

I am a Comedian, That's My Job: The Stand-up Activism of Vir Das

Vishal Raj  and Himangi Priya 

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Roorkee, India.
vishal_r@hs.iitr.ac.in

Abstract: In an epoch characterized by rapid digitalization, the proliferation of disinformation, and the deepening schisms within society, the significance of stand-up comedy has assumed unprecedented prominence. Its popularity is burgeoning on a global scale, and concurrently, the Indian comedy landscape has witnessed a remarkable influx of talent over recent decades. Among this exceptional cohort of comedic voices, Vir Das emerges as a prominent figure. Known for his incisive humour, he ventures far beyond light-hearted humour, delving into the heart of pivotal societal issues. This article discusses the profound impact of comedy and satire in catalysing socio-critical transformations through a discerning analysis of select jokes from Vir Das's repertoire. As such, it is organized into three distinct sections, each contributing to the overarching objective. The initial section offers a concise exploration of the historical evolution of comedy, with a particular focus on its development within the Indian context. Subsequently, the second section delves into the core concept of stand-up comedy as a potent medium for activism, grappling with fundamental questions regarding the gravity and consequential influence of comedic discourse. Lastly, the concluding section meticulously conducts a comprehensive thematic analysis of Vir Das's body of work, accentuating his pivotal role as a stand-up activist.

Keywords: *humour; India; stand-up comedy; activism; Vir Das.*



EDITURA UNIVERSITĂȚII DIN BUCUREȘTI



BUCHAREST UNIVERSITY PRESS

University of Bucharest Review. Literary and Cultural Studies Series <https://doi.org/10.31178/UBR.13.1.6>

<https://ubr.rev.unibuc.ro/>

ISSN 2069–8658 (Print) | 2734–5963 (Online)

Volume 13 | Issue 1 | 2023 |

© The Author(s) 2023



Published by Bucharest University Press. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

In a period characterized by societies contending with profound divisions, political upheaval, and an incessant inundation of information, humour emerges as a formidable instrument for solace, comprehension, and connection. Equipped with acumen and perspicacity, stand-up comedians step onto the stage with the explicit intent of confronting the idiosyncrasies of contemporary life. In so doing, they challenge prevailing assumptions and serve as a poignant reminder to their audiences that laughter possesses the capacity to transcend the most entrenched boundaries. Amid this fragmented landscape, stand-up comedy undertakes the role of a unifying force, offering a much-sought respite from the prevailing chaos and, perhaps most significantly, furnishing a pathway for individuals to discover common ground through the medium of laughter, engendering thoughtful contemplation. Recognized as socially aware comedy or, as described by Rebecca Krefting, “charged humour” (3), these comedic expressions transcend mere entertainment. Instead, they are purposefully crafted to address significant socio-political issues. This intentional design enables audiences to comprehend and analyse socio-political events, fostering increased political involvement. (Becker and Bode 612) Given its unique ability to encapsulate profound ideas within humour, stand-up comedy, often taken for granted, assumes a pivotal role, especially in the context of our increasingly digitized world. This genre of comedy offers a distinctive perspective for critiquing the intricate global socio-political landscape.

In a parallel trajectory, the Indian comedy scene has experienced a remarkable upsurge in talent over the past few decades, with comedians armed with sharp sarcasm to dissect India's complex political and power dynamics (Anto and Vyas 2; Sarkar and Siraj 45). Among these exceptional voices, one stands out prominently: Vir Das. Renowned for his incisive humour, Vir goes beyond the realm of light-hearted comedy, delving deep into crucial issues. Ranging from majoritarianism to cancel culture, East vs. West dynamics to secularism, and mortality to cultural barriers, his routines serve a dual purpose – entertainment and enlightenment. His performances catalyse the creation of an alternative discourse, sparking meaningful conversations on pressing topics. This article situates itself at the intersection of socio-political comedy, socially aware comedians, and Vir Das's activist approach to comedy. Building on Sophie Quirk's assertion that “there is no such thing as ‘just’ being funny” (9), as laughter in any form inherently functions as “a comment” (6), the article endeavours to delve into stand-up comedy as a form of activism. It seeks to demonstrate this premise through an analysis of select segments from Vir Das's comedy routines.

