- the non-English, unwesternized people whose ability to celebrate is mocked by the video. There is a strong conceptualization of a middle class which is invariably linked to a politics of spatial purification which centers on middle class claims over public spaces and a corresponding movement to cleanse such spaces of the poor and working classes. The middle-class identity becomes an assertive one, one that is articulated in public discourse as well as social and cultural forms (Fernandes, 2004).

In India, during the early 1980s, television was used to create the ideal viewer. This viewer was the “viewing family,” a cohesive entity with shared values. Television was used to cater to this family and make it a part of a larger national family (Mankekar, 1999, p.47). It was to this family that the message of an Indian modernity was delivered by television. Television was therefore used to foster “national development and entrusted with the task of creating modern citizen-subjects,” (Mankekar, 1999, p. 48). In the 1990s, with the advent of more channels, this idea of modernity changed from being a good Indian citizen to one who could traverse through multiple identities. In *Localizing the global Television and hybrid programming in India*, Divya C. McMillin writes;

Star TV’s channels, particularly Channel [V], had cashed in on the global/local hybridity and turned it into a new popular genre of programming. It took the values and cultural icons of both the United States and India and presented them in light-hearted combinations with one another. (p. 56)

Indian television post liberalization and throughout the 1990s changed the public and the idea of a public sphere. In the post liberalization era, the Indian media was creating and catering to a global middle class. The nation and the public had been appropriated by the

middle class (Chaudhuri, 2010). While television had either the government or corporations decide upon the identity of a nation, YouTube has been touted as a space where people can express their own unique identities. By the very nature of its format, YouTube disrupts the way stories are told and the way they are consumed. In YouTube there is a “sense of understanding visual culture through tightly stripped moments” (Kavoori, 2011, p.12) These moments create a limited frame for viewers to understand context, intent, identity and culture (Kavoori, 2011).

A new medium

There is scant literature on YouTube as a medium. Research has also pointed toward YouTube as a platform to form community through video, with comments and shares pouring in (Hilderbrand, 2007). In their study on YouTube videos by Asians in America, Lei Guo and Lorin Lee found that YouTube videos acted as a platform to challenge the hegemonic views about Asian/Asian Americans while simultaneously establishing their own vernacular rhetoric and thus (re)building a new YouTubed Asian community. YouTube allowed Asian Americans to construct “hybrid subjectivities by travelling along the borders of different vernacular communities, and deconstructing the differences among Asian/Asian Americans” (Guo & Lee, 2013, p.404). Studies also say that serious discussion is difficult to have on YouTube, since the platform favors entertainment and play (Hess, 2009). In the end, YouTube is not just one thing, a fact scholarship on it acknowledges (Soukup, 2014). In his article, “Looking at, with, and through YouTube,” Soukup writes that:

It upends the traditional media structures, at least in highly commercialized economies. It’s wildly popular. It shows that ordinary people have things to

communicate. It challenges ideas of a mass audience. It cuts across categories—it is not simply a video-sharing site; it is more than a social media site; it is more than a communication channel; it is more than a place for creativity; it is more than a place for semi-private sharing; though it is all these things. (p. 25)

YouTube also offers a space for “caustic commentary” on current affairs since videos posted on YouTube are usually outside the radar of traditional media (Kumar, 2015 p. 240). But while many papers comment positively on the medium, some fundamental issues remain concerning who can speak online, in what way, and to whom (Van Zoonen, 2010).

In the end, YouTube is not as democratic a medium as it projects itself to be. The popularity of YouTube videos hinge upon popularity and widespread acceptance of an idea, “That which we already know and already like enjoys the special treatment offered to the “most viewed”: videos that are easily found, and always visible, whether you search for them or not” (Juhasz, 2009, p. 146). Also, YouTube content can be clearly demarcated into amateur and professional content, and it is through this demarcation and opposition between a roughly edited online video and a high quality professional video that YouTube maintains distinctions about who seriously owns culture (Juhasz, 2009).

The role of gender in and on YouTube is still at a nascent stage as far as research is concerned. Most of the research focuses on how women interact with YouTube videos or how they are represented in these videos. In their study, “Online activism and subject construction of the victim of gender-based violence on Spanish YouTube channels: Multimodal analysis and performativity,” authors Sonia Núñez Puente, Diana Fernández

Romero and Rainer Rubira García focus on the YouTube channels of two virtual feminist communities that deal with violence against women (Núñez Puente, Fernández Romero, & Rubira García, 2015). The study looks at how YouTube videos address the women they are produced for and how they incorporate the identity of the women they produce for into the videos, in this case victims of violence.

Studies have also looked at the difference between male and female vloggers, and have concluded that female vloggers are more likely to vlog about personal matters than male vloggers, while female vloggers receive more views than male vloggers (Molyneaux et al, 2008). Another difference noticed is that while men are often comedic in their delivery, female vloggers are actively involved in the YouTube community and try to facilitate debate by asking questions of their audiences. Studies have also observed that YouTube offers community to women. “YouTube therefore is not just a remediation of older patriarchal technology. It operates as a network of support for women who are all dedicated to the common goals of acceptance and respect. It is a virtual space where women's voices can be heard and moments of a feminist public sphere can begin to take shape” (Szostak, 2014, p.56).

CHAPTER III

METHOD

Cultural studies seeks to understand the relationship between cultural production, consumption, belief and meaning to social processes and institutions. The production of texts is itself a social practice (Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001). This study will attempt to understand the production of YouTube videos within the context of Indian culture through a textual analysis. YouTube comedy videos tend to offer youthful, modern perspectives on social issues. This analysis will look at how these videos employ certain tropes of masculinity, femininity and Indian culture to satirize Indian society. Textual analysis seeks to understand the ways in which certain forms of representation take place, the assumptions behind them and the kinds of sense-making about the world that they reveal. The attempt here is to understand how these texts tell their stories, how they represent the world, and how they make sense of it (McKee, 2003).

Textual analysis is also indebted to semiotics and this thesis will look at how media is derived by analyzing signs in a particular system (Zoonen, 1994). An analysis of these YouTube videos will look at the semiotics of these videos. For example, in mass media output, “female characters are always constructed as archetypes of virtue or vice” wherein certain codes like a white dress would signify purity or dark hair color would signify danger (Zoonen, 1994, p.74). It is therefore left to the semiologist to understand how particular combinations of signs construct meaning.

This thesis examines these constructions of women by decoding the signs presented in the videos analyzed. According to Shuquin Cui, “the essential elements of the visual medium include series of cinematic devices, elaborated with respect to

cinematography, mise-en-scene, editing, sound and colour. These are the areas where narrative meanings as well as semiotic structures can be articulated” (Cui, 2003, p. 23)

An analysis of cinematic devices such as mise-en-scene, sound, color and camera angles will be employed in this study. This study will also pay close attention to the way language is used in these videos to create certain categories of class and caste.

The YouTube comedy channels I will focus on for this study are *East India Comedy*, *All India Bakchod*, *The Viral Fever*, and *Girliyapa*. These channels have been chosen because of their popularity within the Indian news media and their visibility in Indian news media. All of the above channels are based out of Mumbai, India. These are well established channels that are run like professional media houses. All India Bakchod featured on the Forbes 100 Celebrity list with an income of Rupees nine crores or 140,000 USD . Channels like TVF have even launched their own streaming website and employ 100 employees (Singh, 2017).

The videos have also been chosen based on their content. The rationale behind the choice of videos is inspired by Sangeet Kumar’s 2015 study, *Contagious memes, viral videos and subversive parody: The grammar of contention on the Indian web*. In his study, he organized his videos under three categories of social, political and cultural videos. I have used a similar approach in choosing videos for this study in order to get a wide range of content. In addition to this, I have also chosen videos that have similar themes, such as videos that comment on festivals or homosexuality in order to make a comparative analysis of these videos and to analyze similarities or dissimilarities in their messages to the audience. In addition to this, I also chose videos that were most popular on YouTube according to viewership. Most but not all videos analyzed were in the top

ten most popular videos on their respective YouTube channels. This is primarily because many of these channels also publish content related to their stand-up comedy shows or episodic YouTube comedy serials. The shows chosen will be those that are in the form of a YouTube “sketch,” a short segment, under ten minutes and involving actors, sets and a definite script. Fourteen videos were analyzed based on the above parameters.

CHAPTER IV

FEMININE DESIRE AND SEXUAL POLITICS ONLINE

The beginning of humor

Satire has always had a rich history in India. It was one of the eight genres in the Indian treatise on drama *Natyashastra* by Bharata in ancient India, which helped establish its importance within theatre traditions (Kumar, 2015) In colonial times, weekly magazines like the *Awadh Punch*, launched in 1877 helped shape the political ethos of the time.

This tradition of political satire found expression in multiple mediums in post-colonial India. These included theatre, popular and parallel Hindi cinema and television shows. Over the past two decades another medium was added to this discourse: the internet, which enables comedy groups to comment and challenge government decisions (Punathambekar, 2015).

In the online sphere, there are two approaches to satire. The first looks at satire as a site of political discourse which enables communities to create a space for dissent. The second approach brings into focus the contextual dimension of theorizing the political role of satire. Globally, satire arises as a response to a lack of trust in representational institutions (El Marzouki, 2015). Therefore, YouTube videos emerge as a more direct voice for dissenters to express their opinions and views openly and with minimal censure.

The viral videos of India are one such genre that comments on government and social issues. They do this through the process of “‘doubleness and self-bifurcation’” which juxtaposes an implicit voice beneath the explicit spoken one. “Each is a repetition that deviates through an incipient second voice that defamiliarizes, ridicules, and critiques the said phenomenon” (Kumar, 2015 p. 239). The result of this juxtaposition is

subversion, where deeply entrenched structures of exclusion and oppression along lines of gender, caste, and class in India are challenged and these digital projects can help in dismantling the discursive mandates upon which material structures of power rest (Kumar, 2015).

These videos want to play by the rules of a new generation. Over the years, Indian media has brokered a new notion of the self. This new identity is tied to a neoliberal construction of success and individualism. In this construction, freedom and women empowerment is linked to the ability to have a successful career and a ‘joyous celebration of female sexuality’ (Chaudhuri, 2014, p. 152).

