

Winning battles with a joke: a qualitative inquiry of humour in the Indian Army

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Abstract

Humour in military organizations can be antithetical given the rigid hierarchy, high degrees of work formalization, and obedience to hierarchy. This paper explores how humour is initiated, propagated and maintained in the Indian Army. We conducted twelve in-depth interviews with retired army professionals and used Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis to capture the study's main findings. Three major themes emerged – organizational humour, leader humour, and team humour. We found humour is essential in combating stress, increasing social cohesion, facilitating newcomer assimilation, and promoting a positive work environment. We also found evidence of subversive humour used in forms of resistance to challenge the hierarchical structure subtly. We have provided a three-part schema of workplace humour which sheds interesting insights on workplace humour. Our findings will contribute to understanding how military humour helps to maneuver challenges of a stressful work situation.

Keywords: armed forces, leader humour, team humour, organizational humour.

1. Introduction

Army is one big humour workshop. (Interview respondent)

Indian Army is the world's second largest standing army with over 1.4 million regular troops. They work in the remotest locations with difficult service conditions and relatively limited connectivity (Pandey et al., 2020). They ensure national security and the presence of various operational/non-operational stressors and prolonged exposure to counter insurgency and counter terrorism contributes to high stress levels (Peri, 2021). Armed force work in a zero-error kind of work environment where any little scope of error can prove detrimental to others. It will be of considerable interest to understand how humour in such precarious professions can be related to certain functional outcomes.

The typical perception of an army personnel is in terms of a professional militarized image which is stiff, tough, and serious. The ignorance of *human* behind camouflaged uniforms makes it difficult to juxtapose humour in various aspects of army life. This leads to a theoretical dismissal of the utility of humour in serious professions like armed forces.

Culbert (1976) studied the impact of films as a medium of institutional instruction during the World War II for the US armed forces. It was found that use of humour in a film like *Private Snafu* helped the soldiers accept their serving in the most undesirable situations which further helped them to cut down on their worst fears and boost their morale. In retrospect, why is it so that a humorous film was more liked than other normative war films? Drawing on the incongruity theory (Crawford, 1994; Kulka, 2007), it can be suggested that when an experience violates the normal assumption of one's subjective experience, it generates more laughter. This possibly also suggests why during times of emergency, gallows humour is at its peak (Duncan, 1982). A retired Colonel shared a similar experience. His men were under immense fire from the other side, that went on throughout the day. They were just sitting there preserving themselves. Everyone was tired and hungry, some were even wounded. It was after sunset, really dark with bad weather. Now, evening is usually tea-time for the soldiers. In the midst of all this pressure, suddenly someone blurted out "hey, we didn't get any tea". Everyone started laughing, saying "we could die here, and you're thinking about tea?" The funny remark, delivered with perfect comedic timing, helped alleviate the stressful situation and put everyone at ease. (Apte, N, personal communication, October, 9, 2021).

In the above example, we see evidence of gallows humour which is a type of an intentional coping humour that is generated during situations that are too serious to be funny (Thorson, 1993). Against the backdrop of army work, in this paper we explore how humour is initiated, propagated, and maintained in the Indian Military setting.

Many studies in the past have offered a functional perspective and studied humour majorly in non-military organizations (Avolio et al., 1999; Cooper et al., 2018; Decker, 2006; Decker & Rotondo, 1999; Holmes & Marra, 2002; Holmes & Zealand, 2007; Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012; Neves & Pina, 2018; Petraki & Ramayanti, 2018; Plester, 2009; Priest & Swain, 2002; Taylor et al., 2022). For example, Cooper et al. (2018) found that leader humour induced positive emotions in subordinates, which resulted in high quality of leader-member exchange (LMX), which led to subordinates' extra-role behaviors (OCB). Decker (2006) found that supervisor's high sense of humour reported higher job satisfaction among their subordinates. Neves and Karagonlar (2020) found that both affiliative humour and self-enhancing humour were positively related to increased trust in the supervisor. A meta-analysis of 49 studies ($N = 8,532$) showed that employee humour was positively related with work performance, workgroup cohesion, and negatively related with work withdrawal, burnout, and stress (Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012). According to the Wheel Model of Humour (Robert & Wilbanks, 2012), humour facilitates the spread of positive emotions, and such positive affective spirals help create a positive work environment (Neves & Pina, 2018). This results in effective integration of a cohesive team by bringing people closer to one another, and is characterized by high task commitment, better interpersonal relationships, increase work satisfaction, improved group performance, and development of plans and goals for the future (Brainerd et al., 2008; Holmes & Marra, 2002; Mullen & Copper, 1994; E. Romero & Pescosolido, 2008; Samson & Gross, 2012). Given the above findings, it should be noted that there are very few research studies that have focused on humour in military settings (Godfrey, 2016; Priest 1990). This study is a sharp departure from the overemphasis placed on non-military settings in the context of understanding humour in workplace. We believe it is essential to understand how humour can support military functioning like improving morale, combat stress, build resilience, and develop comradeship during times of crisis to name a few among others (Davies, 2001 & Priest, 1990).

According to Kahn (1989), humour serves multiple functions that can benefit people and their shared ecosystem. First, it acts as a collective coping tool that can ease the painful organizational transitions during difficult times. Second, humour can facilitate cognitive re-framing therefore offers a different perspective of an otherwise routine event or a situation. Third, the ambiguity of humour in communication allows the delivery of negative messages which is otherwise difficult. Fourth, humour can also be used to express hostility that can aim to hurt or wound others. This can negatively impact interpersonal relations. Lastly, humour can promote integration of oneself into a broader socialized system where *insider jokes* become part of a shared collective identity.