Before delving deeper into the central aim of this article, it is imperative to elucidate the rationale underpinning the selection of Vir Das as the subject of inquiry. The realm of contemporary Indian comedy can be discernibly bifurcated, albeit with some degree of fluidity, given that comedians often blur the

boundaries that distinguish these categories. The first category, characterized by humour rooted in the quotidian and mundane facets of life, seeks to regale audiences by playfully ribbing the trifles of existence. Comedians such as Zakir Khan, Kenny Sebastian, Anubhav Singh Bassi, and Abhishek Upmanyu comfortably inhabit this milieu. Notably, they consciously refrain from delving into overtly political themes, as exemplified by Kenny Sebastian's aptly titled performance, *Why I Don't Engage in Political Humour in India* (2018). In stark contrast, there exists a second category of comedians who unflinchingly immerse themselves in the labyrinthine realm of political discourse. They dissect power dynamics and societal narratives within the crucible of comedy. Figures like Kunal Kamra and Varun Grover epitomize this genre. Nonetheless, Vir Das occupies a distinctive and pivotal position within this multifaceted comedy landscape. His style of humour hits across a broad spectrum of subjects, championing the cause of humanism over opposition to established norms. Armed with profound philosophical insights and an incisive satirical edge, he unflinchingly scrutinizes society's deepest taboos. His ethos of performance extends beyond mere ridicule, proffering innovative solutions to universal quandaries, thus setting him apart from most of his comedic counterparts.

Therefore, this article selects two of Vir Das's comedy sets, specifically *Religion vs. Comedy* (2021) and *Who Has Freedom of Speech?* (2021), for thematic analysis¹. The rationale behind this choice is twofold. Firstly, these performances serve as exemplary case studies of his comedic artistry, wherein he employs a recurring pattern to deliver humour while simultaneously challenging the apparent normalcy of socio-political structures. Secondly, these sets seamlessly align with the broader context of exploring stand-up comedy as a potent form of activism.

The article unfolds in three distinct sections. The initial section succinctly traces the historical evolution of comedy, particularly the stand-up genre, within the Indian context. Subsequently, the second section discusses the central concept of stand-up comedy as a medium of activism, delving into the fundamental question surrounding the seriousness and impact of comedic discourse. Finally, the concluding section conducts a meticulous thematic analysis of Vir Das's jokes, underscoring his pivotal role as a stand-up activist.

Stand-up comedy in India

The evolution of stand-up comedy in India spans a remarkable 2000 years, tracing its roots back to ancient traditions such as *Natyashastra*. Influenced by early manifestations of humour within the realm of drama theory, comedy

¹ As of 30th August, 2023, the videos have garnered 1,903,573 and 1,542,471 views respectively.

seamlessly integrated into Indian cinema during the mid-twentieth century, with luminaries like Rajendra Nath and Johnny Walker at the forefront of this comedic wave. A pivotal shift towards live comedy shows came in the 1980s with Johnny Lever's trailblazing *Kabbadi* (1986), heralding a distinctive departure from prevailing entertainment genres. The landscape witnessed a transformative moment with the advent of television broadcasting in the early 2000s, elevating the genre's popularity through iconic shows like *The Great Indian Comedy Show* (2004) and *Comedy Circus* (2007). However, it is imperative to note that during this epoch, Hindi comedy, which was predominant, diverged from the emerging genre of stand-up. This divergence was marked by a proclivity for slapstick humour within Hindi comedy, as opposed to the more nuanced and topical nature characterizing stand-up comedy, which delves into personal and sociopolitical subjects (Jha, *A Brief History*).

The inception of standup comedy, as known in the West, is often attributed to Vir Das, who performed a groundbreaking show in Delhi in 2003. With his roots in the US standup scene, Vir Das introduced a new form of humour to India, diverging from the prevalent slapstick genre dominated by physical gags (Bhandari, *How Vir*). The advent of *YouTube* in 2005 and platforms like *Comedy Central* fuelled the growth of standup comedy in India, drawing attention to comedians like Russell Peters from the Indian Diaspora. The global recession in 2008, coupled with the return of non-resident Indians and the booming Indian economy, contributed to the rise of standup comedy (Paul 122). The genre's popularity surged as globalization and the influx of foreign professionals infused Western tastes into India, creating a demand that transformed Indian standup comedy into a profitable industry. By 2010, *The Comedy Store's* establishment in Mumbai signalled the professionalization of Indian standup comedy, bringing international comedians to the forefront.