Laughing with the Indian woman

If media images tend to create a stock image of the liberated modern woman, YouTube videos have a different take on it. Women here can be traditional and assertive at the same time. In *Girliyapa*'s 2017 video “Thug Wife Compilations” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OuCmsGvXh-Y>) we see the average Indian housewife fighting back. The ‘thug wife’ uses a phrase from Hip Hop culture to represent the Indian housewife, who wears a saree and a bindi and wears her hair in a simple braid. But her actions range from being passive aggressive to outright aggressive. The videos set her up as someone who cannot be fooled. When her husband tries to prank her by filling her morning cookies with toothpaste, she takes her brush out to brush her teeth with the toothpaste in the cookies while her husband looks on in embarrassment. When a pickpocket steals her husband’s wallet she stops her husband from running after the thief, instead using her saree to lasso the man toward her, and then scares him away.

She is assertive, and knows what she wants. She insists on riding her husband's bike and when her husband asks, "How will you ride my bike in a saree?" "thug wife" undoes the front pleats of her sari to turn it into a navvari sari (a traditional Maharashtrian saree which has a partition between the legs). The viewer also sees her outsmart a modern, westernized Indian woman who has blonde hair and wears western clothing. The woman and thug wife encounter each other in a store, the woman shadows thug wife around the store picking everything she likes. They scuffle over a pair of shoes and the woman gives thug wife a condescending look, judging her saree and bindi (dot on the forehead). When thug wife lets go of the shoes and turns to pick another pair, the woman snatches the new pair from her. A triumphant thug wife smiles and buys the original pair.

In all these instances, thug wife is the epitome of cool. She is confident and unapologetic. She may not be fluent in English, or dressed in western clothing, or even a career woman but she is showcased as empowered. Thug wife does not need to be saved: she does the saving both in the house and sometimes outside of it. However, her identity as wife remains an important, overarching part of her existence. The conceptualization of the 'thug wife' is a Hindu version of feminism, one which situates the woman within the family (Chakrabarti, 2014).

Thug wife is strong and competent but her power is limited to the domestic sphere, the video shows thug wife's thuggery only when it comes to shopping and household chores. Her interactions are limited to the shopkeeper, her husband, and a fellow shopper. Also, while she is extremely frustrated throughout the video clip, she cannot directly articulate her issues or confront those around her. As a woman, she must always maintain her calm. The only thing she can do is rely on sarcasm usually through her actions and

facial gestures to make her displeasure known. It is in these acts of subversion that ‘thug wife’ is powerful. She shows her thuggery through gestures but is never allowed to protest openly or show displeasure.

The ability to protest, and do so loudly, to have people hear women out is constantly emphasized in YouTube videos. The video’s approach to women’s issues usually starts with trying to make women articulate what the problem is. In these videos we see women interjecting themselves into the dialogue, especially when it concerns their own bodies. Talking about sex therefore becomes a crucial first step toward articulating dissatisfaction with sexist double standards.

Dealing with conservative thought

Since the late 2000s, Indian soap operas have become more open about sex and talking about sex on television has become more commonplace. But there are certain caveats to this discussion. To begin with, the discussion of sex can only happen within middle-class settings and within the institution of marriage (Khorana, 2013). YouTube comedies are simultaneously breaking the norms set by television when it comes to discussing sex and also upholding these norms. Sex is part of the YouTube Comedy universe in many forms. From the personal to the public, we see women discuss sex in their bedrooms, with family and we even see the discussion of sex in classrooms.

In the examples highlighted below, I focus on the way YouTube comedies discuss sex and female sexuality in varied ways and how gender and sex sometimes are closely interlinked in this medium. Sex is at the epicenter of dialogue in these videos but it is always in dialogue with other facets of Indian identity. A woman’s sexuality therefore

becomes a plot device to bring attention to how modern India is. In so far as identity is being rearticulated in these videos it is through sex and the discussion of sex.

East India Comedy's video, "Sex Education in India," was posted in July 2014 as a response to India discontinuing sex education in its schools. The video takes pot shots at the way the Indian government is trying to curb sex education in India. The way in which female characters are shown as voices of reason and assertive about their sexuality adds an extra dimension of understanding and deeper meaning into the comedic sketch. How women explore and express gender and sexuality is also an expression of individual freedom. Patriarchy's attempt to squash female sexuality is an attempt to annihilate them as individuals who have agency and power (Banerji, 2010). Efforts to squash sexuality are showcased in the video too, as the traditionalist teacher only views the female students as women wearing a veil and carrying babies and not as individuals with thoughts, ideas and an interest in sex. There is a demarcation between modern and traditional and this demarcation is created and re-enforced through humor. However, this remains an upper class, privileged humor that is judging the "other."

The video opens with a man walking into the class room. The set here is a dilapidated classroom with paint peeling off the walls. The classroom looks and feels like an old public school classroom from the past. The professor's English accent has a rustic tone to it, something you would associate with a man who probably did not learn it as a first language, while the students are native speakers of English. These elements showcase the disparity between old India and new India. The dilapidated school is literally a crumbling institution, holding on to old notions of propriety and trying to impose it on a modern generation that is trying to escape this dilapidated institution.

We hear a school bell ringing at the start of the video. This is the moment when the audience is called in to pay attention. The ringing bell also signifies control and an old-school approach to education in India. Once the teacher walks in, he starts talking about what he will teach the students today. The lesson is about sex education, but he sneezes instead of even saying the word sex, a commentary on censorship in India and the older generation's inability to even utter the word sex in public. He then proceeds to call it "Sambhog Shiksha," the Hindi word for sex education which sounds more sanitized than the English word. This is also a critique of the national agenda of moving away from western labels and ideas to more Indian ideas, at least at the superficial level of renaming practices and places.

As the video proceeds, one sees the comedy group's attempts to bring attention to the ridiculous way in which nationalism has been imposed on the Indian mind. The next scene delineates this conservative mind set when the teacher points to a chart and says, "This is the male reproductive system," while pointing to a male skeleton with a box covering his reproductive system, and when he points to the female reproductive system he squirms and says, "This is the other one." Thus, begins a commentary on the way in which sexuality is treated in India and how female sexuality is negated or banished from consciousness. This point is emphasized when the professor asks the students, "any questions?" and when a female student raises her hand, he ignores her.

When we see the classroom, gender difference is accentuated by the fact that the classroom has only two female students. The shots never give a panoramic view of the class, so an exact number is hard to come at but there are at least three other boys in the classroom. However, by closing in on the irritated female student's face, the director

hints at a female gaze. Perhaps the audience views the teacher through her eyes. The point of view shot of the class shows the internal view the teacher holds. This is literally the male gaze at play, but this time it is conflated with orthodoxy.

The teacher sees the women in his class as a traditional Indian man would with veils covering their bent heads. In the background, music associated with rural India is played. The next scene is of the girl looking puzzled at why her voice was not heard. A minute into the sketch, we get the first instance of obvious comedy. The teacher says, “Now obviously, all you people want to know, how does yown sangam (sexual relations) happen?” as he says this we see him pick up a book with a ruler inserted into it. He takes the ruler out and starts pointing toward the paper presentation again. The ruler here therefore become an artefact of power. The book which stood as the symbol for the vagina is set aside while the ruler guides the students on what is appropriate sex education. While the teacher maintains his serious tone, the absurdity of what he says gradually increases. We know this is absurd because the female student is shown getting increasingly irritated with the teacher. While talking about sexual relations he teaches students that the first step is to match kundalis (horoscopes). This is also a commentary on the blind faith associated with match making -- that if you are manglik (born under the influence of mars) then you had better not marry. To a native viewer it also harks back to a commonly held belief in India that manglik women will bring death upon their spouses. The steps mentioned by the teacher are a description of a typical arranged marriage, where “parents meet,” and then there is a “wedding meet.” The night of the wedding, “the boy inserts his Indian culture into the female values,” says the teacher when a male student asks him what happens on the wedding night. When asked if this is followed by

the birth of a baby, the teacher grows irate and calls the student stupid and proceeds to talk in Hindi about how babies are a gift from God. The use of Hindi here accentuates this archaic belief, emphasizing that the people who hold such beliefs speak in a certain manner, a language completely different from that of the female student who is at this point the sceptic in the room.

The sketch then proceeds to comment some more on the ignorance inherent to the Indian view of sex. The professor says that almond and milk before marriage, a euphemism for sex in this case, is not part of Indian culture. He then proceeds to show a video, that one is similar in form and content to a common advertisement of a patient dying from lung cancer cautioning against smoking, except over here the patient is cautioning against pre-marital sex as he lays on his death bed suffering from syphilitic lungs. The video is captioned with the message, “sex is injurious to health.” The video then says that this man’s girlfriend became a bar dancer and his younger sister joined a much-hated television show. Thus the women in his life paid for his indulgence in sex.

When we pan back to the students viewing the commercial, they are wearing 3D glasses. This time the women are being watched by the audience and they are not wearing traditional clothes. Instead, they are in school uniform. A problematic scene that comes up next is that of teaching what the students should avoid by employing the devanagiri alphabet. The script used for indigenous languages in India becomes a script that also stands for instructing the youth. This script is associated with masculinity and privileges the man. For example, the teacher says “kha se,” and a student replies, “khiladi” which translates to, “what begins with kha?” and the student replies, “player,” a masculine term denoting promiscuity. The teacher cautions the boys to not be promiscuous. In his eyes,

the female students do not exist. This is also a commentary on the acknowledgment of male sexuality but denial of female sexuality in Indian culture. Next, the students protest saying that they have not learnt anything, the video pans to the girls complaining first and then the boys, and the teacher replies only to the boys.

At this point, his accent and the way he says “gourment,” instead of government is supposed to invoke laughter, circling back to the idea that a man who cannot speak English with an upper middle class accent cannot be progressive. Modernity and progressive thought are thus conflated. The male students then asked about homosexuality and lesbianism, to which the teacher replies that it is not part of Indian culture because if a boy marries a boy there will not be any dowry. Lesbianism is acceptable because it would result in double dowry. At this point one of the female students gets up to yell at her professor. She says what he is saying is nonsense, and then has a soliloquy about how “Indian values does not create babies, sex does, you are teaching us about sex and refuse to say the word.” She then continues to scream at him and say, “Say it, sex, sex, sex, it is just that simple, sa se sex (sex begins with s)” she says growing ever more hysterical. At this point it is up to the audience who is looking at her to either agree or disagree with her. The viewer thus has autonomy to decide on how funny or not funny this video is.

There is a brief silence after her speech and then a phone rings, which makes the teacher bark at his students, “whose is it?” Realizing it is his own phone, he picks it up. They talk about a joke shared about a female porn star as he plays with the nipple of a beefy actor whose photo is pasted on the chart board. This is a commentary on the everyday acts of sleaze men in India are allowed to commit without derision or judgment.

After cutting the call he tells students that there has been a change: the government of India has decided that “sex is a myth, like Godzilla, Anaconda, Orgasm, G spot and Global warming.” Next week the class will be taught self-control and meditation.