Any humorous situation involves people or groups and humour should be interpreted through the lens of intersectionality where power, rank, status, cultural codes, group dynamics, and situation defines the context and appropriateness of humour in organizations (Duncan, 1982; Godfrey, 2016; Vivona, 2014). Studying humour in a military organization will shed interesting theoretical insights into how humour can be used as a discourse for its people's effective functioning. We contribute to the literature in several ways. First, we contribute to understand humour in non-commercial or highly stressful complex organization like the Indian Army. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study in India that captures humour in military settings. Second, we contribute to literature in terms of methodology. Past studies on humour have been majorly quantitative in nature (Cooper, 2005; Cooper et al., 2018; Decker & Rotondo, 1999; Neves & Karagonlar, 2020; Neves & Pina, 2018; Tremblay & Gibson, 2016; Yam et al., 2018) and to address this gap, we have performed in-depth qualitative study of Indian military personnel to capture deeper theoretical insights. Third, we have described humour using a three-part schema of workplace humour (organizational, leader and team). This will help to provide a holistic view of workplace humour. Fourth, we believe studying humour in the context of military settings can offer alternative non-functional insights. For example, given the rigid social order in the organization, does the ambiguity of a humorous communication also help the lower rank officers contest against the power of the hierarchy? Fifth, to our knowledge, there is no systematic research on team humour that focuses on collective humour exchanges between team members. Our research will theoretically contribute to the understanding of team humour.

This paper is organized as follows. The first section summarizes the extant literature on humour in organizations. The second section outlines the empirical approach, including the procedure, and data analysis. The third section reports the description of findings. The paper concludes with a discussion of the findings, practical implication, limitations, and future directions.

2. Humour in organizations

Romero and Cruthirds (2006) defined organizational humour as “consisting of amusing communications that produce positive emotions and cognitions in an individual, group, or organization” (p.59). The use of humour in the workplace can be at various levels. Irrespective of the differential levels of workplace humour, three distinctive roles are played in any case of humorous interaction. They are the initiator, the appreciator, and the humour's object or target. An initiator is someone who creates a joke, an appreciator is the one who agrees with a joke, and the object is whatever or whoever is being considered as the butt of a joke (Lyttle, 2007). However, humour in workplace humour is not only limited to one's sense of humour and how one uses it at the workplace, at an organizational level but it is embedded into the culture of an organization. Plester (2009), in an exploratory study of four organizations, studied the creation of boundaries that either allowed or discouraged the use of workplace humour and fun. She found that local cultural rules, time, and context governed the use of humour in the workplace.

Some organizations had formal policies that imposed boundaries on the use of humour, while in other organizations, the tone of humour was set by the CEOs. In other words, it suggests that the use of humour starts at the top and gets cascaded to other organizational activities, like recruitment and hiring, to build a strong culture of fun. For example, Tony Hsieh, the CEO of Zappos, asks job candidates, on a scale of one to ten, how much they rate themselves as being weird (Kero, 2019; Kerr, 2015). Holmes and Marra (2002) studied the use of humour in the ongoing workplace interactions (meetings) of four different types of organizations (government, semi-public, commercial, and factory). They studied the amount, pattern, type, and style of Humour used during meetings and explored how the use of humour contributed to the creation of distinctive workplace culture. Findings revealed that much humour was used in factory meetings (FAC) and private commercial organizations (PRI). And relatively low humour was used in semi-public (SPU) and government (GOV) organizations. FAC, SPU, and GOV used supportive Humour in a collaborative style to build cohesive, highly integrated, effective teams, whereas PRI used more contesting humour. Therefore, the nature of the organization also determines the type of humour to be used in organizations. Plester and Sayers (2007) studied three IT companies and found humour served six functions in organizations. They are making a point, boredom busting, socializing, celebrating differences, displaying culture, and highlighting and defining status. A jocular abuse (or teasing) type of humour style involved benign day-to-day banter or insults that brought fun and enjoyment.

Moreover, it will be of significant interest to see how workplace humour in alternate or 'extreme' work environments is used. Davies (2001) suggested that humour during war helps to enhance solidarity. It is a coping strategy to restore sanity, improve morale, and develop comradeship under difficult circumstances. Using published military memoirs of British military personnel, Godfrey (2016) explored humour in the military context. He found that the utilization of subversive humour challenges organizational hierarchy and structure. The use of gallows humour played a strategic role in developing comradeship.

Additionally, humour is used to initiate military entry, and thus it plays a huge role in getting personnel exposed to the culture and the subsequent socialization. Humour is embedded in the training culture; the trainers use it in their communication for managing and disciplining the new recruits. Priest (1990) found that new cadets at the U.S. military academy, who used humour, coped better with the stressful training situations and were less likely to quit. Garner (1994) found that police humour helped in the bonding process among law enforcement officers. Police officers use humour to nullify the effects of traumatic events on their own emotions. Alexander and Wells (1991) found those police officers who were in charge of body handling post a major disaster found humour as a helpful coping strategy. Drawing on dirty work (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999), Vivona (2014) examined the use of humour among crime scene investigators. The study found that gallows humour helps in coping and allows a mental disengagement from emotionally troubling or threatening circumstances. The study explored the appropriateness of humour and suggested people who are outside of such work will not be able to understand the need for humour. This suggests, in order to understand humour, it is important to reflect on the work context. Things that may seem to be inappropriate as an outsider can be normative for an insider. However, humour should be matched with the context. Both tacit and learned understanding of context plays a significant role in the perceived appropriateness of humour.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

We used qualitative research to explore workplace humour to gain deeper theoretical insights. Qualitative research provides “valuable insights into how people construct meaning in various social settings” (Neuman, 2006, p.308). We used descriptive phenomenology and have focused on the lived experiences of the participants. The significance of descriptive phenomenology lies in the methodology that offers significant insights into the phenomenon based on the consciousness of the participants (Mhatre & Mehta, 2022).