Vir Das, through *Weirdass Hamateur Nights* (2009), played a crucial role in nurturing emerging talents and experimenting with diverse themes, ushering in a golden era. The subsequent formation of comedy groups like Schitzengiggles Comedy (SnG), East India Comedy (EIC), and All India Bakchod (AIB) in 2012 solidified the influence of standup comedy on the cultural landscape and led to alliances among comedians. This confluence of traditional roots, global influences, digital mediums, and the establishment of dedicated comedy platforms underscores standup comedy's dynamic and multifaceted nature in contemporary India, positioning it not merely as entertainment but as a significant cultural and social phenomenon.

Stand-up comedy as stand-up activism

The intricate interplay between humour and seriousness often raises profound questions: Can humour seamlessly coexist with serious subjects? Is it

conceivable for a joke to thrive within a realm where humour and gravity harmoniously blend? To address these questions effectively, it is imperative to delve into the very essence of humour itself. Sigmund Freud, in his seminal work *Jokes and Their Relations to the Unconscious* (1960), posits that comedy's societal role lies in addressing taboo subjects, challenging prevailing social norms, and serving as a form of catharsis (103). However, a common assumption within public discourse perpetuates the notion that humour is an antidote for seriousness. This widespread misconception confines humour within the boundaries of triviality, deeming it unworthy of examination. Nonetheless, Lockyer and Pickering assert that humour should not be dismissed as a mere trifle; rather, it holds profound significance that surpasses its surface levity (809). They further posit that humour, rather than being opposed to seriousness, actually harbours the potential to yield substantial implications (809). In light of this backdrop, this article attempts to conceptualize stand-up comedy as a manifestation of stand-up activism.

At its core, stand-up comedy is a nuanced and intricate dialogue. Quirk characterizes it as a "complicated interaction" (3), necessitating a high level of interpretative competence from its audience, who must navigate through a multifaceted medium of communication, discerning truth from irony and traversing the ambiguous terrain in between (3-4). Standup comedy, as a contemporary form of comedic expression deeply rooted in humour and deliberate amusement, transcends mere entertainment by serving as a potent vehicle for incisive social critique, capable of exerting significant influence over its Audience (Anto and Vyas 2; Paul 122). It sets itself apart from other forms of entertainment, such as music and cinema, primarily due to its profound reliance on the power of language and text. Comedians deftly employ linguistic tools like irony, wordplay, timing, exaggeration, and incongruity to navigate sensitive subjects, effectively avoiding potential repercussions associated with them. Essentially, their creative brilliance and artistic prowess find expression through the intricate manipulation of language. Nevertheless, Quirk contends that a joke is not merely a textual construct; more than what it is, it is what it does (5). Mary Douglas expands upon this concept, asserting that a joke serves not only as an exchange between a comedian and the audience but also as an interaction between the comedian and society at large (152, 155). In this context, jokes become performative, as they elicit laughter and, in doing so, perform a specific function. This linguistic and aesthetic manifestation of humour provides fertile ground for comedy to be an "important form of social component and dispute" and becomes a crucial tool for "social criticism" (Quirk 5). Theorists like John Limon have even theorized it as a form of "abjection" and revolt against dominant ideologies (73). It is this potential for jokes to transgress boundaries that enable standup comedy to challenge societal norms and scrutinize the prevailing status quo, thereby endowing it with its potency as a medium for social critique.

Moreover, comedy, when utilized as a medium to critique socio-political issues, possesses the extraordinary ability to shape societal norms through “the power of its distribution” and its inherent capacity for amusement and entertainment (Chattoo and Feldman 26). What confers contemporary standup comedians with a more influential standpoint is the burgeoning digital landscape and the rising global consumption of content; these unparalleled platforms expand their reach to every corner of the world. In this ongoing era of digital transformation, the opportunity to engage in and share comedy has never been as effortless and accessible to the general populace as it is today. Therefore, the profound significance of social media and the internet cannot, and must not, be underestimated. Internet-driven platforms such as YouTube have ushered in fresh prospects for content creators due to their openness, visibility, interactivity, and on-demand functionality. This revolution has not only reshaped the comedian's landscape but has also significantly altered the audience's perspective (Quirk 130). Now, audiences exercise greater control over their media consumption process, manifesting their preferences in increasingly conspicuous ways through actions such as likes, comments, and shares. This awareness of the audience's inclinations is pivotal as it assists artists in tailoring their content to align with their audience's desires. For example, comedians like Vir Das are frequently observed soliciting topics from their audiences for future performances. This digital audience fundamentally distinguishes itself by its “specificity and interactivity” (Quirk 132), providing essential validation for socially critical humour. The influence wielded by this empowered audience is immensely substantial; Quirk contends that contemporary comedians are fundamentally shaped by the capabilities of digital media (130).