The last scene of the video has the female student who had objected to the way the class had been taught head to the front of the class and begin writing on the board. At the same time two boys talk about learning more about sex on porn websites like YouPorn and RedTube. At first it feels like a conversation exclusive to boys as the viewer only sees the backs of the female students. In the end, the female student turns around and tells the boys, “Guys, y’all are so immature, Xvideos, they have HD.” As the video ends, the writing on the board is brought into focus. This is the proverbial writing on the wall and it reads, “Sex is not a stigma, ignorance is.” In some way, the women in this video have reclaimed the dialogue on sexuality, especially their own. The way ignorance is constructed in this video has a distinct class dimension to it. The debate is not only between female student and male professor here, it is also between the English-speaking female student and the Hindi-speaking male professor. The viewer is expected to accept this opposition and the project here is to enlighten that Hindi-speaking man, to ensure the abatement of his ignorance.

With over four million views, the video clearly resonates with an urban Indian audience, the 17% of Indian population who have access to the internet (Kumar,2015). While on the positive side, even though the video is talking about sex education in India it makes a strong case for female sexuality and acknowledges the Indian obsession with keeping women out of the realm of sexual discourse. However, on the down side, the acknowledgment of female sexuality does not negate some discomfoting portrayals of

rural India. The women in the video, who own their sexuality, speak impeccable English, are juxtaposed against a teacher who is clearly from a rustic background thus creates an unfair portrayal of the subaltern in India. The viewer may come away thinking that conservative Indian thought stems from rural India, and this acts as a distancing mechanism within the text.

Indeed, conservative Indian thought is constantly critiqued within YouTube videos. On Women's Day this year, *Girliyapa* released a video titled *Mom I am not a virgin* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=07Vhdxymw&t=3s>), its very title announcing that this is a contentious issue. The action in the video occurs within the confines of a woman's bedroom. The daughter is on her laptop while her mother is folding clothes. The video clearly demarcates modernity and tradition: the mother clad in salwar kameez is busy doing household chores while the daughter in western clothes is on her laptop. While her mother folds clothes she realizes that one of the pieces of clothing is a pair of men's shorts. The mother and daughter confront each other over this.

In her analysis of the 1980's shows "Hum Log" and "Buniyaad," Purnima Mankekar showcases the treatment of the "fallen woman," on Indian television. An example of this is the character Veeranwali from the show *Buniyaad* who has pre-marital sex with her fiancé. Her fiancé later dies during partition and Veeranwali discovers she is pregnant and attempts to commit suicide. When her mother finds out about her pregnancy, she takes Veeranwali to a hermitage so that her pregnancy does not bring dishonor to the clan. Veeranwali's redemption comes in the form of ascetism. As an ascetic, she dedicates her life to community service and this rehabilitation replaces her uncontrolled sexuality with renunciation of worldly pleasures (Mankekar, 1999).

In the 1980s, sex outside of marriage was heavily censored on Indian television. The woman's chastity was important and if any transgression on her part compromised her chastity she would have to atone for it. In 2017, chastity is still important, but now women can speak out and against societal norms. Throughout *Girliyapa's* 2017 video "Mom, I am not a virgin," (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=07VhdxY_Mwc) the dialogue unravels in the form of irrational questions and rational answers. The mother is pegged as someone who cannot rationalize her daughter's need to have sex. Instead, she says her daughter, "Will not find a good match in marriage," and that sex will lead to unnecessary complications like pregnancy or STDs. Her daughter gives a rationalized reply: she says that she knew her boyfriend, Aakash for four years and it is better to have sex with someone she knows. "I am comfortable with him, and that is why we had sex," she says. Her mother asks her to speak softly in reaction because she does not want others to know her daughter is not a virgin. The mother who is a symbol of conservatism, someone who needs to be reasoned with and whose thought process needs to be challenged for the sake of female emancipation.

Like the previous video on sex education, the focus here is on articulating sex. The daughter will not be silenced. This is a departure from earlier instances of the way Indian media has handled pre-marital sex and this time the attitude is unapologetic. The daughter replies, "You have done it, I have done it. The whole world has, what is wrong with the word?" In the end however, the daughter's sexual liberation comes with certain conditions. She has indulged in pre-marital sex, but she is also someone who cares deeply about her parents. Her aspirations are to work and take her parents on a world tour and pay off her student loans. The family therefore is still an important institution within the

sketch. Towards the end of the video, her boyfriend calls and tells her that he has made dinner reservations at a vegetarian restaurant. This appeals to her Hindu and presumably upper-caste mother and is his only redeeming factor. Evidently, pre-marital sex may seem less of a transgression if other Hindu middle-class values are upheld. Career, family and tradition (in this case vegetarianism) therefore become points of reconciliation between mother and daughter and tools through which pre-marital sex is normalized. Even if the daughter has asserted earlier that sex is just sex, and she would not want to marry a man who is concerned with her virginity instead of her as a person in order to gain her mother's acceptance, she needs to project herself as an ideal daughter and her boyfriend needs to be sensitive to the norms of the previous generation.

Body as discourse

A modern morality emerges through YouTube videos, and sex has centerstage in this youthful morality. If there is a push toward creating awareness and acceptance around sex, these videos also address the very experience of having sex. A feminine perspective of sex, on the various facets of sex and on attitudes to sex especially within a feminine space is further assessed in *AIB's* 2017 video, "A Woman's Besties"(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h-hzBo0kHWY>). In this video, the narrative presented is a familiar one in which a woman expresses her fears to her friends. The fear of being pregnant outside of wedlock has been used in Indian movies as a narrative device, usually to caution women against premarital sex. However, in "A Woman's Besties," this narrative is subverted; the dialogue shifts from stopping a woman from having premarital sex to encouraging safe sex.

Conflict is the main driver in this video where we see a woman in conflict with herself. The video complicates the notion of desire through the conversation the woman has with her sex organs. The question the video wants to answer, albeit through humor, is how does a woman break away from traditionalism and own her sexuality? Does her need to have sex alienate her from her own body or does it affirm something innate about her? The humor in this video is usually concentrated in puns, like the one we see in the title where *besties* rhymes with *testes*. There are no obvious laugh out loud moments, but small, inside jokes that underscore the lived experience of Indian women.

The video opens with a woman waiting for the result of a take home pregnancy test. In the video, Priya, the protagonist, is in conversation with four other women. At first the room she is in seems like a familiar space: the feminized bedroom with soft lighting and a plush bed taking center stage and women in pajamas having a sleepover. But, the space diverges from the norm when we notice that instead of doing feminine activities like painting their nails or fixing their hair – a common visual theme in such scenarios, these women look slightly tense or bored. All the women in the room jerk in unison and we hear a phone vibrate. Priya reprimands another woman in the room who has a phone to her cheek. She calls the woman Clitika and scolds her for her insatiable appetite by saying, “Now is not the time Clitika.” To that, Clitika replies that she does not know time, all she knows is desire, that of the body. This is a play on a popular and much parodied dialogue from the Hindi film “*Jism*” (Body) that explored notions of female sexuality. The phone signifies a vibrator and the audience realizes that Priya, the protagonist is talking with different parts of her body: her vagina, her clitoris and her

breasts. In the opening credits, Vagayenti is credited as moistus maximus, Clitika as pleasure buttons and Geet and Boobit as jigglus wigglus.

In the video, Priya's breasts -- Gita and Boobita -- ask her why she is being so negative and Priya snaps at them. Her vagina, Vagayenti, is more assertive than the other three. Vagayenti is heavier than the rest of the ladies and exercises more control over Priya. Almost like an elder sister, she reprimands her for having unprotected sex and not insisting on a condom. The humor in this video stems from the conflict generated by the pregnancy scare. The video deconstructs female sex organs to showcase the struggle of being sexually liberated in India. While the clitoris is only concerned with pleasure and the boobs are all but mute observers, the main conflict in this video is between the vagina and its owner. The vagina which will be most affected by the birth of a baby is most worried about the consequences of the pregnancy test.

Different parts of the body deal with sex differently. While the breasts are passive observers throughout the video, Clitika, the clitoris, is primarily concerned with pleasure in sex and Vagayenti the vagina is primarily concerned with protection and criticizing Priya for indulging in unprotected sex. We see this emphasized even in the choice of actors picked for the role. While Clitika is conventionally pretty, slim and does not look very threatening, Vagayenti is heavier and looks stern and controlling. Even the way she speaks is rougher than the other girls combined.

Fat as represented by Vagayenti in this video is being used as a narrative device both as a form of control as well as humor. The fat female body is the source of sexual control and prudence in this body while sexiness lies with the slim body. According to Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco (2001), the mainstream definition of fat female

bodies falls under two predominant definitions. First, the fat female body is defined by a benign asexuality, a body that cannot be sexually represented due to a corporeal mark of absence. The second definition is that of the body as a site of sexual masquerade. Here the fat female body conveys both “an excessive salaciousness and a hyperbolic derision of that prurience” (p. 232). The vagina is not superstitious, this is obvious when she tells Priya, “Applying a black dot on the penis is not protection,” commenting on Priya’s lack of practicality. “We have done bareback before,” Priya tells Vagayenti, Vagayenti retorts by saying, “That is not the kind of message we want to give the girls watching this video.” At this moment, the two women look at the camera and their audience to emphasize the point that safe sex is important.

Throughout the video, Priya is hysterical because sex has now put her in a desperate situation. “You were supposed to be in your safe zone,” she tells her vagina, to which Vagayenti replies, “You were supposed to use a condom.” In this moment, we see a familiar Indian trope being reiterated -- that sexual freedom comes with a price. Even though there is no judgment placed on premarital sex, the video underlines that there are consequences for only being driven by pleasure and not being extra careful about sex. Female sexual behavior needs to be controlled. Although there are no moral consequences for experiencing pleasure, there are very real physical consequences.

Priya is dealing with these consequences as she waits for her pregnancy test results while her vagina offers only scorn for what Priya might put her through. Vagayenti also mourns the death of Hymen, observing, “If she were alive, we would not need to see this day,” while all the girls look sadly at Hymen’s photo. They bemoan the loss of Priya’s virginity especially in this sad moment. Vagayenti also admonishes Priya for abusing her

and putting her through other atrocities like a Brazilian wax for her boyfriend, but she is interrupted by Clitika who says the Brazilian wax was done for her sake, “Do you know what it feels like being lost in that dark dense jungle, it is dark, I could not see anything.” Sexual desire in the form of Clitika and morality in the form of Vagayenti are in constant battle here. This conflict, is an extremely feminine issue. The message of “Woman’s Besties” directly contrasts with a previous video sketch done by *All India Bakchod (AIB)* in 2015, called “Man’s Best Friend” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=93oxfr6KfpA>).