3.2. Participants

The Indian Army is the land-based military force of the Indian Armed forces. It plays a significant role to ensure national security and unity by defending India from both internal and external threats, and also maintaining peace with the neighbouring countries. It also conducts humanitarian rescue operations during natural calamities. Personnel work in different capacities from soldiers to officers. In this study, we have included only retired Indian Army professionals who are currently working at a different organization post their service or not working.

A combined purposive and snowball sampling strategy was used to select participants for the study. Purposive sampling was used for all the participants as it allowed researchers to select suitable individuals with desired years of work experience. A sample of five participants initially agreed to participate and this sample was then expanded on a ‘snowball’ basis. Twelve retired Indian Army professionals were selected as participants for the semi-structured interviews. The data was collected till the theoretical saturation. We reached our data saturation with 12 interviews as no new themes were emerging (Guest et al., 2006; Hennink & Kaiser, 2022; Tan et al., 2014). However, it should be noted data saturation is not dependent on number but on depth of the data (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

Table 1. Profile of the participants

Participant	Gender	Age (in years)	Rank	Years of Service
1	Male	61	Brigadier	34
2	Male	60	Brigadier ²	33
3	Male	51	Colonel ³	25
4	Male	45	Colonel	22
5	Male	65	Lt. General ¹	39
6	Male	64	Colonel	31
7	Male	44	Colonel	22
8	Male	68	Brigadier	35
9	Male	48	Colonel	23
10	Male	61	NCO (Non-commissioned officer) ⁶	20
11	Male	70	Subedar ⁴	17
12	Male	46	Jawan ⁵	16

Note: Rank description

¹ - Army Commander in charge of one of seven commands of the Indian Army

² - Brigade Commander in charge of a Brigade that consists of Headquarters, three battalions with a troop

³ - Battalion Commander

⁴ - Platoons Commander

⁵ - Soldier

⁶ - A Military officer who has not pursued a commission

3.3. Data collection tool

Semi-structured interviews were conducted for the study. The questions were prepared based on the objective of the study. The interview schedule was validated by six experts in the field. It comprised of independent researchers, army professionals, and academics. To conduct some interviews in Malayalam and Kannada, we used back translation using Carlson's (2000) procedure. The schedule consisted 13 open-ended questions, to conduct in-depth interviews with the participants. The first few questions aimed at asking about their professional profile, later questions were asked to explore how they conceptualize workplace humour in the context of military settings. Few examples are: "What does humour mean to you?", "Do service personnel use humour in work-life? What are the different ways?", "Does the use of humour in any way help the newcomer to adjust with the pressures of the organization? If yes/no how?".

3.4. Procedure

The purpose of the research was explained to the participants. The informed consent form was emailed to all. After obtaining their consent, interviews were conducted based on their convenience. It included both face-to-face interviews and online video interviews. The participants were explained the ethical issues and confidentiality, and their permission was obtained to record their interview. The obtained data was stored in a password-protected system which was accessible only by the researchers. Each interview was conducted for a duration of 60-110 minutes and data were collected between October 4th – November 15th, 2021. The responses were then subjected to further analysis.

3.5. Data analysis

We transcribed the responses and coded the participants to ensure confidentiality. The data was coded and various themes were identified to facilitate thematic analyses. We used Braun and Clarke (2006) steps of thematic analysis. The several phases used in our study involved data familiarization, generating initial coding, searching for themes across the data, reviewing the themes, and lastly, producing the report. We used Attride-Stirling's (2001) thematic network analysis to summarize the main findings of our study. Thematic network analysis involves web-like maps which are a robust and highly systematic way of presenting the findings. Based on Attride-Stirling's (2001) findings, we first extracted the lower order premises from all the transcripts and grouped them as basic themes. The basic themes were then analysed and clustered into organizing themes. Lastly, the super-ordinated theme was created based on the organizing themes (see Figure 1). Open coding was individually carried out by two authors. Whenever there were differences of opinion, a discussion was carried out to obtain mutual consensus about the coding. In few cases, suggestions from an expert were used to rework on some themes to capture the main findings appropriately.