Vir Das and his stand-up activism

It's just words, do you know that all of it is just words. (!) Standup is just words. Debates are words, reviews are words, analysis is words because in a civilized society, you respond to words (.) with words, (!) and that means (.) that we have tonight. (AC) (AA) And tonight, I make you feel good, tonight I will set your world on fire (AL) ... tonight, I will make you feel good and uncomfortable and happy and sad ... I will do all of that with just words. I am a comedian; That's my job. (!) (?) (AA)² (Das, *Time to Stand Up* 00:00- 01:08)

² Transcription conventions employed:

(.) → A pause less than 3 seconds

(!) → Accents, it indicates emphasis.

(?) → Raising intonation

(P) → Significant pause, a pause more than three seconds

(AC) → Audience claps

(AL) → Audience laughs

Implicit within Vir Das's words lies a compelling notion: that comedy possesses the potential for a more significant impact. It becomes evident that his agenda extends beyond humour, transcending the simple task of entertaining his audience and delving into discomfort. His audience uncovers a resounding declaration of his comedic purpose within these words. As one of the genre's pioneers, he adeptly encapsulates the essence of stand-up comedy as activism, elevating it to a profound medium for societal reflection (Jha, *A Brief History*). According to Lawrence Mintz, the idea of social change is inherently present in a joke that contains "a critique of the gap between what it is and what we believe should be" (71). Taking the argument further, Simon Critchley asserts that humour arises from a disjunction between "expectations and actuality" (1). This gap or disjunction is a constant element in Vir's comedy. With his craft, he attempts what Quirk calls "manipulation" (1). Quirk's theory of manipulation posits that "Telling a joke is always a manipulative process" (20). It is worth noting that manipulation here does not have a negative connotation; instead, it underscores Vir's profound influence over his audience. In the ensuing subsections, his demeanour and expertise, skilfully blending humour with a profound sense of responsibility, affirm his position as a comedian who not only entertains but also fosters contemplation and meaningful discussion.

Religion vs comedy

In their pursuit of unravelling the enigma, *What makes us laugh and why?* Mascot and Moder present an interesting proposition: comedy hinges profoundly on the concept of objectification (1). This process, they assert, involves reducing the target of humour to a single trait, allowing the uncanny to surface, and granting permission to address the unspeakable. It enables people to find humour in misfortune and turn reality on its head (2). In the select set, Vir echoes this proposition of objectification. He deftly objectifies the sacrosanct institution of religion and places it alongside a frivolous phenomenon – comedy. In this juxtaposition, he utilizes humour in a Freudian manner, deploying it as a subversive psychological instrument. Freud, in his analysis, posited that "humour is not resigned; it is rebellious" (Freud, *The Standard* 163), emphasizing the inherent rebellion embedded within humour. Clearly discernible from the title itself, this is a daring venture, boldly fusing two seemingly disparate elements. The audacity of this thematic choice should not be overlooked, especially in a

(AA) → Audience Appreciation

(CL) → Comedian laughs

nation where religious fervour holds a significant place in the cultural fabric. Vir, fully aware of the inherent risks, chooses to proceed.

Many, many People over a long period of time have been telling me the same thing as a comedian Vir, you will not have a career in India until you start doing relatable material, and that's what I am gonna do tonight. I am gonna do material that you can relate to and that you can recognize in comfort. Are you ready, yeah? ... Let's talk about religion now ... (.) (AC) (AL) (AA) (Das, *Religion vs Comedy* 00:00-00:19)

From the very inception of this performance, starting with his choice of subject matter, he garners enthusiastic support from his audience. It is crucial to comprehend that the seamless transition from textual content to humour hinges significantly upon active participation from the audience. The applause, mirthful laughter, and hearty cheers bestowed upon him do not merely constitute a reactive response; instead, they represent an unequivocal affirmation and acceptance of his audience. Taking this forward, Wertheim contends that joking serves as an integral negotiation of the ongoing dialogue surrounding the values, institutions, and authorities mutually negotiated between the comedian and his audience (26). Within this dynamic negotiation, his primary objective lies in unearthing the inherent incongruities at the core of religious beliefs. He conscientiously acknowledges the gravity of the situation, humorously interjecting, "Do you know how sad it is that we have to hide in a forest to have this conversation" (Das, *Religion vs Comedy* 00:30-00:33). This candid recognition of fear elicits laughter, effectively diffusing the palpable tension and initiating a role reversal in which the fear itself emerges as the focal point of joke.