In “Man’s Best Friend,” we see a man visiting the doctor’s office with the complaint of erectile dysfunction. Throughout the video, the narrative had the man and his penis vent their problems to the doctor. The doctor’s cabin was a markedly male space, where the penis and the man were in couples counselling and the doctor had all the answers to their problems.

Not only was the penis the “Man’s Best Friend” but also his companion, a companion who had now stopped functioning because the man had become a workaholic. In this dialogue, women were used primarily for the sake of pleasure. Their bodies were a tool to pleasure the man and his penis. The focus of the video was on enabling the penis to do its job, to celebrate the phallus for its accomplishments, and even medical institutions were supportive of and invested in the penis’s success, the doctor asks Varun the owner to “play with your penis, explore, take him out” and he tells the penis, “contain your excitement, don’t do that premature thing.”

There is a distinct difference in how male and female sexuality are treated in Indian media. Even if YouTube videos are trying to give a voice to female sexuality, for the most part they restrict this imagery to the bedroom. There are also certain limitations on

who speaks to whom about sex. Women speak with women and men with men.

According to Leena Abraham, “New cultural and material products with modern values and meanings have brought different dimensions of sexuality into the open” (p. 135).

However, even in these new spaces the dominant norms of gender roles are recapitulated.

The binaries of male sexuality as aggressive and uncontrollable and female sexuality as passive and compromising are common images in Indian mass media. Furthermore, male sexuality extends beyond family boundaries while female sexuality centers around marriage and spouse (Abraham, 2001).

In “A Woman’s Besties,” we do not see any mention of family boundaries or marriage, but the very act of seeking pleasure without being careful, of getting ‘carried away,’ is considered deplorable. The video reiterates a common message about Indian female sexuality: if female sexuality is not controlled through direct regulation, it can take a dangerous and destructive form (Abraham, 2001). The clitoris, Clitika, is depicted as senseless. All she wants is pleasure and this has very real consequences. One scene that underscores this is when Priya is out jogging and she notices a fellow jogger. Their eyes lock and they smile and wave at each other. The jogger’s penis signified here by another man, (incidentally the same duo from “Man’s Best Friend”), who stands up and blatantly pursues all the girls in the video. He is confident at first, signifying aggressive male sexuality which is at first returned with smiles by the girl. As he continues, Clitika lunges at him while imitating the Indian snake dance. On seeing this, he gets scared and pulls his owner away. This wanton display of sexuality by Clitika is constantly reprimanded in the video. Sex only for pleasure is judged as uncouth. But while Clitika displays sexual aggression, she is also portrayed as conciliatory: someone who is not

interested in conflict or judgment. The clitoris therefore is considered vestigial not only in matters of the body but also in matters of emotion.

If Clitika is sexually aggressive, Vagayenti is a source of constant consternation to Priya. The Hindi speaking Vagayenti is a bit crass and rowdy. She speaks like a lower class Indian woman when she uses expletives like “chutiya” (vagina) and “gandu” (butt). Priya asks for her cooperation and receives none. This conflict underscores the discomfort women have with their vaginas and their bodies. The body here is a source of internal conflict. When Priya asks Vagayenti to make her period come and Vagayenti tells her it is not that easy, the video goes into a flashback of a series of betrayals caused by the vagina. The betrayal here is the period. The video asks viewers to “enjoy their delusions” about period blood by depicting it in its “purest form, a blue liquid.” There are two interesting discursive moments here. The period, that all too familiar and common female phenomenon is at least being depicted here as an experience. However, the way it is being depicted still holds onto popular notions of the period being an encumbrance.

While the video does not treat menstruation as taboo, it does treat it in a negative way. We see Priya unable to complete an office presentation because her vagina is attacking her. Over here, the vagina or Vagayenti is depicted as a villain, even while she is throwing punches at Priya, she does not want Priya to sneeze because then she would start bleeding and create a mess. The idea of menstruation as dirty and unwanted, is an outcome of masculinist disciplinary practices which have relegated feminine bodily experiences, especially menstruation to the private sphere and have discouraged any conversation on it. (O’Keefe, 2006). While the video discusses period bleeding and pain openly, the frame it uses is that of the period being unwanted and dirty.

What is constantly reiterated in the video is how sexuality is private for women. Even though Priya has a medical issue, hers is a lonely problem. She cannot visit the doctor, like the man, and gain external validation. An unmarried woman whose body is not functioning the way it should cannot seek external help from Indian society, she must rely on herself. However, the video does not necessarily present this as problematic. The message here is to practice safe sex, and that according to the video is a personal responsibility, and also the responsibility of the woman.

Female sexuality is allowed to express itself within enclosed spaces, the one time Priya has a sexual moment in the park, there is a rejection from the penis. While in the “Man’s Best Friend” video, the man and his penis are allowed to be in public spaces. A sense of pride is conveyed in their shared experience of venturing into the world, the woman and her body parts are confined to the bedroom for the most part. Even when Priya plays with herself she does this in a conscious way. Her movements are always deliberate, not brash. In “Man’s Best Friend,” casual sex is referred to in passing, but Priya’s sexual interactions are not as casual. The boyfriend plays an important role in the video as Priya and he exchange sexual texts, as the women talk about her doing a Brazilian wax for him or when Priya admonishes Vagayenti for using expletives and says, “You kiss my boyfriend with that mouth.”

While in “Man’s Best Friend,” the doctor is equally invested in the success of his male patient’s sexuality, for the female protagonist there is only an internal monologue that can allay her fears. The tone of the video is confrontational: here is a woman who is sexually liberated but is constantly judged by her own body parts for it. Her breasts do not care much, the real war is between her vagina and her clitoris. Her hymen is mourned

and her butt is reviled. Every part of her body is judged in the video instead of celebrated. She needs to be more careful is the ultimate theme in the video. She can have fun, but she needs to have fun within prescribed norms.

As the women start bickering again, the timer goes off. The pregnancy test is negative and Priya breathes a sigh of relief. Priya apologizes to her vagina and then tells her, “We will always be super-duper tight,” a commentary on the price placed on tight vaginas. Here again, this shows how her sexuality is not completely hers. A tight vagina for whom? Herself or someone else?

In the end, Priya tells everyone that she cannot risk their friendship over sex. She wants to commit to a life of abstinence, perhaps because Vagayenti’s barbs have gotten to her. Has the anxiety of being pregnant outside of marriage in a conservative society made her a different person? She calls it a distraction and an illusion. As she says this, Clitika is about to commit suicide, but at that moment she gets a message from her boyfriend, Varun that says he is “cumming over” with churros and she changes her mind and says “F*ck it, let’s have sex.”

The ending credits state that Priya went on to have a lot of safe sex, Vagayenti went on to earn critical acclaim for her monologues (a reference to the play, *The Vagina Monologues*), Clitika went on to get the happy ending she deserved, and Geeta and Boobita were banned from social media. This speaks to the media narratives around these body parts and how they are celebrated as seen with *The Vagina Monologues* and controlled (a comment on the limitations on people posting bare breasts on social media) by the media.

Throughout the video, Priya's sexual life is scrutinized by her own sex parts. This time, the sexually liberated woman is judging herself. The dialogue she has with different parts of her body are part of the new urban experience of Indian women. Even if mainstream media in India has started accepting premarital sex, there are certain rules that still need to be followed. The video showcases the lonely, self-deprecating experience of having sex in India. There is no mother figure here to judge Priya, but she gets judged nonetheless, her body judges her harshly for her carelessness. In one scene they even look at a photo of the hymen remorsefully. There is a tenuous relationship with virginity built into the video under the layers of humor.

On the surface, the very fact that there is a video that talks about the vagina and clitoris as entities may seem progressive, but when we take a closer look we see how certain cultural norms are still being reiterated in these videos. Sex is still an activity relegated to the bedroom, any outward display of sexuality can scare a man off, as we see when Clitika is excited in the park. The relationship between a woman and her clitoris may be a simple one, but the relationship between the vagina and the woman is complicated and this conflict is delineated in the video. A woman's body is under scrutiny not by outsiders but by herself, and the problems that her body faces are not something she can openly share with a doctor, hers is an interior experience. Self-control and renunciation seem integral to this interior monologue of a woman with her sex. The vagina wants her to follow the path of abstinence, much like society, but the clitoris wants her to experience pleasure. Clitika who is unapologetically sexual is silenced throughout the video. It is only in the end, after Priya gets a message from her boyfriend

that we see a glimpse of liberation but even this liberation happens at the insistence or due to the existence of a boyfriend, not because of an interior urge.

Freedom and choice

Sex and freedom are themes that are constantly explored on YouTube, especially when the videos are women centered. YouTube comedies thus may be overcompensating for the lack of talk around sex in other media. *Girliyapa's* 2016 video “Ladies Room Bakchodi E01, To Stick or Not to Stick,” starts by showing one girl applying a deep brown color lipstick to her lips as we hear a flush going off in the back ground. Her friend, Piyali walks in, smiles at her and says in appreciation, “Nice lipstick, Saira, the ones from the toilet next door will die as soon as they see it,” to which Saira replies, “Why kill those virgins?” This video is the Indian female version of locker room talk only, in this case, it is through the use of metaphors that these women can speak about sex and their own preferences.

The video starts with a blatant judgment about “the virgins” who live next door. For Piyali and Sira, virginity is no longer associated with purity and honor, but considered undesirable, especially when talking about the opposite sex. Saira then talks about her lipstick while handing it over to her friend, telling her she bought it off Tinder.com and it stays for twelve hours. Piyali looks at her aghast and says, “Twelve hours, that is too much commitment for me.” Saira replies with a confused expression and says “Commitment?” The video moves on to a montage of other women applying make up, and the opening credit ends with a toilet sign that says, “Men to the left, because women are always right.” The next slide says “Men are from mars, women are from Venus,” and then cancels out men and replaces the word with lipstick. The audience knows that

lipstick in the video is a metaphor for the penis. When we come back to the video, her friend is yelling at her in Hindi, a translation of this would be, “Our youth is only this short, and you want to commit to one lipstick for half of it, isn’t that a long time?” Saira replies, “What nonsense, I am a one lipstick woman.”