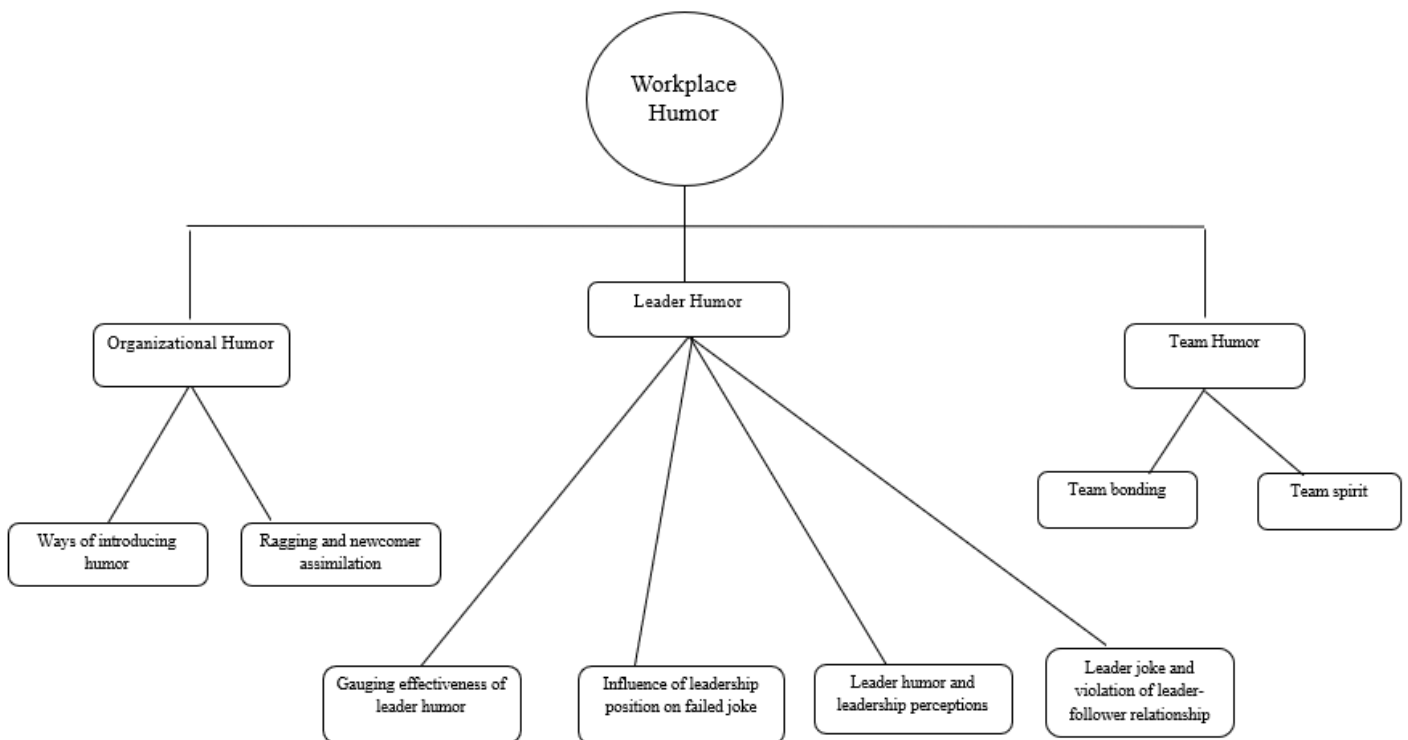


Figure 1. Structure of thematic network analysis

4. Findings

The data analyses helped to understand workplace humour in the context of Indian military settings. The findings are divided into three major organizing themes. First, relating to humour at the organizational level and how organizational practices facilitate the use of workplace humour. Second, understanding the use of leader humour in Indian Army. Third, how humour in teams help in cultivating team spirit and strengthening team bonding.

4.1. Organizational humour

Our findings revealed that humour is an integral part of the Indian Army. As a participant shared, “I think humour is a part of organizational structure and culture of the Indian Army. Over centuries humour has been consolidated within the cultural system of the organization.”

Whether deployed in peace, field, or war situation, humour helps to promote positive attitudes in the context of work. It is difficult for personnel to live in isolated areas, separated from and not able to speak to their families. Therefore, as an organization, the bonding in the army is emphasized upon. It was found that the army expects its officers to induce Humour in everyday life engagements. As a participant shared,

It could be laughing at situations which seem desperate and difficult, to ease the burden and alleviate stress, or it could be a body of jokes that soldiers share among themselves, or it could be a joke aimed that explaining how the situation of the organization is. The idea is a person who can laugh with his troops means that he/she has established a good connection with them.

4.1.1. Ways of introducing humour

Our findings reveal that one may find humour in daily routine activities, informal gatherings, social events, and early training days which includes physical training and sports.

The ‘*Badakhanas*’ or mess parties are the socio-cultural gatherings that focus on fostering interpersonal relationships. In such events humour can be sometimes impromptu or sometimes planned in form of drama, skits, songs, and dance. A participant share,

These badakhanas, social events, cocktails, dinners, how much may people from outside mock, they are an essential part of army life. And as part of these events, there is humour, there is a lot of humour. There are events in which people crack jokes, sing songs, dance, there’s music, liquor all these things. It’s the way the military works.

Another participant similarly shared,

There is no switch off button in Indian army. There are social engagements, sports, physical training and we all these together. My day with my boys starts at 4:30 and sometimes ends by 11:30 pm when we have a mess party or a badakhana. You start living like family, and that is how we share the relationship with my battalion.

In the armed forces, one goes through extreme physical and mental training which places the trainee under various forms of stress. A participant shared, “The humour starts right in training. When we are in the drill square, you must have heard of drill sergeants, in India, we call them drill ustad. They have a very institutionalized way of you know putting you down by humour. This eventually helps you to work hard.” In other words, drill sergeants use humour which appears to be a ridicule but helps to improve performance.

After any demanding task, humour helps to de-stress these moments. there are a lot of liberties given to personnel to use humour. These light-hearted moments are always remembered. As a participant shared,

You are put through extreme mental and physical stresses when you are in training. The moment the event is over like, firing, endurance run, or obstacle course, you have a location where there is tea, lemonade, and fun frolic that follows immediately. Even if someone might have felt bad emotionally, he realizes that it’s all part of the game.

