

Book review

Perera, Sasanka & Pathak, Dev Nath (eds.) (2022). *Humour and the Performance of Power in South Asia: Anxiety, Laughter and Politics in Unstable Times*. London: Routledge.

Humour and the Performance of Power in South Asia: Anxiety, Laughter and Politics in Unstable Times edited by Sasanka Perera and Dev Nath Pathak aims to provide a new reading of South Asia through humour. The present collection of interdisciplinary essays is written by doctoral students and established scholars from various fields of social sciences and humanities. The book explores a diversity of historical and contemporary manifestations of humour in South Asia with a remarkable sensitivity for the regions' unstable socio-political reality. Although the editors believe that the volume is representative of the entire region, it is important to highlight that they adopt a cultural understanding of South Asia rather than a geo-political one. This is reflected in the limited selection of the countries that the essays explore.

The present volume is organised into three thematic sections following an overarching introductory chapter. The first section, entitled “Humour in Literary and Visual Subversions”, entails two chapters which deliver historical explorations of literary and visual humorous content in India. The second section, “Folkloric Worldviews: Laughter as Performed Narratives”, groups three essays on Indian and Sri Lankan folk traditions with prominent humorous components. The last section, “Mediated Messages for Laughing and Thinking”, brings four chapters that explore how politics are performed through humour in mediated spaces of Sri Lanka, India, and Bangladesh.

In the “Introduction: Cultural politics of humour in South Asia”, Sasanka Perera and Dev Nath Pathak outline the objectives of this volume, arguing that the aim is not to deliver an anthology of humour in South Asia, nor a theoretical framework for understanding it. Rather, the goal is to present humour as an interpretive window into South Asia and to capture the meanings of humour from diverse viewpoints. Through a brief overview of the past and current philosophy and sociology of humour (covering a range of authors from Bharata Muni, Plato and Aristotle to Mahadev Apte), Perera and Pathak argue for the need for a stronger and more prominent sociology and anthropology of humour, especially that of South Asia. The book aims at and succeeds in filling the identified lacuna and serves as an incentive for a more conspicuous intellectual discourse on humour in South Asia.

The second chapter, “Colonial cartoons: *Punch* and vernacular *Punch* politics of humour in colonial India”, by Divyendu Jha delivers an enticing exploration of political cartoons in colonial India, reflecting on the visual representations, discourses, and imperial experiences they entail. Although the author promises to delve into the reception of these cartoons, and does so briefly, it is unclear where the inferences about reception come from. Nonetheless, the main points of the chapter are brought with clarity and conviction. Jha provides a genesis of political cartoons in India, arguing that they stem from cartoons published in the English-owned magazine *Punch*, which had many reproductions in India, including those in vernacular languages. The author contends that the cartoons in the British-owned magazines mirrored the orientalist view of Indian society through “their vocabularies, idiosyncrasies and shared idioms”

(p. 33) rather than challenging colonial politics. This point is then juxtaposed with an analysis of Indian-produced cartoons, which, according to Jha, resisted the occidental gaze by criticising the imperial rule and existing power relations. Complemented by cathartic humour representing everyday issues and popular imaginations, Indian cartoons consequently aided the construction of national collective consciousness.

The third chapter, “Khattar Kaka’s subversive Hinduism: A case of literary-cultural politics of humour” is written by one of the editors – Dev Nath Pathak. This essay delivers a reading of a literary character, Kattar Kakha, as an alter ego of Hari Mohan Jha, his creator. More importantly, it elaborates on the humorous character of Kaka and his discourse as a critical reflection on religious and ritual practices of Brahmins and Maithili society. Pathak demonstrates how Kaka’s reformist vision and Lokayat-like philosophy humorously highlight the incongruences between the everyday world and religious politics of the Hindu community. Pathak concluded that, even though Kaka was not attributed a political agenda, there is a clear sense of cultural politics portrayed in Hari Mohan Jha’s work. Therefore, Pathak claims, somewhat inconclusively, Hari Mohan Jha’s work can be seen as a prelude to political humour in India. Given that Kattar Kaka’s criticism focuses on the internal workings and imaginations of the local community rather than on the occidental construction of the orient, this rich, in-depth analysis nicely counteracts the previous chapter and brings balance to the first section.

The second section begins with Prithiraj Borah’s chapter “Tales from Assam’s tea gardens: When humour becomes resistance in the everyday life-world of labourers”. Drawing on Husserl’s (1970) and Schutz’s work (completed by Luckmann) (1974), this ethnographic study depicts the life-world of labourers of the tea gardens of Assam. Throughout the analysis, Borah aims to demonstrate how humour can be understood as the workers’ tool for resistance to the oppressive and patriarchal practices of their superiors. The analysis encompasses four examples rendered as humorous form of resistance to the existing hegemony: the killing of the garden manager’s dog; the use of local slang; the folksongs sung by the labourers; and the throwing of stones at the manager’s bungalow. While the main takeaway of this essay is clearly outlined, unfortunately, the analysis remains flat and unconvincing. Although Borah is aware that the ‘dog incident’ might seem to “the ‘modern’ listener as unfunny and peculiar” (p. 73), the questions of what is humorous about this event and the throwing of stones remain unanswered. More importantly, the main point of this chapter is also susceptible to debate. It appears that the analysed instances of humour have no pretences of changing the power dynamics, and one could suggest that they serve as a form of relief rather than resistance.