In this exchange, the viewer is all too familiar with the character of Saira, the beautiful, yet chaste girl who will stick to only one man. Saira embodies all the qualities of a good Indian girl: her clothes are modest, her hair is well kempt and her romantic aspirations are modest. But even in this ideal that the video creates there are points of deviance from this typical Indian conceptualization of a good girl. For one thing Saira mocks the virgins in the men’s restroom, and she admits to buying her lipstick online, a reference to online dating sites like Tinder. Piyali on the other hand, has a more relaxed disposition, her long hair is left open, and her clothes are more casual and free flowing than Saira’s.

Later in the video, Saira also tells Piyali she is not the kind of girl who leaves home with one lipstick and returns with another. Piyali counters her by asking why doesn’t she counter the men in the other rest room, they have perfume, but apply deodorant four times a day referring to committed men hitting on other women. To which Saira says, “Men stink, and you know what they say about girls who apply lipstick all the time.” In this moment of obvious judgment, another girl interjects, she has short hair, in contrast to the two long haired girls and does not wear any make up. She looks with disgust at Saira and says what a liberal viewer would think at this juncture in the video “Ramdev karein toh anulom vilom, aur Ramdevi karein toh game of thrones?” which roughly translates to, “If Ramdev (Yoga Guru who does Yoga topless) does it (yoga), it is exercise, if Ramdevi

(female) does it, it is considered game of thrones (almost pornographic).” The video reverses judgment we normally see in mainstream media, now, the chaste woman is questioned for her hypocrisy and not valorized for being chaste. Casual dating and casual sex are therefore given license by a third party. In this space, Saira is in the minority. The notions of purity and chastity associated with Indian womanhood are challenged and questioned.

Piyali, who owns her sexuality and wants to explore it, is seen as more honest, the popular voice who counters mainstream notions of propriety. Saira brings family and by extension honor into the dialogue with Piyali. Piyali is only interested with the here and now and does not espouse any of the conventional views of sexuality.

While the video addresses gender and challenges popular notions of gender when it comes to sexual orientation and race it echoes mainstream sentiment. Homosexuality is talked about in hushed tones and does not have the same approval as sexual liberation. Piyali as a character is portrayed as the new Indian female, yet her views are liberal only when it comes to heterosexuality. She breaks the stereotype of women in media, yet upholds racial stereotypes when she talks about the big black lipstick, and mirrors the discomfort felt in Indian youth while talking about homosexuality.

Space is also a character within this video. The image of two women talking loudly in a rest room about sex is not common in Indian television or film Brinda Bose (2008) writes in her essay, *Modernity, Globality, Sexuality, and the City: A Reading of Indian Cinema*:

Sexing and/or gendering the urban space unpacks the political possibilities for rethinking boundaries of private and public domains within the city as well as in

connection with suburban and rural spaces. Foucauldian notions of the panopticon, whereby the invisible but tangible threat of surveillance produces self-socialization and regulation, are reproduced in different ways in the new urban society that engenders a fresh set of social and cultural interactions. Many studies, for example, have explored how the male gaze in the late century eroticized city life and sexualized the spaces it viewed. (p. 40)

Even across YouTube videos, conversations around sex usually happen in bedrooms. To talk about sex in public is taboo and a public restroom is a compromise for these women. They bring talking about sex into the public domain, but they do so within the confines of a feminine public space (the women's restroom) and by using the metaphor of lipstick.

Women in public spaces, not behaving ladylike, is another comedic device used in YouTube comedies. There is a move to reclaim public space, but that move is still fraught with ideological tensions. In "The Whites of their Eyes," Stuart Hall states that ideologies are transformed by articulating traditional elements differently and producing a different meaning. In another *Girliyapa's* 2016 video, "Why Should Hot Girls Have All The Fun?" (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q_Tw62JPijg&t=42s), sexual harassment is critiqued not through reaction but through acceptance. The characters in the video position themselves differently from the popular discourse. In this discourse, they do not see themselves as objects, but become subjects. They do not want to be harassed, but they also welcome attention.

The gaze here is overturned. The women hold forth and have power. Through the course of the five-minute-long video, the women do not allow the perpetrator to speak. The tomboy tells the guy, "The girl is an LG flatron television," referencing her figure.

The other, plump girl agrees and says, “Do you want to be fooled, or you want justice?” while gesturing to her body. The video challenges the notion of beauty. She states that she does not have time to do make up and has a bad hair day every day but that should not stop her from being desired. While they ask for attention they also constantly underscore female desire -- over here that desire is for seemingly average looking women to get some kind of attention. To reclaim desire, these women question the very foundations of femininity, beauty and desire.

There is a moment of reflexivity when the girls joke about their position. “We look like stereotypical feminists,” the tomboy says, while assuring the man that they will not go on protest marches if they are harassed in the streets. The humor in this video stems from the way these women are addressing the issue at hand by being active participants in it. They ask the man to stare at them, “Stare a little shamelessly, we should feel it,” says the girl while sending him to a corner. The makers of the video add another element of confusion when the girls notice a guy staring at them, for a moment they are happy. But soon after, they say, “Creep, ugh so ugly,” and “Why can’t they stay in their limits?” while talking about him. The girls now echo the same sentiment their “hot” friend had expressed at the start of the video. But then they revel in it, while staring at him. One of them asks the other for a deodorant, and she refuses, so she mutters, “I am hotter” and calls her friend a “jealous bitch.”

If *Girliyapa* is a female comedy group, then why are they abusing another woman? Why are they calling each other jealous and bitch? Comedy is usually a licensed zone, a place where one can make fun of serious offences like street harassment or women’s safety. It is thus disconnected from the serious. By nature of its format, comedy does not

allow for serious questions (Hall,1990). In this format, women complaining about being stared at would not be as effective as what *Girliyapa* does with their video. It uses confusion to make its point. Stuart Hall writes that “the same old categories of racially-defined characteristics and qualities and the same relations of superior and inferior, provide the pivots on which the jokes actually turn, the tension points which move and motivate the situation in situation comedies.” In this video, the categories used are defined by gender, not race (Hall, 1990, p. 45). These are jokes by women about women and the attempt is to shed light on women experiencing harassment.

Public empathy usually lies with men and not women when it comes to crimes against women in India. “She deserved it,” or “she was asking for it,” are judgments Indian women deal with constantly when they complain about violence against women. In this video, two women are literally, “asking for it,” while confronting a lecherous man, thereby underlining the absurdity of the logic behind the judgments placed on women in situations of sexual abuse. In the comments section, on female user comments, “Story of my life,” another female user says, hahahahahaha man! phenomenal!!!! now this is something genuine and real life crisis they portrayed in this video.” The video is not really seen as a comment on harassment, as much as women talking about how they want to be desired. This leads to women users on YouTube reaffirm this hegemonic narrative and talking about their own need to be desired. At the same time, in a problematic development, street harassment is denuded of any violence.

Sex and control

In another *Girliyapa* video, it is the private space of the home that is under scrutiny. Their videos work with popular Indian narratives while trying to subvert them. The videos do

not really evoke laughter as much as they induce a certain discomfort with the way Indians view certain constructs. The happy family is one such construct. The family as a group has always been a plot device for Indian media to explain conformity to rules and customs. It has also been a tool to control women, to explain to them that their individual wants and desires are not as important as that of the family. Partha Chatterjee emphasizes the primacy of constructions of family to notions of culture and nation by suggesting that “the home was... not a complementary but rather the original site on which the hegemonic project of nationalism was launched (Mankekar, 1999, p.108)

In Girliyapa's 2016 video, “How I raped your mother,” emphasized the family as a site of hegemony. The video looks and feels like an Indian soap opera. The first shot is a static shot of a building, followed by another shot of three women on a couch in a large living room. The camera slowly zooms out to show more of the living room and its inhabitants. The living room is large, accommodating all the members of the family in one frame. There are six women in the frame and three men. The *mis en scene* replicates a typical scene on Indian television soap operas. A giant wall in the backdrop is filled with photos of this happy family. The women are dressed in their finest jewelry and traditional Indian clothing that one would normally see women wearing at formal events, while the three men in the scene are in casual everyday clothes.

This essentially replicates the Indian soap opera's emphasis on the male gaze, where the woman must always look a certain way to project the image of a good, Indian housewife. Two older women are huddled around a younger woman, cowering on the couch asking her what is wrong and why has she returned home within a few months of marriage.

The oldest woman in the room, presumably the grandmother asks in an authoritative voice, “Has your husband had an affair?” To which a man interjects and says, “What are you saying?” to the old woman. The women in the house encourage the younger woman, Devika, to speak. Another older woman says, “Only us women can understand your pain,” and throws a dirty glance at two men sitting on a couch close to her. The men shrug, in the first comic moment in the video. This comment underlines the cluelessness of the men, juxtaposed with the concern of the women.

At the beginning of the video, the oppositions are delineated and both the men and women occupy equal space in the room, but the women are part of an “in” group while the men are outsiders. The women sympathize with Devika, the newly married woman. They are trying to comfort her and their physical proximity to her in the scene showcases a shared knowledge of how arranged marriages can be difficult for women. The men look on at the women, but seem clueless about what they are doing in the frame.

Devika tries to explain herself, “Arun (her husband) forces me every day and does not heed my refusal, is it not a problem?” This time her father replies, “Oh! He must be doing this out of love, he just wants to feed you.” The refusal continues until she screams, “I get raped, Papa, I get raped.” This is when everyone in the room gasps in unison, the women react for the first time, and the men gesture angrily. Her father stands up with a knife in hand and asks loudly, “Who raped you? I will not leave him alive!” She screams back for the second time, “My husband!” her father simmers down in confusion and says, “but he is your husband?” She responds, “It is marital rape!” The family breaks into laughter. In this scene rape is challenged, but marital rape is not. Rape is not just about violence against a woman. Rape is about who is committing violence. Rape by an

outsider is therefore judged harshly, but the idea of a woman's body being abused by her husband is considered preposterous.

In this video we see the mania around protecting the institution of marriage over protecting the rights of women. Jacques Derrida thinks we repeatedly elevate phantom ideals of origin as purity. Media always says that purity can be restored if "charges are brought home against the exteriority as a supplement." Derrida talks about the other, an outside threat to purity. We are typically told that the other is no threat to the ideal in question and at the same time we are told it is a threat (Deutscher & Critchley, 2006, p.3). In "How I raped your mother," marriage also implies that men have unlimited rights over the bodies of their wives. When mausi (aunt) reads out from her phone she says, "Marital rape is not possible in India because marriage is a sacrament." There are two ideals here: one is that of India -- a pure, pristine ideal -- where deviant behavior is not accepted. The second is that of marriage, which signifies purity in the form of a bond before God. The nostalgia for this ideal of India and of marriage is upheld by the older generation in the video. The younger generation is trying to question it but is quickly silenced.