Vir: In my mind, it is a female higher power (.) (AA)

One girl in the audience: Yes (AA)

Vir: Thank you, ma'am, I wouldn't do that. I wrote the next joke, you are not gonna like it. (AC) (AL) (Das, *Religion vs Comedy* 01: 31-01:39)

One notable facet of his comedic style is his remarkable ability to transition between jokes and direct engagement with his audience seamlessly. This abrupt shift, as observed when he responds to an audience member, not only sustains the ongoing dialogue but also highlights his expertise in establishing a persuasive and conversational connection with his viewers. Through these adept switches, he captures and sustains the undivided attention of his audience. These exchanges subtly lay the foundation for his subsequent examination of three major global religions: Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity. He ingeniously brings religion into the contemporary sphere, cleverly mocking it by drawing a parallel with the act of venerating a joint family. His analogy humorously implies that this form of

reverence, in reality, results in lucrative contracts and opportunities, shedding light on the endemic corruption prevailing in India.

That's what it is in India, which is we are worshiping a joint family (!), which makes no sense because we are not getting anything in return. In real life, if you worship a joint family, you can get like aviation contracts, railway contracts, electricity, cell phone networks (AL) (AA) (AC) ... you get stuff back (AL) (,)
Look at how uncomfortable you are right now. (!) (Das, *Religion vs Comedy* 03:20-03:39)

While making the audience uncomfortable, he transitions from religion and corruption to the severe and extreme aspects of religious fundamentalism. He begins by discussing the concept of religious ownership, humorously challenging those who assert exclusive ownership over their faith or deity. He astutely emphasizes that faith and God are not personal possessions but shared experiences, thereby exposing the fallacy of possessiveness in religious matters.

People say, "Vir, don't talk about my faith." It ain't YOUR faith. It's faith. (!)
"Vir, don't talk about my god." Not YOUR God! (!) (,)
Does not belong to you.
If you keep walking around going, "Hey man, don't talk about my girlfriend. I'll kick your ass."... But there are billions of guys saying the same thing about the same girl. (CL) (AL)
She's not your girlfriend, buddy. (AL) (AA) (AC) (Das, *Religion vs Comedy* 04:09-04:29)

Moreover, he distinguishes between those who take offense at religious jokes and those who resort to fundamentalist actions, provocatively questioning the necessity of God requiring fundamentalist defenders.

If you are offended by religious jokes, you are a human being. If you are avenging religious jokes, you are a fundamentalist. (!) (,)
And does God need a fundamentalist? Really, he needs you? You are the first line of defense? (CL) (AL) (Das, *Religion vs Comedy* 04:32-04:47)
... you know what would happen if you went up to Muslim heaven and you are like, "I beheaded sixty people because they drew a cartoon of you." (?) (!)
Do you know the first thing God would ask? ... "What is a cartoon?" (AL)
He doesn't know. Did you forget that God made you, and You made all this other shit. (CL) (AL) (Das, *Religion vs Comedy* 04:54-05:11)

You know if you went to Jesus. If Christian missionaries went up to Jesus Christ and they were like, "Hey, we went to all these other countries, and we beat the shit out of them, (?) and now they believe in you." (!) (CL)
He'd be like, "Hey man, I never asked you to do that. (AL) I don't speak their language. I don't understand what these white people are saying." (AL) (P)

Aww. Did we forget that Jesus was Middle Eastern, huh? Did you forget that Jesus was Brown? (!) (AL) (AC) (AA)

You know, if Jesus was walking around down the street in New York City, (?) (CL) at least five people would be like, "Get out of my way, Abdul."... He'd get pulled over by the cops every day. (AL) (Das, *Religion vs Comedy* 07:23-08:11)

In India, we will lynch a Muslim family for eating beef, and then we'll travel abroad where there's a McDonald's on every single corner. (!) (CL) (AL) Eating Indian cows. (?)

Do you know that India is the third largest exporter of beef in the world? (!)

