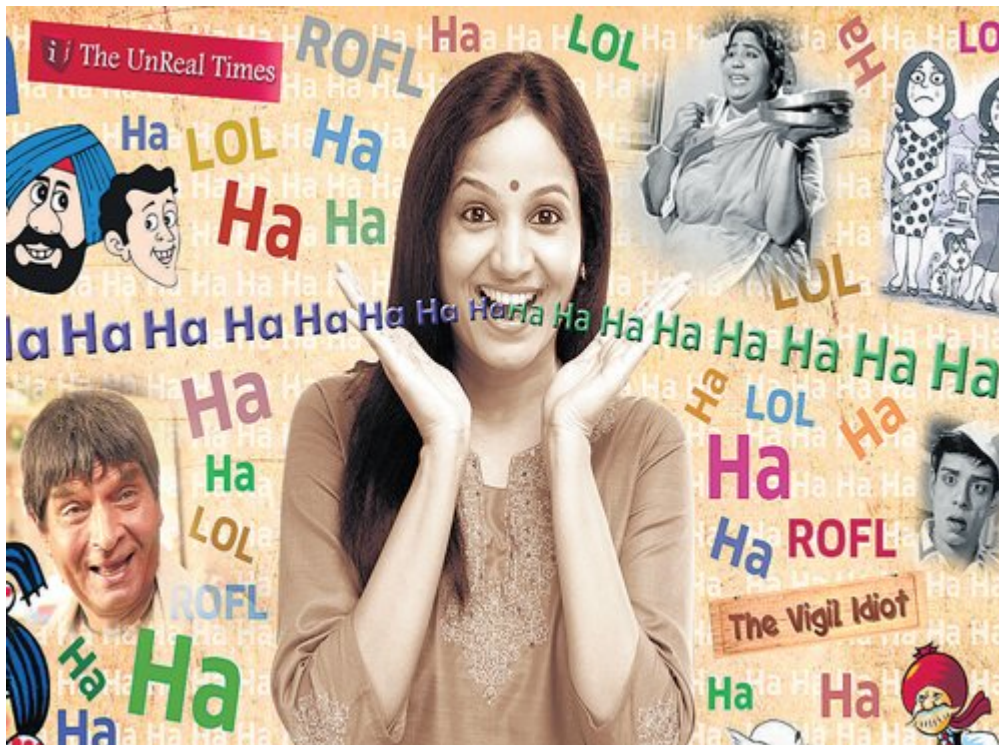


Seriously, not funny!

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Forget not to laugh!

We are a nation that seems to revel in taking everything too seriously. In effect, we have forgotten how to laugh. Sadly, what passes off as humour today are a few TV shows and fillers in films that make fun of others. Whatever happened to an intelligent sense of humour, wonders Shefali Tripathi Mehta...

Squeamish with the funnies? That's us. The one free medicine for all ailments that we are least disposed to taking is humour. In the light of study, research and innumerable findings on the advantages of laughter, the healing properties of a heartfelt smile, we manage to maintain a straight face.

What bumps our funny bone (which literally is not pleasant — the sharp tingling down the elbow) is some Santa-Banta, some English idiom translated literally into our local languages, over-the-top impersonations and signboards that are funny only because they were not meant to be. C'est tout! We have a woolly, shifting Lakshman rekha in our heads which we decide to draw where and when we like, much as a confused teacher laughing with the class suddenly goes prim and reprimands the giggling students.

Isn't it strange that when we were babies, it seemed that the sole purpose of every adult was to try and make us laugh — tickling us, making funny faces and inappropriate sounds, jumping, walking on fours — outright jokers they turned into just to get one gurgle, a smile. Then, just as we began to get the jokes, we were told that life is no laughing matter. Be serious! — study seriously, eat seriously, play seriously.

We became wary of words aimed at laughter and even shortened our amusement into LOLs and ROFLs. We hear a chuckle and up our ante; was there a snigger in that guffaw, we worry. We didn't believe everything that the grand old man of Indian letters, Khushwant Singh, wrote, but we had no reason to disbelieve that it was with malice to all. And now we are at the increased risk of turning into a super touchy nation, a country of touch-me-nots.