Eventually, in the video, patriarchal notions prevail. We see the female complainant return to her abusive husband. She tried to revolt and failed. Her failure was set up from the beginning. There was one voice of sanity in the video, the other person, presumably her sister, who supported her. She could only do that through gestures, a hug, a look of confusion or exasperation. She was the youngest in the group and the only one who recognizes the violence in the situation.

Devika talks about consent twice in the video, once addressing her family and then again while talking to her husband. Both times, she is challenged. First her grandmother

tells her that “your aunts would not have been born if I care about consent,” while the second time her husband tells her she is being hypocritical. “Do you take my consent in everything you do?” he asks, while talking about how she makes food that he does not like. This again underlines the way in which a woman’s body and her control over it is considered unimportant. The woman here is reduced to a vehicle for child rearing and pleasuring her husband.

Devika’s husband then goes on to yell at her and asks her if he did not complain about her making food he is allergic to. Why is she making a big deal out of this issue, he demands at the end of his tirade. For this he is applauded by the family.

The sarcasm in the video is evident, the family as a unit of honor and safety, that part of Indian society that has always been upheld in mass media representation as the core of Indian values is now showing support for violence. This video shows the inherent patriarchy within this structure of the family. This moment of applause manages to make Devika see the folly of her ways. She tells her husband, “You are right Arun, I did not realize you have sacrificed so much for me,” she repeats what Arun has told her, that she sits at home while he goes to work and that she has now bought into her own devaluation. The video’s power lies in underlining how Indian society devalues women and their roles at home.

The last shot of the video has the family taking a selfie together, another comment on how Indian families brush aside controversy and privilege the projection of a perfect happy family while denying real issues. The only person who finds the turn of events unbelievable is the young teenager who throws her arms up in dismay and exclaims, “What the fuck!” before she is pulled into the selfie by her mother. This girl is the last

voice of dissent in the family, and she too is being asked to conform, by literally dragging her into the same frame as the rest of the family. The family selfie ends with a popular tag line from a Bollywood film, *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham*. The whole family shouts into the camera, “It is all about loving your family” in a final commentary on the way mainstream Indian media always privileges the family over the individual.

A reconfiguration

If on television, the Indian woman was built as a symbol of tradition and bound by duty to the nation and her family, on YouTube she is trying to reclaim her space. What YouTube offers is a chance for women to speak out. As we see with the videos discussed above, this is centered around her sexuality. Sex makes for great jokes on YouTube comedies, but it also occupies a place of importance as women reclaim the dialogue about their body.

As seen in the analysis above, there are certain tensions between choosing to be modern and choosing to be Indian and these points of disjunction are analyzed in these videos. The focus of these videos is commentary and not activism, and this emphasis on articulation is what defines Indian identity online. All of the videos analyzed above focus on women sharing their experiences around sexual encounters, whether consensual or not, but the emphasis for the most part is to create a space for honest dialogue. YouTube comedies therefore become a space for asserting their unique identity, an identity that is separated from any larger ideal of the nation or even womanhood.

CHAPTER V

CONSTRUCTING CLASS AND MASCULINITY

Despite being youth centered and with content that emphasizes female emancipation, the one unavoidable truth about Indian YouTube comedy is that it is a male dominated industry (Rashid, 2017). Topics covered in these videos not only convey a new idea of being Indian but also convey a new idea of Indian masculinity, a masculinity which is closely linked with class and consumption (George, 2006). A lot of YouTube videos attempt to proselytize and therein emerges a certain identity of the perfect Indian man, and a certain view of preferred Indian masculinity. These videos accept certain types of Indians and reject certain types of Indian. In this chapter, I will interrogate this view of class tied in with the construction of Indian masculinity and manhood as discussed in these videos.

An easy target while critiquing Indian culture and things inherently wrong with the culture is to look at the problems of religious extravaganza. On YouTube videos in India, we see a Hindu middle-class approach to the idea of celebration in India. These videos therefore investigate appropriate behavior while at the same time propagating a certain view of celebration in India.

Tradition under scrutiny

In *East India Comedy's* 2014 video, “Wrecking God” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PxoSPucPKrY>), we see an urban, middle class critique of the way festivals are celebrated. The video starts with an opening credit in English that says, “Indian festivals celebrate the glory of our Indian Gods, but sometimes,

some people take it too far.” These “people” who take it too far are then showcased in the opening sequence of the video.

The next shot shows men dancing vigorously. Their faces are covered with colored powder, and their outfits are representative of lower class men in Mumbai; bright shirts or a ganjee (a vest) paired with shorts. One of them has a towel wrapped around his neck, representative of working class people in India who need the towel to wipe their sweat while working in the sun. We then see representatives of the urban middle class singing a song which parodies pop singer Miley Cyrus’s “Wrecking Ball.” The song is called “Wrecking God,” and the lyrics have now been changed to talk about the rowdy other, those men on the streets celebrating Indian festivals.

This song is an example of the hybrid Indian identity, a merging of national and global identity, marked by consumption of global culture and a middle class that tries to merge traditional India with some form of global modernity (Fernandes, 2004). The lyrics of the song start with, “They scream, they shout, they dance about, like Sallu (actor) fans on cocaine. I really doubt, they are devout, jobless and kind of insane,” says the first verse of the song. The ‘us’ in this video is the middle class, English speaking Indian who has to share his streets with the rowdy, lower class man during festivals. “They” is used to delineate the rejection of these men. These are the men who need to be controlled.

Apart from language, clothes showcase this difference between ‘them’ and ‘us’ in the video. “Their” clothes are dirty and torn, “ours” are well pressed, formal wear. As viewers, we are meant to identify with the well dressed, well-spoken Indian who wants to celebrate Indian festivals in a civilized manner. The middle class here is the voice of

reason, their judgment is sacrosanct and we see the rowdy lower classes through their eyes.

In the next verse however, the lyrics to the song are addressed to this 'other.' It showcases a loss of control where the middle-class is coerced into celebrating festivals in a certain manner by the lower classes. The lyrics state that "Don't you ever say, this is how to pray, clogging and polluting the streets. So much Kachra (garbage) giving me Asthma, I feel like Vader trying to breathe." The next verse has the same rowdy men in the opening sequence in more respectable attire. They now scream out the chorus of the song, "I cannot take these festivals, why can't people just act civil, they don't even have dancing skills, it is like voluntary epilepsy, being such, such junglees." While they sing this out, the space they occupy comes into focus. These men now occupy cleaner streets. One of them sits on the porch of a fancy house while demonstrating his anger. At the mention of the word epilepsy we are taken back to those rowdy Indian men on a dirty beach in Mumbai. This further delineates the right way to occupy a public space in India, and the wrong way to do so.

The ideal Indian man is therefore someone who is in control of his emotions and of his body. Dancing on the streets with other men does not fit into this video's conception of propriety and decency. This idea of Indian masculinity can be traced back to Indian history. In colonial India, the Indian man was stripped of his masculinity, considered a weak, effeminate man by the British government. The colonizer was virile, while the colonized was dirty and weak and therefore could not defend himself (Parker & Agleton, 2007). Subsequently the call for independence played on this view propagated by the British government. Now, the Indian man, had to be manly, not for himself but for

the country. Swami Vivekananda, a Hindu reformist called for an India with a muslim body and a vedantist brain. Hindu men had to assert their masculinity. Thus, Hinduism was reconfigured to embrace the ideals of hegemonic masculinity (Banerjee, 2003).

In this video, the dancing Indian man who does not have control over his own body is considered an abomination. To be a part of Indian society, you need to be properly attired and have control over your bodily movements. Anger, however is permitted. Throughout the video, the bliss of the unruly masses is juxtaposed against the anger and irritation of the middle-class Indian.

The anger also stems from the fact that there is fear of the other who is seen as violent. This is articulated when a man in a car sings, “I wish I could say, hatt na chutiye, sadak tere baap ki hai kya?” (Get lost, does the street belong to your father?) but he is controlled by an older man sitting beside him in the car who tells him “Are you mad? They will kill you.”

We also see upper class women offering their perspective on the other, the other who makes them feel unsafe by staring at them. They refer to these men as “tharkis” (lascivious) and hope to be rid of them. We do not see any women from the lower classes in the video and there is no comment on their experiences on the street. As a viewer, we are only supposed to care about the middle-class woman and her experience and rejection of these men.

The video then goes on to talk about the way “they are making God commercial,” and then cuts to the rowdy, roadside boys asking for donations to celebrate their festivals and the home owner screaming to the camera, “Does God need our money?” The video then travels through Mumbai streets and we are shown a fair skinned man in a white suit

who sings in a deep, god- like voice, “I only have one request. Can everyone calm down, please? I can hear the noise till here. I even had to order these (points to noise cancellation head phones).”

God then goes on to say to his subjects, “Stop making money in my name, try to reduce poverty. Do not keep it like an Ambani.” Over here, God is a middle class Indian conception of God, he asks the lower classes to not beg for money for his festivals and he also rejects the higher classes by mocking the house built by Indian business tycoon Mukesh Ambani. He wants these men on the streets to reduce poverty while asking them to not ask for donations for their celebrations. This middle-class God therefore, like the creators of the video is trying to tell the ‘other’ what is good for him and what he must do to prosper. Austerity over extravagance is the message of the video. Until the 1990s, the media propagated a spirit of austerity among Indians, this austerity was seen as a virtue which drew inspiration from Gandhi’s version of Indian nationalism. The next two decades saw a reconfiguration of Indian nationalism. “Choice rather than constraint and extravagance rather than thrift became the new rhetoric of globalization” (Chaudhuri, 2014, p. 145). But the benefactors of globalization are the creators of the video, we see this when the end credits of the video claim that it was made on an iPhone 5S. There is also a disclaimer in the end, shot on the beach, that says “We do respect your religion, Hindu, Sikh, Muslim or Christian, don’t force feed us your tradition, it is not Biryani. This is just a parody, we still love our country.”

In the above video, there is a conflict over space and resources. The middle- class men want to control the way certain segments of society celebrate festivals in urban India. The video does not ask who the streets belong to, but assumes that they belong to

the middle class. The anxiety of urban India is illustrated by this video, asking how we control the unruly masses? How do we push the “other” out of this space, how do we stop them from taking our money and harassing our women?

In their construction of the other, YouTube videos also offer a critical examination of the self. The self is not perfect either, like *EIC*, *All India Bakchod (AIB)* also posted a video about problems with Indian festivals, only this one criticized the middle-class approach to celebrating.