Do you know if you go to the White House, they would serve you your God back to you? (!) (CL) (AL) (Das, *Religion vs Comedy* 00:11:26-00:11:44)

These jokes impeccably exemplify what Quirk terms "social criticism" (5). Vir adroitly employs humour to illuminate a myriad of dimensions inherent to religious convictions, concurrently offering astute scrutiny of the inherent hypocrisy and steadfast fanaticism frequently displayed by extremists. He proffers a profound commentary, revealing the intricacies enmeshed within religious identity, dismantling prevalent misconceptions, and exposing the folly of extreme actions conducted under the cloak of faith. With skilful precision, he demarcates a stark dichotomy between two distinct factions: those who take offense at religious satire and those who resort to extreme acts of reprisal. Shrewdly, he challenges the very necessity of a deity necessitating fervent defenders, all while drawing attention to the irrational foundations of religious extremism. He proceeds to delve deeper into religious misunderstandings and stereotypes, conjuring vivid scenarios from the three major religions: Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. His highlighting of the irony and hypocrisy entrenched within religious practices, juxtaposing the gruesome act of lynching a Muslim family in India due to beef consumption with the global consumption of beef sourced from Indian cows, underscores his intent to provoke contemplation among the audience.

If your faith is so rattled by a joke, is it really that strong? (?) (!) (P)

You believe in your God. You worship your God. Leave my jokes alone. (!) (,)

That's it. Your God can take it. (!) (AC) (Das, *Religion vs Comedy* 00:12:02-00:12:20)

Vir elegantly concludes the episode by shifting his focus towards introspection and philosophical contemplation. These statements encapsulate the culmination of his previous jokes and insights concerning faith and religious devotion. In a thought-provoking manner, he poses a fundamental question: when faced with a simple joke, does an individual's faith possess the strength and depth required to withstand such a challenge? This probing inquiry delves into the heart of the matter, emphasizing that genuine faith should demonstrate resilience, capable of enduring trials and jests without succumbing to vulnerability.

Who has freedom of speech?

Mary Douglas astutely observes that for humour to possess subversive power, “the element of challenge” is a vital component (155). She argues that the effectiveness of humour as a pivotal tool for conveying alternative viewpoints hinges on comedians’ ability to question deeply ingrained concepts and frameworks. This stimulates the audience to expand their worldview, thereby enriching their overall comprehension of these concepts. Vir exemplifies this phenomenon by deconstructing the core essence of freedom of speech and seamlessly incorporating political commentary. He initiates his routine by probing the audience’s perception of freedom of speech, a concept often taken for granted. His opening remarks serve as a clever segue into the overarching theme. He mockingly critiques those who fail to recognize their constrained freedom of speech as they engage in mundane discussions about football and intermittent fasting. This initial jest establishes the tone for his performance, accentuating the stark contrast between surface-level conversations and the authentic exercise of free speech.

Who here feels like they have enough Freedom of speech? Never going to get into trouble, make some noise ... See, (CL) those f***ing morons are the problem (!) (?)

Right, they don't have Freedom of Speech, you just have an uninteresting thought (AL)

Nobody is coming after you because all you tweet about f***ing football and intermittent fasting (AL) (AC) (AA) (Das, *Who has Freedom* 00:30-01:02)

He then directs his attention towards the leaders and politicians who ostensibly wield the most substantial freedom of speech. Employing a rhetorical question, he queries, *Who possesses the privilege of Freedom of Speech?* and promptly supplies the response, asserting, “Leaders and politicians, for as a leader, coherence is not a prerequisite” (Das, *Who has Freedom of Speech?* 01:25-01:30). Taking a more direct swipe at India's political landscape, he takes aim at the nation’s pressing issues, including the migrant worker crises, water scarcity, agricultural struggles, and economic woes. In spite of these paramount concerns, he wryly highlights that the Prime Minister is adept at providing the public with memorable phrases such as “fifty-six inches” and “chausa Akshay chausa” (Das, *Who has Freedom* 06:41-06:42). Through this satirical commentary, he lays bare the insignificance of political discourse when juxtaposed with the genuine challenges confronting the populace.

Look at India right now. We have a migrant worker’s crisis, a water crisis, a farmer’s crisis. Our GDP has shrunk like nine thousand percent (?) (!)