Objection Milord! Taking offence seems to have become our favourite pastime, spurred as it is by the 24x7 media that makes all such non-issues, headlines. On the one hand, we aspire to become global citizens and on the other, we have deep-rooted caste, class, religion, regional, social and political affiliations. The changing paradigm of modern life has created suspicion and insecurity, making us super-sensitive and defensive of that which we believe 'belongs' to us and which we must safeguard. This, though, is the lesser reason; a lot of the brouhaha is created by dimwits, trouble makers and idle-minded devils.

The latest on the 'taking offence' front is that bald men have taken a morcha and submitted a memorandum, alleging ridicule by Rahul Gandhi for his remark that the Opposition 'can sell comb to the bald'. How, by any stretch of imagination, does the remark mean anything offensive to bald men, is anyone's guess. And thanks to the use of gender in Hindustani, only men objected, the bald and beautiful women laughed their heads off.

There's never a lull in the piqued people's lives. They never have to wait too long, look too far — men, women, leaders, politicians, film stars alike seem to have a chronic tendency to put their foot in mouth, especially in their attempts to elicit laughter.

Another unwitting victim was the politician, Sriprakash Jaiswal, who tried to raise a laugh but had women raising their rolling pins at him for using an analogy comparing a cricket match victory with a wife to say how the 'attraction' wears off with time. Because most of the protesters are generally not first-hand receivers of deemed-derogatory remarks but baton-catchers who relay ire and indignation, I would like to inform the ladies who rose in rebellion, that he used 'mazza' literally, 'fun'. Howzzat!

These kind of daily dharnas and effigy burning are more laugh-worthy in the entire issue. When will we realise that the subject of a joke is not always the target of a joke? It is ironical that derogatory, regressive TV serials run for years to unprecedented TRPs but social and political satire and spoofs in books, films and TV are banned because they may hurt someone's sentiment, somewhere.

The cartoonist Shankar published 'Don't Spare Me Shankar', a compilation from his collection of about 1,500 cartoons of Nehru, with a foreword by Indira Gandhi, who wrote that Nehru "enjoyed a hearty laugh — often at his own expense". Such tolerance is uncommon in leaders and politicians of today.

Today's leaders have to appease communities of supporters because of who they are in power. Mobs roused by inane, half-understood reasons demand their leader's backing and a leader with little vision, and no commitment to the country or society at large joins the slogan-mongers, dharna-sitters and morcha-walkers at the drop of a cartoon. Frivolous, nuisance defamation suits that are filed daily can make for a side-splitting encyclopaedia of humour.

No laughing matterThe plurality of our society makes it a tough job to create laughs. We're always careful not to offend anyone. With all the caution, someone is still offended by something because of our misplaced sense of pride and propriety. To raise laughs at the cost of others is churlish and silly. To be able to see reality with candour; to laugh at ourselves; to caricature our quirks and vices, needs intelligence. Who finds sexist, racist and jokes targeted at a group or community funny? Ignoring foolishness is a measure of intelligence that we cannot take credit for.

At one end of the spectrum is these 'offence taking' people who are waiting to find an excuse to shout down humour as ridicule and at the other, are people who have their 5- and 10-year-old kids stay up late to watch comedy shows that makes fun of potbellies and wives. Whatever happened to an intelligent sense of humour? What makes us laugh is not silly people saying silly things, but clever people saying clever things. It was the master himself, Charles Chaplin who said, "My pain may be the reason for somebody's laugh. But my laugh must never be the reason for somebody's pain."

Where is the subtlety, the intelligence that will mirror us — our idiosyncrasies, our social, political and religious hypocrisy? Political repartee today is taken over by shrill, offensive attacks. What passes off as humour are a few TV shows and fillers in films that make fun of others and most often border on the vulgar. Making fun of stereotypes may not have rattled too many in the past when films depicted a drunk called Braganza, a fat Parsi lady in a dress and funny Hindi, a lungi-wearing 'Madrasi', but there has to be little tolerance for such inanity today. Only halfwits cracked up watching the curly-wigged, noodle with curd eating, over-the-top aiyyo-Khan in recent times.