All India Bakchod's video on celebrating Diwali is called “Honest Diwali” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rKDW1of2TOs>). The video which was produced in 2013, opens with a woman putting the finishing touches to a rangoli she has made for Diwali. The rangoli is a colorful pattern made on the floor by the women of the house during Diwali. The audience hears a temple bell and traditional music playing in the background. The woman is dressed in Indian clothing and is sitting on the porch of her house while she lights a diya for Diwali. She is a symbol of tradition and piety for that moment, this is an image often used in Indian television during festivals. The camera pans down to an ugly piece of Rangoli. Alongside this rangoli a message states, “This is pointless.” A boy rushes in from behind the woman and ruins part of the rangoli, and we see the woman scream out “You motherfucker!” followed by a litany of expletives that are drowned out by the sound of crackers.

The woman here is no longer a symbol of piety. She is angry and annoyed with the boy, a real Indian woman who does not make a perfect piece of art and gives in to her emotions when annoyed. The opening credits say AIB presents Honest Diwali, this is then followed by a close up of a newspaper which says “Politician does daft thing, details

you have already read online.” This is a middle-class household in India. The man reading the newspaper opens his door to the security guard of his apartment complex. The security guard says, “Fake respect sir, fake respect.” The man replies, “Oh Bihari surname,” referring to the community to which security guards in Mumbai belong. The exchange offers another perspective on the financial aspects of collecting money during festivals. While EIC’s video judges it as a form of begging, where the rowdy men coerce middle class men into giving them money for the sake of the festival, in *AIB*’s video we see both perspectives: that of the security guard who judges the man at the door for his small mindedness and the middle-class Indian who may earn a decent salary but cannot part with it even during a festival.

There is a difference between collecting “chanda” and collecting “bakshish.” Chanda is a form of crowdsourcing that helps people from the community put up a festival, while bakshish is a bonus offered by citizens to those who serve them through the year. Both practices involve someone from the upper classes handing over money to the lower classes. As viewers, however, we are forced to assume the identity of the person giving the money in both cases. The complaint here is that the “other,” specifically the “lower class” other, is lazy and not financially secure and therefore a subject of ridicule. There is no commentary on the informal economy the security guard operates in, or whether his salary is enough to let him lead a comfortable life. Humor here makes him equal to the owner of the house, but at the same time removes any conflicts related to class. Even if the video tries to be honest, it does so from a middle-class viewpoint. There is no mention of logistics involved in building a pandal for the Gods that the money collected is used for. The perspective of the video reifies certain economic

narratives, narratives that place the upwardly mobile middle class Indian citizen, specifically an Indian man in a position of power, as someone who judges those below him negatively. There is some commentary on the cheap, uncharitable Indian man, but it is only in passing.

The next scene in *AIB's* "Honest Diwali" critiques another practice during Diwali, that of Diwali shopping. We see a couple enter a store and greet the storekeeper. The storekeeper feigns obeisance while mouthing his true feelings, that he wants to fleece the customers today. This is a space of equality. Two men approach each other with equal disdain and are performing masculinity by wanting to take control of the situation and assert their power. The shopkeeper rattles off the details of the fridge, the customer looks at the product and asks more questions to seem knowledgeable while his wife relinquishes any control over the matter. Here the space of purchasing high value products is clearly delineated as a masculine space. The woman interjects the conversation between the storekeeper and her husband by saying, "I have not made a stupid comment in the past ten minutes, so here it is," while asking a rudimentary question to the store keeper.

The next scene plunges the viewer into a supposedly feminine space, that of gift giving. The need for performance during Indian festival is emphasized here again. The scene opens with a woman opening the door and enthusiastically greeting her guest while saying, "Oh my god, dian (witch)," to which her friend replies, "Oh my god chudail (witch)" and later adds, "I have brought you last year's dry fruits." The emphasis here is on the affective nature of the interactions between these women. While the men are stoic and in control of their emotions, the women display emotions they do not feel. The video

showcases the emotional labor of woman forced to be nice to people they dislike for the sake of Diwali. Women here are no longer emblems of tradition, nor the keepers of religiosity. The video veers away from the holi, pious image of a woman during festival to a more real, tiresome portrayal of this experience.

The end of the video takes place in masculine spaces; the gambling room and outside, where crackers are burst. In the gambling room, a grimy space with alcohol and food crumbs covering the table, the men discuss their vulnerabilities. The expectation here is to see yet another Diwali custom to fruition, but then the men struggle with these displays of masculinity. The video emphasizes this discomfort when one of the men at the table says, “You hide my nervousness, I shall now crack a non-veg (inappropriate) joke,” the men around him laugh uncontrollably. Another man says, “I have a gambling addiction, but on this day it is socially acceptable to gamble right?” the men laugh again. Another man says, “I do not even know gambling, but who wants to be lonely on Diwali?” and this time no one laughs at him, the men around the table just stare at him awkwardly. They judge this blatant show of emotion and weakness. Even in their interior lives masculinity dictates the norms. While self-deprecating humor is acceptable, emotional vulnerability is not.

This concept of fragile masculinity is further commented upon when we see two men trying to light a rocket. The rocket has a confident, almost mocking tone of voice. He asks the man to light him, to not be scared. The man’s fear is apparent, but he goes forth and lights the rocket, the rocket says, “Baby tickle my itch like a saucy bitch it is blasting time.” The rocket pretends to be out of fire, and then when the men come closer he says he was only fooling them. The next scene is of two men observing firecrackers

being lit, one of them tells the other he is showing off, to which the man replies, “Oh you know my penis is small.” The scene cuts to the rocket which is again asking the men to come and light it, because the fire has gone out again, as the men come closer he tells them he is going to blast and the video ends.

If the *East India Comedy* video showcases the urban Indian man’s problems with a man on the street, *All India Bakchod* mocks the middle-class man who is bogged down by societal expectations. The rocket, which is a metaphor for the phallus mocks the scared Indian man. The rocket is crass, mocking the man’s reluctance and his lack of confidence. This middle-class Indian man is too genteel, he cannot handle the brashness of the rocket.

Acceptance online

Masculinity and what it means to be a good Indian male is constantly negotiated in YouTube videos. At times it means being a good Indian citizen or a rebellious son who resists parental control. Homosexuality too is addressed across these videos, usually in the context of activism. In 2013, the Supreme Court of India overturned a high court verdict that had ruled Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, a law that criminalized gay sex as unconstitutional (Monalisa, 2013). This was a big blow to the LGBTQ rights movement in India and the move was criticised in the media.

YouTube comedy groups, *East India Comedy (EIC)*, *The Viral Fever (TVF)* and *All India Bakchod (AIB)* responded to this move with humor. While *EIC* went with educating the masses about homosexuality on one of their *EIC* rages that are in the form of news bulletins, *AIB* and *TVF* created sketches to talk about Section 377. However, all three

sketches interpreted gay sex as sex between two men, there was no mention of lesbian or transgender sex in these videos.

AIB's 2013 video on Section 377 was titled *AIB: Imran Khan Answers Questions About Being Gay & Sec 377* (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cXqH7_dYM_k&t=2s). The video featured Indian film actor Imran Khan act as an online agony uncle who would answer questions from Indians on homosexuality. Imran Khan, a heterosexual, Indian, family man was therefore projected as the voice of reason in this video. His subjectivity as a heterosexual, modern Indian man who is well educated and comes from an urban background put him in a position of privilege. The video, tries to speak for the "Indian gay," but all the dialogue happens between straight Indian men. The video starts with a title slide that says that "A lot of homophobic Indians actually believe in this law, it would be unfair to judge them without actually listening to their concerns. So shall we?"

The first question is about choice, a common theme across these videos. A male viewer's voice over asks, "Yeah, Imran, I do not understand why these gays choose to be gay, why don't they un-gay?" Imran says there is a simple way to make someone un-gay and the video cuts to a scene where an effeminate gay man is talking to his friend. Imran's voiceover then says, "Just flick the switch." In the sketch, the man who is effeminate when gay turns masculine when straight. If he smiles when he is gay, he scowls when he is straight, if his body language is loose when gay it becomes tight and upright when he is straight. In this part of the video we realize that this video is a masculine space where the dialogue is between one straight pro-gay man and other straight men. Imran Khan speaks for gay men, most of the actors in the video are AIB

regulars who are straight, upper class, urban Indians and this video addresses concerns that one would hear in heterosexual milieus.

The next question is asked by another male viewer, who asks, “Imran, I heard Gay people invented AIDS, is it true?” Imran’s answer to this is to tell the viewer that “Yes, gay people come armed with a very dangerous gay AIDS DNA, which is anti-national and horny.” The video cuts to scenes of a strand of DNA which is purple in color and has wings, a tiara and a sash saying “fabulous” on it. These images speak to an urban experience of gay pride, caricaturing homosexuality and trying to fit gay identity into certain understandable boxes.

Elite post-colonial education becomes an important facet of explaining homosexuality in these videos. The videos assume ignorance, especially of science and history. The people who ask the queries are usually asking them in colloquial English or a mix of English and Hindi, which makes homosexuality an issue that can be explained only by a man who has some exposure to the west.

This is underlined when another viewer tells him that being gay is not part of Indian culture at which point the video shows Indian temple sculptures that depict homosexual sex and reminds the viewer that wonderful things like “Dowry,” “female infanticide” and the “caste system” are still part of Indian culture. This is the first time we see a more nuanced approach to the tradition versus modernity debate that is part of effecting change in Indian culture. Colonialism is implicated in this debate, as it is with most debates surrounding the Indian Penal Code, but there is also a reminder here that tradition is not all bad.

When a female viewer asks a question about “Gay people wanting to turn everyone else gay,” the video cuts to a scene of a man with pink vision turning people and things into gay. He aims his vision to a couple in a bar and the man he aims it at instantly becomes more effeminate and leaves the woman he was talking to. The gay converter also converts a bottle of wine into a margarita and the Avengers action figures into soft toys.

The video constructs gay and straight as a binary. Gayness, as well as straightness are not just a matter of sexual preference but also a matter of performing masculinity: if you are straight you perform masculinity, if you are gay you perform femininity. The conceptualization of a gay man as effeminate reifies stereotypes.