Monika Yadav’s chapter “Dramatic Haryanvi humour: A case of subversion in *jakari* and *ragni*” conveys a well-rounded analysis of two genres of humorous performances from the Haryana state. Where Borah lacked in conviction, Monika Yadav thrives, tackling the humorous nature of these performances head on, arguing for a “non-universal nature of humour” (p. 81), but also by delivering a rich and nuanced analysis. Combining ethnographic and netnographic work, this essay explores two polarising, and highly gendered performative genres demonstrating how the humorous and satirical elements of *ragni* and *jakari* performances challenge the patriarchal norms. Yadav argues that by presenting alternative realities through humour, these performances deliver a carnivalesque social critique and resistance towards the heterosexual norms and repressive gendering that occurs in Haryanvi community.

In the sixth chapter, “‘A Sri Lankan arrives in hell’: A case of laughing at ‘Sri Lanka’ and the ‘Sri Lankan’ in a collection of modern folktales”, Lal Medawattegedara analyses six stories from a compilation of local humorous tales entitled *Wit and Humour*. Medawattegedara questions how Sri Lanka and its nation is portrayed in these tales and whether they can be understood as more than self-disparagement. He does so by paying close attention to ‘silences’, or lacunas present in the selected folktales. Throughout the analysis, the author of this essay

demonstrates how the chosen folktales differ from the traditional ones by entailing a sense of inconclusiveness. According to Medawattegedara, this inconclusiveness blurs the portrayed stereotypes and faults of Sri Lankans and their state and, consequently, renders the humour affirmative rather than demeaning.

The third and final section of this volume begins with Sasanka Perera's chapter "Humour, criticality and the performance of anonymous power: Internet memes as political commentaries in Sinhala society". Like the first essay, Perera's chapter focuses on the visual representations of political humour, although contemporary ones, created and disseminated by the Sri Lankan internet community. The co-editor of this volume begins with another recapitulation of the historical and current-state overview of sociology of humour, albeit a cursory one compared to the introductory chapter. This is followed by an analysis of folkloric, ritual, and theatrical humorous practices of Sinhala society, which provide the reader with rich contextual information for the ensuing analysis of internet memes. The author demonstrates that there are significant structural and narrative similarities between traditional stories and contemporary Sri Lankan political humour. Regarding political memes, an important facet and a reason for their popularity, especially in politically unstable and repressive systems, Perera claims, is their anonymity. Not only can political memes serve as a form of critique and resistance, but the anonymity which shields their authors from retribution or censorship, renders memes a safe space for bolstering democratic practices.

"Humorous masculinity: Nepali men in mediated Indian male gaze", co-authored by Sandhya A. S. and Chitra Adkar, employs superiority theory as a framework for understanding the Indian male gaze in relation to stereotypical representations of Nepali men in Indian 'chutkule' jokes circulated in social media, two popular films, and in response to Nepalese cringe pop. The authors demonstrate how "the stereotypical representation of the Nepali man as brave, effeminate, loyal and submissive is found to be humorous because of its deviations from the hegemonic notion of masculinity, which the Indian male is assumed to embody" (p. 143). Therefore, the process of othering through humorous stereotyping also serves as an affirmation of Indian identity and their superiority over Nepalese men. The authors strengthen this argument by elaborating on how the Indian male gaze stems from colonial history and perpetuates the colonial-racist social hierarchy, while also being a product of gender norms.

The penultimate chapter, "Politics of performance and performance of politics: Analysing stand-up comedy in the Indian context" is another product of joined forces, this time those of Sukrity Gogoi and Simona Sarma. The chapter brings a cyber-ethnographic exploration of stand-up comedy as a subversive space fruitful for criticising Indian political structures. By delving into recorded performances of six prominent comedians and their reception, the authors elaborate on why humour can be perceived as a powerful tool for expressing dissent and challenging hierarchies. The chapter also entails a discussion on gender relations within stand-up comedy and their effect on the themes and narratives that comedians explore. Although stand-up comedy can serve as an effective subversive tool, the authors argue that it is not without limitations, as the comedians' and the audiences' socio-cultural milieu plays an important role in determining the content and the reception of each performer.

This volume concludes with Ratan Kumar Roy's chapter entitled "Humorous public in Bangladesh: An analytical reading of mediated politics", which explores how the public engages with television news in Bangladesh. Although the author relies more on personal persuasive skills than presenting the data, he argues that there is a "humorous public" that expresses discontent with the mainstream media through humour. Roy contends that with the ever-evolving communication platforms contributing to media convergence, audiences now have a variety of means to "turn playful" (p. 187) and to profess their dissatisfactions creatively, delivering criticism through comic expressions distributed in social media.

Apart from the various degrees of conviction and depth of the essays, one of the major downfalls of this book lies in its somewhat misleading subtitle. One would expect that *anxieties*, *laughter* and *politics* would serve as leitmotifs unifying all the chapters. Instead, *anxieties* are rarely even mentioned throughout the book, while *politics* reads as a very broad and undefined term, sometimes used in the sense of government, while other times it stands for socio-cultural differences. These issues notwithstanding, the book at hand presents a rich and enticing collection of humorous phenomena in South Asia. More importantly, the present volume successfully demonstrates that humour can be a valuable site for unveiling socio-cultural realities (not only) of unstable regions. Due to its interdisciplinary character and the numerous case studies, it is a significant contribution to humour research, but also an appealing invitation for scholars of sociology, anthropology, political science, literary, media, gender, or South Asian studies, to engage not only with this volume, but also with humour in their own work.

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