4.1.2. Ragging and newcomer assimilation

Does the use of humour also help in assimilating newcomers into the organization? Ragging is a practice where in-coming juniors are subjected to teasing by their seniors. It is intentional, allows ice-breaking and facilitates socialization (Nallapu, 2013). A participant shared, “Using humour helped in making connections faster. It also eases the person and allows oneself to quickly settle down. Ragging facilitated newcomer adjustment intending to make things easy, highlight one’s awkwardness, and make them feel comfortable with the situation.” Similarly, an officer revealed,

If the person who is being ragged, realizes that it is only to break even, only to make him a part of the family, then it becomes some kind of a joke going on. So, it’s a good tool to break in people in organizations.

It is interesting to note that the ragging episodes shared by some participants were quite intense. For example, it could be kidnapping an officer and stealing his wife’s jewelry, or taking an officer’s identity card and dropping him in a different unit where he was alleged to be an imposter. Another common thing that came up was the ‘*sahayak*’ (help). The seniors would

dress like one, carry the luggage, and tend to the newly joined officer in all ways. After a few days the newcomer realizes that it was his senior in disguise. Such incidents, although intimidating at first, helped in better integration. With each passing year, this helped in bonding and creating fond memories. A participant shared,

It is harassment initially. I have been a driver, *sahayak*, I have been the room bearer, my wife has been a party to it, my friends have also been a party to it, and even my children. It's to create memories and bonding. The first two-three days it may be harassment but it's then lifelong memories and team bonding.

4.2. Leader humour

In a leader-follower dyadic relationship, leader humour played a significant role in influencing the well-being of their followers. This further allowed the use of humour effectively to promote a positive work environment. A participant shared, "It's my job to look after my juniors, try to ease the stress. I occasionally crack a joke or just try to laugh with them. And it has a major impact." Similarly, another participant shared,

I don't have 860 *jawans* (soldiers). I have 860 minds. How do I optimally use 860 minds? Only if they are happily engaged, they are going to take the initiatives on their own. How do I bring this happily engaged work into practice? Humour.

The findings of the study reveal different factors determining the effectiveness of leader humour.

4.2.1. Gauging the effectiveness of leader Humour

If use of humour in an organization is top-down, in order to be effectively using humour, participants in our study revealed that it is important for a leader to gauge his/her humour. It is important for a leader to be vigilant and know if humour has been well received by their subordinates. A participant shared, "Every communication has so many parts. Feedback is important. Non-verbal communication like nodding and smiling tells you that the followers agree with me." Similarly, another participant shared, "If you use humour, you can see the reactions of other people. How are they taking it? Sometimes it is the body language. And if humour is not correctly perceived, probably you have to limit yourself." Therefore, various channels of non-verbal communication like facial expression or body language provide important feedback that should be well understood by the initiator of the joke. However, two participants also felt that it's not easy to receive immediate feedback given their leadership position. A participant shared, "There's no immediate way of gauging humour but over time if you have gained respect, if you have been able to build a cohesive team, ease stress, you know you that you have used humour in the right way." Another participant shared

You get an assessment whether your humour has been accepted or not, it is never gauged. You want to perceive what effect your humour has created. If you have achieved the results, especially when there was a glitch, and you were able to fix it like boosting the morale, relax more and think on their own, you know that your humour has worked.

Thus, a leader can get an assessment of his/her joke in two ways, first, utilizing channels of non-verbal communication, second, if the intended results are achieved.

4.2.2. Influence of leadership position on failed joke

A leader-follower relationship is based on a hierarchy, and thus, offers more opportunities to a senior to crack a joke. A participant shared, "For juniors' humour is difficult, for example, a junior might have to take permissions to use a little bit of humour." In other words, it is easier for a leader to crack a joke, even if it's a flop one. It is often difficult to get honest reactions from the followers. A participant shared, "People around you laugh more at your jokes when you are in an authoritative position."

We found leadership authority and influence enable receiving only desirable feedback from followers that signals an agreement with the leader's failed joke. It is important to acknowledge that in a top-down humorous exchange, laughter in response to humour may be a genuine liking of the joke or a liability to express likability towards the hierarchy accentuated joke to prove alliance with the leader. As a participant shared, "When a senior cracks a joke, even though it may be a very flat one, the junior will laugh. A lot of times when you are in a position of authority, humour protects you to crack a particular joke." Similarly, another officer shared, "Some receivers might not have liked the joke but still laughed at it, some might have laughed but then changed the topic, or someone would have really enjoyed your joke, laughed about it and felt better."

Given a rule-bound, hierarchical organization like military organization characterized by obedience to authority it might implies that there is always a predisposition to like your senior's failed joke in all occasions. Interestingly, we found subordinate not directly reporting to a senior can resist the hierarchy accentuated humour. A participant shared,

I was a Brigadier then. At a party, there was a commander like me who was cracking his PJs, and people were laughing and going gaga. One guy was not laughing. So, I asked this guy, 'you don't seem to enjoy humour?' He said, 'Sir, I don't have to laugh.' I asked, 'what do you mean?' He said, 'Sir, I am not in his brigade. He is not going to write my ACR' (Annual Confidential Report or performance review).

Therefore, it can be said the position a leader is occupying empowers them to go ahead with a failed joke because it is difficult to get honest reactions from the receiver. At the same time, subordinates can challenge or resist submitting to the social order if they are not embedded in the particular hierarchical structure of the initiator. However, we understood even if being in a particular position allows cracking more failed jokes, a leader should always try to gauge the situation. As a participant shared, "Sometimes you may crack a joke upon someone, and that person may frown. That gives you an indicator not to pursue that line of a joke and recover from that situation."