Even though the video is trying to challenge stereotypes about gay men, the humor in this video stems from the gay space created. This space is filled with unicorns, rainbows and illicit sex. While the video is trying to reject stereotypes, and trying to educate average Indians about homosexuality, it does so by co-opting these stereotypes. When viewers ask questions about same-sex relationships none of the scenes show lesbians. Men performing femininity are considered funny, but there are no shots of women performing masculinity or female desire. Neither is it humorous to show two women indulging in sexual behavior while men hugging men is a source of laughter in the video. Historically, women loving women has been received more negatively in India, in comparison to gay sex. In the study *Fire's queer anti-communalism* (2008), Alexandra Lynn Barron writes:

Allowing representations of desire between women to circulate is akin to disrespecting the nation, and, in Thackeray's eyes, will lead to total chaos. The

boundaries of the nation, for fundamentalist movements like the Shiv Sena, must keep out many kinds of threats, from the Pakistani cricket team to "contagious" lesbianism. Thackeray's comments and the various reactions Fire generated also demonstrate how representations of female sexuality are particularly charged sites in discussions of national identity. (p. 65)

In *TVF*'s video on Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code that criminalizes homosexual sex, (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IIYDzLQ0yP4>), the comedy group equates homosexual sex with eating non-vegetarian food. It also models the woman in the video as someone who wants to 'cure' these non-vegetarians of their vegetarianism. The woman here therefore is the bearer of tradition while the men are the transgressors.

Location plays a central role in the way the comedy is constructed. The title sequence of this video says that "In a landmark decision, the Supreme Court of Tunisia, criminalized the consumption of Non-Vegetarian food under Section #377 of the penal code." The video is supposedly set in Tunisia, but has Indian actors talking to an Indian God woman about their non-vegetarianism.

Two men walk the corridor of a hotel to meet a woman who will cure them of their non-vegetarianism. One of them protests and says, "It is a preference not a disease," while the other man, who may be a friend or a partner, tells him that since they are here they might as well go in to see what is going on. While the man who does not want to change is a masculine, assertive, Indian man, the man who wants to change is more docile and wears a look of confusion on his face through the video.

The 2014 video is titled, “Coming-Out of the kitchen, a non-veg Qtiyapa” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IYDzLQ0yP4&t=120s>). Here, the play is on the words non-veg, usually used in India to mention something taboo or sexualized. Once the men walk into the room they are greeted by a woman in saffron who is called Mata Rambabe. Rambabe is a play on the words Ramdev, a yoga guru who has gone on record to say he can cure homosexuality. Mata Rambabe shakes their hand and smells the non-veg on her own fingers and looks at them with disgust. The assertive man says this is offensive and gets up to walk away only to be stopped by his friend.

Mata Rambabe then asks the men about the time they realized they were gay (non-vegetarian). Vegetarianism, heterosexuality and Hinduism are thus conflated together in this video. By using vegetarianism, the video creates a point of familiarity with its viewers. The need for non-vegetarianism is not an abnormal need despite the taboos placed on it by certain Hindu communities in India and by equating non-vegetarianism with homosexuality the video normalizes homosexuality for viewers. One of the men replies, “I always felt like a non-vegetarian trapped in the body of a vegetarian.” Then he talks about going to America for an internship and being all alone until he was taken to a party where, “I had one drink, then another and the next morning I woke up with a sausage in my mouth,” he says. Everyone in the room, including his friend looks mortified when he says this. Mata Rambabe then asks his friend about his story. The friend says, “To me it happened by accident. I was in Bangkok and in my hotel room I ordered a veg samosa. But as it happens in Bangkok they sent a chicken samosa.”

A lot of Indian men go to Bangkok for sex tourism and this references an incident where the character was sent a lady-boy instead of a woman. “It was the best meat I ever

had. Oh Bangkok. A mecca for middle class people.” He then goes on to talk about how he was bi- food curious. Having best of both worlds and “Soon I realized for me, the grass is greener on the other side,” he says.

In both cases the men found sexual liberation in another land. While the man who had always been aware of his sexuality needed the freedom of the west to truly become himself, the other man seems to have made a choice based on desire alone. Is he gay? Or is he a man who likes to have sex with other men? He offers a clue when he accepts his non-vegetarianism and says “Everything about me is non veg.” The God woman reprimands him for saying this by telling him, “This is not how our society functions.” He retorts, “So you are telling me that only people in the west, have the luxury to make their own decisions?” Again, it is the masculine, confident man who has taken a decision. He emphasizes the fact that this is his preference while his friend thinks this is something innate to him, not something he actively wants.

The video ends on a note of confusion. The men leave the room, their resolve to be non-vegetarian is renewed. They accept themselves the way they are. As they leave, the god woman digs into a piece of chicken, thereby signifying her own non-vegetarianism, which can be coded as lesbianism. But, this is never made explicit. The lines between heterosexuality and homosexuality are blurred but the audience never gets a sense of closure. The last line, where the man says he prefers green chutney over garlic sauce is the only definite answer we get here, that he prefers an Indian man over a western man. Mata Rambabe, the physical manifestation of Indian tradition, modesty and homophobia has given in, and that is all the audience is left with.

Most YouTube videos privilege male gay experience. We only see snippets of lesbianism, usually as a masculine woman who is assertive in comparison to her feminine friends. To go back to *Girliyapa's* “Ladies Room Bakchodi E01,” “To Stick or Not to Stick,” we only fleetingly see homosexuality that is not judged as unnatural. Like the previous video which implicates the godman Ramdev Baba and his need to convert homosexual men this one also uses his homophobia to make a point.

When Saira tells Piyali she is not the kind of girl who leaves home with one lipstick and returns with another another girl interjects. She has short hair, in contrast to the two long haired girls and does not wear any make up. After she tells the girls “If Ramdev (Yoga Guru who does Yoga topless) does it (yoga), it is exercise, if Ramdevi (female) does it, it is considered game of thrones (almost pornographic),” she gives the girls a look of disgust and mutters under her breath, “hypocrites.” The outsider, the lesbian, is judging both of them but that is it. Again lesbianism is not explicitly acknowledged.

Ideological discourses on YouTube

In the examples above, my focus has been on showing who is doing the speaking instead of what is being spoken. Across the YouTube channels analyzed above, there is a sense of an identity marked by religion, class and a certain form of masculinity. The humor in the videos above is constructed to cater to those who share the identity of the people producing the video. You cannot be lower middle-class or from rural India to completely understand the humor in these videos. These videos, like Indian television therefore cater to and are therefore constricted by a middle-class, Hindu, metropolitan identity. In this categorization of the ‘us,’ we see a large population of India left out, and there is no mention or recognition of this in the video. The only outsiders allowed into the

conception of 'us' in these videos are sexual minorities, but even that is created through a masculine lens.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

The main thrust of this thesis was to investigate Indian identity online. YouTube comedies use humor to critique Indian norms. The sketches usually are inspired by political events or social injustices. Through humor and an emphasis on absurdity, the videos make a serious social critique. Comedy therefore becomes a form of critical intervention in these videos.

Gender features heavily as a theme in these videos. Female empowerment and safety are constantly delineated. However, the spokesperson for female empowerment is usually someone from the younger generation who does not fit into the model of the traditional Indian woman.

In YouTube videos, sex and female desire play an important role in the narrative. Whether it is the daughter justifying her decision to having sex before marriage to her mother in “Mom, I’m not a virgin,” or women discussing their sexual preferences in “Ladies Room.” The women discussing these issues are usually urban women, with a good grasp over English and a global outlook. They listen to western music, they wear western clothing and are consumers of a globalized world.

These videos are constantly establishing the modern, urban Indian woman as the ideal, as someone who has a voice and is asserting her identity. They are also pitting this modern ideal against the traditionalist woman to delineate the difference between the two. The mother, the teacher, the God woman, the callers who have vernacular accents they all have viewpoints that need to be changed or at least challenged. Their ignorance is also underlined by the fact that they are holding onto the past, and it is assumed that their

ignorance stems from a lack of knowledge and privilege. They therefore, become the subaltern (Spivak, 1994), except this subaltern speaks and is engaged within these videos. Now, the issue is to bring them into the mainstream ideology, even if this is an ideology that is adhered to only by a sliver of middle-class India.

Gender and class therefore are interlinked in these videos and their analyses of situations usually replicate a middle-class conception of public spaces in India and who belongs there. Some YouTube comedy groups like *East India Comedy* rely on the stereotype of the vernacular tongue speaking, non-modern or westernised man to ridicule and to control and normalize behaviors increasingly seen as deviant. Others like *Girliyapa* have a more sensitive view of the other. “Thug Wife,” for example, is seen as someone who is powerful even if her power is limited. On the other hand, the mother in “Mom I am not a virgin,” is someone who is open to change if other aspects of tradition, in her case, vegetarianism and respect for her choices, are upheld. Modernity, therefore is an elusive concept in these videos. The videos adhere to an Indian sense of modernity: where tradition is still looked upon as an important facet of Indian identity and Indian identity cannot be totally devoid of tradition.

Unlike mainstream television, there is an unapologetic discussion of sex in these videos. YouTube comedy videos offer women a place to articulate their own experiences and desires. As seen in the analysis “A Woman’s Besties,” safe sex is seen as female choice as well as a victory for womanhood. In the video, the clitoris wins, pleasure wins. This is a reconfiguration of the mainstream ideal of a pious woman. On YouTube, a woman can have sex, but even in this space, there are limitations. She can have sex, but she needs to be aware of the consequences; in the case of this specific video it is

pregnancy. The only video that breaks stereotypes completely is “Ladies Room,” which discusses commitment or the lack of it in depth. But even in that video, we see a conversation between tradition and modernity, between an old school conservative attitude and a more open attitude toward sex and commitment.

Religion, caste and community too play an important role in these videos. The videos make sense of Hinduism only. Festivals in India are Hindu festivals and those are the only ones discussed in these videos. These videos therefore mirror the practises of the majority, much like their television soap, counterparts. The jokes hinge upon a Hindu identity, on the fact that vegetarianism can turn a mother around or that teachers in schools will use Hindu words like ‘kundali,’ while talking about sex.

Further Research

My preliminary intent in doing this thesis was to look at this emergent form of media and to better understand its popularity. What I have not focused on in this thesis are the comments that are posted on YouTube in reaction to these videos. My initial interest in these videos stemmed from overhearing two diverging reactions to these videos in India. This is why I wanted to study this new form of entertainment and this is why I wanted to unpack the narratives in these videos. These videos are filled with their own biases and prejudices, but they also offer an insight into the mind of a younger generation of India media consumers and the priorities of the new generation.

Options for further research would have to look at the way audiences react to these videos and whether they agree with the image of India created in these videos. Also, the producers of these videos are usually concentrated in and around Mumbai or Delhi. It would also be interesting to investigate the political economy of YouTube comedy videos

in future studies to understand the motivations of the people making these videos and to the role sponsors play in the development of content in these videos. In addition to this it would be interesting to analyse the gender, class and sexual identities of the producers of these videos to further understand their standpoint.

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