But two pieces of information we have from our prime minister for sure are fifty-six inches and chausa Akshay chausa (!) (AC) (AL) (Das, *Who has Freedom* 06:29-06:45)

In his distinctive manner, Das consistently imparts profound commentary. An exemplary instance of this is found in his declaration: “The most hateful, violent, misogynistic, racist and unscientific shit has always been said in front of a flag that people love and on a stage that was built for by taking money from the very people that the speech is going to oppress” (Das, *Who has Freedom* 00:11:38-00:11:52). By drawing a connection between such rhetoric and the symbols of flags and stages, supported ironically by the very people it seeks to oppress, Das illuminates the precarious link between freedom of speech and the misuse of authority. Through this discerning observation, he advocates for vigilant differentiation between genuine expressions of free speech and harmful, divisive discourse. In his discourse, he aligns himself closely with Richard Schechner’s theory of performance, wherein Schechner posits an “efficacy-entertainment dyad” (622). This conceptual framework outlines two elements residing at opposing poles: entertainment, emphasizing amusement, and efficacy, signifying tangible outcomes. The presence of the efficacy-entertainment dyad is palpable as he laments the situation where comedians now must submit affidavits to the Supreme Court to clarify their tweets, recounting his own experience of receiving seventeen legal notices within a year. His humorous approach to this serious issue exemplifies his equilibrium on the spectrum between efficacy and entertainment.

In the concluding moments of his performance, he delves into the genuine potency of comedy. He asserts that comedians, writers, journalists, poets, and artists face persecution not due to the fear they individually instil in the establishment but because of the collective energy and unity stemming from the audience's laughter. Here, Das underscores the pivotal role that the audience plays in stand-up performances. He proposes that laughter surpasses mere escapism; it emerges as a formidable force capable of challenging the established order and instigating transformative change.

Who doesn't have Freedom of speech? (?) I am not gonna tell you. I'll just give you a hint. (.)

Right now, there is a comedian in prison for over a month for jokes he didn't do that evening. Comedians have to write affidavits to the Supreme Court to explain their tweets. I got 17 legal notices last year. I went to court twice. Why? (!) (?) (.) Is it because we are not funny? Definitely (AL)

Definitely. Any comedian of any group is not funny to a large cross-section of society. Does it mean we go to jail or court? Does it? ... So why are comedians, writers, journalists, poets, artists going to jail? (!)

It's because THEY are afraid (!) (.)

Afraid of who? (?) Afraid of us? F*** no. They can squash us in a second, Watch, They will...soon (!)
They are afraid of YOU. The scariest sound that the establishment can hear is not the wording of my jokes. It's the energy in your laughs (P) (AA) (AC)
It is not the statement I make it is the agreement in your lungs (?) (!) (Das, *Who has Freedom* 00:11:56-00:13:08)

In both of these sets, he employs a multifaceted approach. This approach not only serves to foster empathy but also effectively unravels enigmatic archetypes. Furthermore, it derides and questions authority, imparting wisdom to the audience. This is achieved with a delightful dash of humour that consistently elicits hearty laughter from his audience. Therefore, it can be persuasively argued that in these collections, his stand-up comedy aligns closely with the notion of stand-up activism.

Conclusion

The article delves into Vir Das's intricate comedic approach, shedding light on his deliberate and purposeful demeanour as a comedian. It illustrates how Vir Das wields humour as a potent tool to unravel the complexities and incongruities inherent in universal phenomena. While his primary aim may not be to effect immediate change in his audience, he remains acutely aware of the importance of introducing alternative perspectives on ostensibly clear-cut subjects like religion, comedy, or freedom of speech. Additionally, it demonstrates Das's unique talent for taking intricate and multifaceted subjects and transforming them into humorous anecdotes, thereby making weighty issues more accessible to the general public.


Notably, he achieves this while consistently directing his humour towards individuals in positions of power and privilege, adhering to the principle of punching up. This approach aligns with Henry Jenkins's concept of the "civil imagination" (29-30), wherein Vir Das envisions the potential for societal change through popular culture, particularly within stand-up comedy. In doing so, he assumes a crucial role in nurturing collective awareness and inspiring positive change through the influential medium of comedy, emerging as an exemplary artist who practices stand-up activism.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Vishal Raj  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8000-4540>

Himangi Priya  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3910-8791>

Works Cited:

- Anna, Ancy Anto, and Neerja Vyas. "Political satire as alternative journalism in Indian stand-up comedy." *Comedy Studies*, 29 Aug. 2023: 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2040610X.2023.2252605>.
- Becker, Amy B., and Leticia Bode. "Satire as a source for learning? The differential impact of news versus satire exposure on net neutrality knowledge gain." *Information, Communication & Society*, vol. 21, no. 4, 2018: 612-5. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2017.1301517>.
- Bhandari, Kabir Singh. "How Vir Das, Cyrus Broacha, and Others Tickled India's Funny Bone." *Entrepreneur India*, 8 Jun. 2022, <https://www.entrepreneur.com/en-in/news-and-trends/how-vir-das-cyrus-broacha-and-others-tickled-indias-funny/429079>. Assessed 17 Sept. 2023.
- Chattoo, Caty Borum, and Lauren Feldman. "Storytelling for social change: Leveraging documentary and comedy for public engagement in global poverty." *Journal of Communication*, 67(5), 2017: 678-701. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/jcom.12318>.
- *A Comedian and an Activist Walk into a Bar: The Serious Role of Comedy in Social Justice*. Vol. 1, University of California Press, 2020.
- Critchley, Simon. *On Humour*. 1st ed., Routledge, 2002. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203870129>.
- Das, Vir. "Religion vs Comedy." *YouTube*, uploaded by Vir Das Comedy, 11 Jan. 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u5hS8vzmQXI&list=TLPQMzAwOTIwMjMlOExB8n7iQ&index=1>. Accessed 10 Sept. 2023
- "Who has Freedom of Speech." *YouTube*, uploaded by Vir Das Comedy, 10 Feb. 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CQbm8XKi_xw&t=398s. Accessed 10 Sept. 2023
- "Time to Stand Up." *YouTube*, uploaded 7 Dec. 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n7w2uGKQDHI>. Accessed 10 Sept. 2023
- Douglas, Mary. *Implicit Meanings: Selected Essays in Anthropology*. 1st ed., Routledge, 2002. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203029909>.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*. WW Norton & Company, 1960.

- *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol: XXI (1927-1931): The Future of an Illusion, Civilization and its Discontents, and Other Works*. Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1961.
- Jenkins, Henry, et al. "Youth Voice, Media, and Political Engagement: Introducing the Core Concepts." *By Any Media Necessary: The New Youth Activism*, NYU Press, 2016: 1–60. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt180401m.4>. Accessed 13 Sept. 2023.
- Jha, Aditya Mani. "A Brief History of Indian Standup: The Early Years Supercut." *Deadant*, 25 May 2021, <https://deadant.co/a-brief-history-of-indian-standup-the-early-years-supercut/>. Accessed 15 Sept. 2023.
- Krefting, Rebecca. *All Joking Aside: American Humor and its Discontents*. John Hopkins University Press, 2014. *Project MUSE*, <https://doi.org/10.1353/book.33137>. Accessed 20 Sept. 2023.
- Limon, John. *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America*. Duke University Press, 2000. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1198z2t>. Accessed 20 Sept. 2023.
- Lockyer, Sharon, and Michael Pickering. "You Must Be Joking: The Sociological Critique of Humour and Comic Media." *Sociology Compass*, 2(3,) 2008: 808-20. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9020.2008.00108.x>.
- Mascot, Jamila MH, and Gregor Moder. "A Head or a Cannonball? An Introduction to the Object of Comedy." *The Object of Comedy: Philosophies and Performances*, ed. by Jamila MH Mascot and Gregor Moder, Springer Nature, 2020: 1-12.
- Mintz, Lawrence E. "Standup Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation." *American Quarterly*, vol. 37, no. 1, 1985: 71–80. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2712763>
- Schechner, Richard. "Ritual and performance." *Companion Encyclopaedia of Anthropology: Humanity, Culture and Social Life*, edited by Tim Ingold, Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2003: 613-47.
- Paul, Subin. "A New Public Sphere? English-language Stand-up Comedy in India." *Contemporary South Asia*, vol. 25, no.2, 2017: 121-35. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09584935.2017.1321618>.
- Wertheim, W. F. *East-West Parallels: Sociological Approaches to Modern Asia*. The Hague and W. van Hoeve Ltd., 1964.
- Quirk, Sophie. *Why Stand-Up Matters: How Comedians Manipulate and Influence*. 1st ed., Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015.

Notes on Contributor(s)

Vishal Raj is a well read and published scholar at the Department of Humanities, IIT Roorkee. His areas of interest are masculinity studies, popular culture, and vernacular literature.

Himangi Priya is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Humanities, IIT Roorkee. Her areas of expertise are film and cinema studies, crime literature, and popular culture.

Citation: Raj, Vishal and Priya, Himangi. I am a Comedian, That's My Job: The Stand-up Activism of Vir Das. *University of Bucharest Review. Literary and Cultural Studies Series* 13(1), 2023: 66-80.
<https://doi.org/10.31178/UBR.13.1.6>