4.2.3. Leader humour and leadership perceptions

We found a leader who cracks a joke is perceived as confident, competent, authentic, and, approachable. A participant shared, "He has agreed to be human, agreed to be vulnerable, agreed to be competent. What more do you need in a leader? Humour is a wonderful thing." The power of laughter that a leader is exhibiting during times of crisis is a great leadership quality. An officer revealed,

When a leader use humour, he/she is also showcasing his/her vulnerabilities in the middle of the stress and make the followers believe in the leader in an efficient way. Humour makes one more confident, even though there is stress, one is making the situation lighter and this make others more focused.

Similarly, another participant shared, “The ability to laugh soothes the nerves. And it’s a great leadership quality.” Interestingly, we found that self-deprecating Humour was considered to be the most preferred and effective type of humour used by seniors in the Indian Army. A participant revealed,

See the best humour is self-deprecating humour. When you take a pun at yourself, the little vulnerability makes it possible for your team to connect to you. Otherwise, if the team considers you as a demigod, you will not be a leader but a commander.

Similarly, another officer revealed,

If you can crack a joke at yourself, people just love it because they see a guy who is at higher position than they are, and yet willing to put himself out there and show that he is vulnerable. So, this works very well.

4.2.4. Leader’s joke and violation of leader-follower relationship

We found when a leader cracks a joke, it serves as a cue that benignly violates the formal relational structure of the leader-follower relationship. Interestingly, in organizations where humour is often inversely related with status of an initiator (Duncan, 1982), in the context of military settings, there are these organizational rituals like mess parties that allows subordinate to crack a joke at the expense of their seniors. We found that during social events subordinates prepare skits or crack jokes at expense of their seniors. A participant shared,

There are many social gatherings, like we have ‘*Badakhana*’ where your troops will crack a joke on you. So, when you are using humour, they will also crack a joke on you and it’s their time and you should have a big heart to take those jokes.

Participants shared when a leader uses humour, he/she has agreed to equalize power. This in turn allows releasing anger if any against their senior in a funny way. Such kind of subversive humour are used as creative tools to critique the status quo. This is also contrary to the belief which states that workers in all conditions should be consenting to management defined norms in an organization (Taylor & Bain, 2003). An officer shared one of his experiences where his senior says, “Major, I thought the time was X but now it’s X+15” So, I said, “yes sir, I know. The time was X. But the last time I was here, I realized that the snacks and tea were served at X +15 so, therefore, I am here now.” Everybody had a hearty laugh. They also understood very subtly that nothing meaningful was happening and at the end everybody shook hands and we had a very fruitful discussion.”

Similarly, another officer shared,

They will have a skit in which a young soldier will mimic the senior most member of a unit like the commanding officer. It will not be very crude but in subtle way they will make fun of the other people. This way it’s a method of releasing anger if there’s any against the seniors by publicly imitating them in a sarcastic manner or funny manner.”

Again, another participant shared, “We have ‘*badakhanas*’ where a lot of humour is used. Soldiers can make skit or crack a joke at the expense of senior. These are facts and we don’t mind.

Also, a participant revealed when followers crack jokes it can also signal leader acceptability. A participant shared,

In the Gurkha battalion, for every function or occasion they have something called ‘*Jhamre*’ dance, which is a traditional Gurkha dance. It was more like rap, where lyrics are written by them. If the boys like you, they will make it on you.

However, it should be noted that such affairs are legitimately regulated in the Indian Army. Because in military professions an officer needs to command or lead their subordinates. A participant revealed,

Things were regulated, not given an open hand. I mean the degree of making fun and being sarcastic was regulated, and it should be. It should not go all out and insult the senior people because then the teamwork won’t happen.

4.3. Team humour

Our findings revealed that humour in the Indian Army helps in team building and fostering team spirit. It was found that humour in teams opened channels of communication that allowed establishing rapport and building authentic relationships characterized by high trust. In any military operations, where team members have to rely on each other to function, team Humour is indispensable.

4.3.1. Team spirit

The use of humour allows knowing the troop members which further makes it possible to stay together in the face of adversities and have good moments. Humour helps in understanding the other person and exhibits an interpersonal stickiness that allows staying together even in the most extreme situations. While explaining the importance of humour, a participant narrated an incident where a certain soldier was injured and paralyzed from his waist below. The participant said, “There were 9 boys from my company staying together in a 10x10 ft hut. When the firing became very intense, they carried this boy. Team spirit is not eating together, singing together, but standing by together in extreme situations.” Humour is one such factor among many others like shared adversity, strong identity, military pride that plays significant role to increase team solidarity. Humour does make a team stronger, where they can crack a joke on each other, bond with each other, and perform collectively as one unit. However, it is not clear if team humour is dependent on an individual’s sense of humour or humour created at a collective level. A participant shared, “We had a time where we needed to stay hungry. I had cracked one joke and my team said ‘Krishnagopal (pseudonym), we all forgot our hunger listening to you.”

4.3.2. Team bonding

Team humour improves team cohesion, and thereby, helps in achieving desired results. A participant shared,

If a team is cracking a joke, which is loud, creating a nuisance, then it is a well-bonded team. They will be very effective in difficult situations, whereas, if a team practices humour only once in a while, but mostly they all are stiff and extremely serious about themselves, then the egos and the personality is more likely to take a beating under the stress of the situations.

Team humour also involves an element of ridicule. Nicknames which are usually used are always at the expense of other individual members which helps to make situations funnier. Although, the target of joke shifts from one member to another. Therefore, Humour is a great leveller that helps to connect team members. A participant shared, “there is an element of ridiculing others. A jawan was called “*use me*” by his team members or an officer being called

as “*tonali*” because his nostrils flared up when he was angry were done with a gesture to make situations funnier.” Similarly, another participant shared, “Nicknames are common thing in army. And obviously, nicknames are at the expense of somebody. Sometimes it’s physical characteristics. Like for example, we had an army commander whose finger was bent, because he had an injury. People use to call him “*ungli*”. Sometimes at other’s personality like Hitler. Nicknames are essentials feature for team building. But they are never to put the person down.”

