

TOWARDS A CONCEPT OF DESI HUMOUR: SOUTH ASIAN DIASPORIC STAND-UP COMEDY IN TORONTO AND THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION

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Shreyashi Ganguly is a PhD candidate in the Department of Sociology at York University. She is an active member of the Canadian Sociological Association and has started a specialized research cluster on South Asia at the Association that fosters intellectual exchange among scholars interested in the area.

Tell us about your field and your professional experiences before starting your current studies.

I have long been interested in the political study of social formations and would like to identify as a political sociologist with a keen interest in cultural studies. After completing both my bachelor's and master's degrees in Sociology, I decided to apply my sociological imagination to real-world contexts. This led me to work as an editorial journalist at a newspaper in India, where I was able to translate sociological theories and conceptual frameworks into accessible commentary on contemporary political developments. My experience in journalism reaffirmed my passion for critical inquiry. This, in turn, motivated my return to academia and the pursuit of advanced graduate studies was an organic next step in my intellectual journey.

Tell us about your dissertation work and how it relates to the study of Canada.

My research investigates stand-up comedy as a cultural performative practice through which the South Asian diaspora in Toronto navigates questions of identity, race, and representation in Canada. I focus on the practice of 'desi' stand-up comedy as a distinct diasporic form of humorous-cultural expression and examine how South Asian comedians and audience members engage with and contest dominant narratives of

belonging, multiculturalism, and visibility within the Canadian public sphere.

Methodologically speaking, I have conducted an in-depth ethnography of the local South Asian comedy scene in the city. This involves participant observation at multiple comedy shows across the city and the GTA over several months. I have supplemented this with interviews with South Asian diasporic comedians to better understand how they understand their identities in relation to their art.

By analyzing the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and identity that shape these performances, this research critically explores how diasporic South Asians are positioned within the broader socio-political and cultural landscape of Canada. Located at the nexus of critical diaspora studies and critical Canadian studies, this work contributes to ongoing conversations about representation, diasporic positionality and the racialized contours of cultural citizenship in contemporary Canada.

What inspired you to do this work?

I have always been drawn to humour. From a young age, I was an avid consumer of stand-up comedy and was surprised by how little had been written about its political and cultural significance. I came to realize that sociology, as

a discipline, has often overlooked humour, perceiving it as lacking the seriousness required for scholarly inquiry. Yet, in our current moment—when humour is increasingly shaped by political structures and has become a powerful mode of communication—it is more important than ever to explore its political-cultural dimensions.

This realization led me to design a research project that addresses this gap in knowledge. At the same time, my own positioning as a member of the South Asian diaspora in Canada deeply informs this work. It prompted me to ask what South Asian comedy can reveal about the politics of representation, and how it might serve as a tool for articulating the experiences of diasporic communities like mine.

What are some main takeaways you want others to come away with?

1. Stand-up comedy is far more than a vehicle for humour or entertainment; it is deeply political, often situated within and shaped by intersecting dimensions of power such as race, gender, class, and migration.
2. In the context of South Asian stand-up comedy in Toronto, humorous expression becomes a critical site for community-building and information-sharing, particularly among diasporic populations that are frequently marginalized within dominant Canadian cultural narratives.
3. Comic performances also function as spaces of affective release and catharsis, offering participants a means of navigating and processing the emotional complexities and anxieties of their diasporic existence.
4. As an art form, stand-up comedy holds the potential to foster both authoritarian and democratic impulses. It can reinforce

dominant ideologies or, conversely, serve as a space for subversion and dissent.

Tells us about the challenges you as researcher are experiencing or had to overcome to do this work.

As a racialized scholar who identifies as female, the main challenge for me during the fieldwork stage of my research was navigating the city spaces at night. Most comedy shows stretched well past midnight and happened in all sorts of places, such as basements and backrooms. On several occasions, I was concerned about my safety as a female while trying to access public spaces or transit late at night, especially in the winter.

Nonetheless, I also saw these experiences as informing my positionality within the research. These experiences helped me better understand how my gender identity, racial identity were mired in the spaces I was researching. These experiences also made me realize that the city of Toronto itself is a significant character in my project and made me come to terms with some of the inhibitions I had about the city.

Tell us about what you enjoy the most about the work you do.

Even though personal safety was a concern during the fieldwork stage, I absolutely loved this phase of my research. I enjoyed going to comedy shows all across the city. Admittedly, I am more fond of the city now than when I first started the research.

I have also formed deep connections with many of my research participants, and I thoroughly enjoyed listening to their stories. Through their narratives, it was fascinating to find that comedy has touched so many aspects of their lives. It was especially rewarding when

my respondents told me that I had prompted them to think about their craft differently.

What advice, lessons, or tips do you have for those starting their academic journey?

My main advice would be about time management. A PhD is a busy process, in the sense that one has to balance several things at once. It is important to clearly plan your schedule so that you can maximize the time you can devote to one particular task. At the same time, remember to block off time for yourself. That, I feel, is super important.

Doing a PhD can be a very consuming affair, it will take up all of your time if you allow it. So my advice would be to take breaks, periods where you do nothing, just to allow fresh ideas to come in.

Additionally, once coursework is completed, the research component can be a very lonely process. Make sure to build networks of friends and well-wishers who you can reach out to when it gets tiresome.

What are the next steps in your research?

I have finished the fieldwork component of my research and right now, I am in the midst of consolidating the data and writing the dissertation.