Unlike other corporate organizations, emphasis is not given to an individual contributor, the performance is more at the team level. A participant revealed, “Humour improves your team cohesiveness and definitely it increases the productivity. You know each other’s strength and weaknesses and you are better able to utilize your human resources.”

Thus, it can be said humour becomes very important for team bonding which helps to bring out the best. And it’s the well-bonded team that survives extreme stress and function optimally.

5. Discussion

In this study, we sought to understand humour in the context of Indian military organization. Humour in military setting is relatively undertheorized (Godfrey, 2016; Priest, 1990) and one of our major theoretical contributions is bridging this gap. Our second theoretical contribution is presenting a non-functional approach to humour. Within the dominant functionalist approach, we could juxtapose an alternate approach that perceives humour capable of energizing resistance (Godfrey, 2016; Griffiths, 1998; Westwood & Johnston, 2013). Past researchers have drawn on workplace humour by extensively focusing on either leader humour, employee humour or organizational humour (Avolio et al., 1999; Cooper et al., 2018; Decker, 2006; Decker & Rotondo, 1999; Holmes & Marra, 2002; Holmes & Zealand, 2007; Neves & Pina, 2018; Petraki & Ramayanti, 2018; Plester, 2009; Priest & Swain, 2002; Taylor et al., 2022). Our third theoretical contribution is that we have attempted to provide a three-part schema of workplace humour, (Organization, Leader, Team) which provides a broader insights into workplace humour in the context of the Indian Army. Since workplace humour is often collectively influenced or determined by organizational practices, culture, policies, leaders, and employees, our workplace humour model provides comprehensive theoretical framework.

The findings revealed that humour is an integral part of the system, and over decades it has become a part of the organizational culture. As an organization, workplace humour is one of the expected leadership traits from military officers. The different ways of introducing workplace humour are informal gatherings / social events, early training days, and daily life events.

We also found the influence of psychological (temporal) distance on ragging (McGraw & Warren, 2010; Yam et al., 2018). Ragging, which in certain situations violates the moral/social norm or poses a threat to one’s physical and mental wellbeing, is perceived as harmless and acceptable when there is psychological distancing (temporal) of events in time. In other words, each additional year increases the funniness of what at the time was a highly threatened event. This increased perception of funniness helps to create memories and facilitates the integration of a newcomer within a team. Ragging or intentional bullying was also found to support newcomer assimilation that can allow them to quickly settle into new situations. The physical and mental wear out in terms of ragging assists in newcomer preparedness for a demanding job. Our findings are line with other researchers who have found that bullying at workplace facilitated cohesion and group integration (Alexander et al., 2012; Nallapu, 2013). We contribute to the extant literature on ragging or intentional bullying in the context of armed forces.

Drawing on the functional perspective, researchers have investigated the effect of leader Humour on certain positive outcomes, like job satisfaction, organizational citizenship behavior,

trust, high-quality leader-member exchange, and leadership perceptions (Avolio et al., 1999; Cooper et al., 2018; Decker, 2006; Petraki & Ramayanti, 2018; Tremblay & Gibson, 2016). In our study we found, humour helped to combat stress, increase social cohesion, facilitate newcomer assimilation, and promote a positive work environment. We have also explored the various mechanisms of humour. For example, humour which is perceived to be hierarchical also require leaders to gauge the effectiveness of their humour in order to promote positive work environment. Non-verbal feedback communication tools like nodding, smiling, and facial expressions can help a leader to be more aware of their humour styles. Alternatively, the use of leader humour can be perceived as effective if the leader can achieve certain outcomes. For example, if a team is a more calm and motivated post humour intervention, then a leader can use this information to gauge the effectiveness of his/her humour. A leader humour is only effective when it is used in the right way. Too much of cynical or aggressive humour can negatively influence people at work. For example, Tremblay (2016) found constructive humour style led to higher inclusion and increased organizational citizenship behavior. On the other hand, the use of offensive humour compromised the follower's feeling of being inclusive.

In this study, we have explored the influence of leadership positions on failed jokes. Drawing on the superiority theory (Gruner, 1979), in a dyadic leader-follower relationship, a leader because of the high status gets more legitimate opportunities to crack a joke even if it's a failed one. Humour is hierarchical (Duncan, 1982; Griffiths, 1998; Vivona, 2014; Westwood & Johnston, 2013) and higher the status, the greater are chances of evoking huge amounts of laughter from the follower to please the leader. Interestingly, we found that a follower can show signs of resistance or even contest an inappropriate leader joke if he/she does not have to directly report to the same leader workwise. Despite the formal leadership position, in certain situations where a joke has not been accepted well, a leader should demonstrate mental flexibility and the capability to bounce back quickly in those situations.

Drawing on the benign violation theory (McGraw & Warren, 2010), we explored situations when the use of leader humour signals follower deviance. Our findings are in line with the past findings (Holmes, 2000; Yam et al., 2018) which suggest the use of leader humour signals follower deviance or facilitate negative interpersonal communication. In our study, deviance meant violating the assumption of interpersonal communication where a follower can push the limits of power and crack a benign (funny) joke at the expense of the leader in events or social gatherings. Our participants shared that the use of leader humour serves as a cue to a follower to subtly make fun of his/her leader. This relates to evidence of using subversive humour as form of resistance that aims to challenge the social order. Interestingly, we also found that followers' jokes at the expense of seniors also meant leader acceptability. We found perceptions of leader humour is positive (Bitterly & Brooks 2020; Priest & Swain, 2002). And the use of self-deprecatory humour is the most effective one because it allows one to connect with the team not as a leader in a more authentic way (Tang & Sun, 2021).

One of our significant theoretical contributions is the use of workplace humour at a team level, and how it is related to team spirit and team bonding. We found humour exchanges between team members helps to get rid of the shyness and facilitates a better understanding of the team member. It also helps to bring out one's real self, therefore being more authentic with other team members. This help them to be with each other, even when the situation becomes very tough. We also found that team humour promotes team bonding. In Armed forces, performance happens at a team level where team bonding becomes very essential for effective functioning. Team humour builds cohesion which in turn increases productivity. It was also found that a team that is cracking a lot of jokes can be perceived as a well-bonded team.

5.1. Practical implications

Our study offers several practical implications. First, at an organizational level, we found humour in the context of the Indian Army, promotes productivity, assists in socialization, eases stress, and therefore creates a positive culture (Mak et al., 2012; Taylor et al., 2022). Thus, military organizations can introduce policies and practices that can encourage interpersonal friskiness which in turn can foster organizational stickiness. However, the use of humour can be regulated to facilitate its usage within acceptable boundaries (Plester 2016). Second, use of humour in forms of resistance can signal subordinate dissent, which can help leaders to manage their social tensions, without penalizing the dissenters. In some other situations, followers' jokes on their leaders can also be benign attempts of subversive humour to destabilize the power-differential. However, in a hierarchical organization certain amount of normative control is required in order to maintain the leader-team effectiveness. Third, study found that humour facilitates the acclimatization of newcomers. Even if in certain instances, where humour was perceived as daunting, it facilitated in-group settlement. Use of humour in this context supported in-group integration thereby, reinforcing the social identity and excluding other out-group members (Tajfel, 1979; Charman 2013). Fourth, at a leader level, a leader gets more legit opportunities to crack jokes and maintain existing social structure even if though they are failed ones. This further explains feelings of superiority usually drawn from leadership positions. Humour which is generally perceived as leaders' armory of control should also at the same time engage in gauging the effectiveness of their humour. In case of repetitive failed jokes, it can also have an adverse effect on the leader-follower relationship. Thus, for a leader especially a new leader needs to use non-verbal communication tools that help in gauging the effectiveness of their humour. Fifth, a leader's use of humour can also send cues to followers to use humour on their leader which can violate the assumption of a leader-follower relationship. Sixth, leaders can use humour as an effective leadership tool to maintain a confident leadership image and also ease stress. We found that use of leader humour led to positive perceptions of leadership. Self-deprecatory humour was found to be an effective type of humour used by seniors in the Indian Army. Sixth, use of humour in teams facilitated communication that strengthened the team cohesiveness, increased team solidarity thereby, fostering high team spirit. Humour in teams can facilitate team knowledge sharing, build inter-member trust, and increase task interdependence which in turn can increase the effectiveness of team functioning.

5.2. Limitations and future studies

This study also has certain limitations. First, our findings on workplace humour are only limited to Indian Army professionals in the Indian Armed forces. The other uniformed forces, such as the Indian Navy and the Indian Air Force were not included. Second, owing to the lesser representation of women in the Indian Army (Sharma & Gupta, 2021), we could not capture the experiences from women's perspective. Third, it remains unclear if team humour was initiated at a collective level or at an individual level, where certain team members with a high sense of humour enabled the use of humour at a team level. Fourth, we did not explore what are the specific styles of humour used in Indian Army. Fifth, the cultural context was not directly addressed. Sixth, the views on ragging came from experienced officers who probably coped better with ragging. We presume the experiences could differ for officials who could not cope. In such case, this type of humour can have a negative impact on people. Future studies can be conducted to investigate if there are cultural military differences in the way humour is used in armed forces. By using published military memoirs on humour, future researchers can differentiate the styles. Future studies can also investigate what comprises team-level humour, whether it is determined at collective level or at an individual level and how it can be related to certain outcomes like risk-taking, or task innovation. It may be interesting to explore team

humour by studying how humour is used among team-members who spend considerable amounts of time together, like factory workers. Future studies can also be conducted to see how failed jokes cracked by leaders are perceived over time and how it affects the follower's perception. Future studies can be conducted to see how a leader's use self-deprecatory humour influence the perception of followers. Drawing on the role-congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002), it would be interesting to see how women military officers use Humour as compared to men. Lastly, since very few studies have been conducted on workplace humour at an organizational level, studies can investigate to see how organizational humour can be linked to group effectiveness using Romero & Pescosolido's (2008) Group Humour Effectiveness Model (GHEM).

6. Conclusion

Military organizations are dynamic which involves high task inter-dependence and constantly demand quick adaptation to volatile changes in the external environment. Therefore, military life is quite demanding, and exposes personnel to various physical, mental, and emotional challenges. In our research, we tried to understand how humour can influence work in the context of military organizations. Our study offers a three-part schema of workplace humour with three different levels of humour. Our study establishes that humour in military organization helps in achieving functional outcomes like increased well-being, high group cohesion, alleviating stress, and improve productivity. However, we also found humour can be also be used as a resistance strategy to challenge organizational hierarchy and structure. In the end, we belief that humour used in the Indian Army is collectively determined by organizational practices, leaders, and soldiers.

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