Filmmaker, lyricist and poet Gulzar, in a recent book, talks of a scene in the film Aashirwad where a man snatches a gold chain and is caught. A crowd gathers and a minor character says, "Oho, ye government nahin chal sakti hai" (this government won't last). This off-the-cuff remark, the subtle humour in the situation, of how we tend to immediately hold the government accountable for all our problems, will definitely make us laugh. The same cannot be said of Tuntun shown eating a cartload of melons or pawing lustily men she fancies and who run from her.

The Utterly Butterly Amul girl advertisement, considered India's most successful promotional campaign, has run for more than four decades. The Amul girl in her polka dot dress is featured in a spoof on current affairs every Friday on hoardings since 1967 and never fails to bring a smile on passersby's faces. It is not that we're totally inept at laughing at ourselves. But we don't always get it right.

Humour helpsTwo blind children from the non-profit I work with were on a trip from their city Bhopal to Mumbai. Standing before the sea, one said to another, "How big do you think the sea is?" The other sagely replied, "Must be the size of our Shahapura Lake." All of us laughed on hearing him, just as we would if it were any another child's innocent reply

Should we have pitied them and pretended not to have heard the exchange, thinking of the 'poor' blind who would never see or fathom the size of the sea, never know the beauty of this world. What purpose would that have served? Handled with sensitivity and taken in the right spirit, humour can serve as a great leveller.

Laughter is the best way of dealing with difficult situations. Being able to laugh during difficult times helps us cope better. When faced with adversity, some people display a great ability to laugh at their own predicament.

Hot and hungry, I stepped into the nearest eatery and looking up from the masala dosa, was greeted by a poster that made me laugh. 'James Bonda' it said, and had Bond running out towards me. Humour in unlikely places, unexpected situations, never fails.

A lot of us still like to begin our day with the daily cartoon strip or the middle/op-ed pieces by our favourite writers. Some writers continue to lightly touch our funny bone, but beyond that there is no attempt to quip and pun in trying to cope with the impossible traffic situations, in the boardrooms or classrooms.

Most people would give their right arm to escape a lecture. I remember one from my college days where the speaker began by discussing the technology revolution sweeping through our lives and that we might soon even have remote-controlled zippers. His dramatic enactment of the improbable situations where we may have to be careful, lest we use it on another, had us split our sides.

Needless to say, having won our attention thus, he went on to the subject of his speech, no longer tedious for the audience. Appropriate humour relaxes the audience and the speaker. It also serves as excellent recall, which is why it should be used in classrooms and lectures, but most teachers are wary of the 'tee-hees' for fear of losing control.

India has a rich tradition of satire and political wit. Most of us have grown up appreciating the sharp sense of humour with which Birbal and Tenali Rama effortlessly outsmart envious courtiers and take pot-shots at the rulers. The Hasya Kavi Sammelans maintained the tradition of gentle reprimand and reminder through humour and drew devoted audiences. From R K Laxman's bewildered Common Man to Mario Miranda's Miss Nimbupani and Miss Fonseca, we were not shy to see ourselves in the mirror they held out.

The online media has given a fresh lease of life to humour in everyday situations. The Vigil Idiot and the Unreal Times are among the several immensely clever websites and social media groups and pages that take pot-shots at the current state of the nation, films and personalities. There is also a growing breed of stand-up comedians. But all this is still in small measure and in closed circles of caution. The challenge is largely the audience, who, fed on sumptuous doses of solemnity and reprimand, are quite reluctant to roll in the aisles.

Why so serious? A friend who had accompanied me waited outside as I stepped in to withdraw money from an ATM kiosk. While the transaction was taking place, I turned around to see people peeping inside and shaking their heads. The friend had started telling them that he had been waiting too long.

As waiting people are wont to do, the rest joined him in expressing displeasure, some may have even said how daft women are with machines. I stepped out clueless and flustered by the unwanted attention. The waiting people realised the joke was on them only, when they saw the friend walk away with me.

We take our life's responsibilities seriously, taking care of family, parents and children. Even though the family system may be disintegrating, we are quite duty-bound even to distant relatives in need of financial help and emotional support. The deep sense of duty, religion and upbringing makes us cringe at the frivolous.

People who laugh loud and crack jokes are seen as non-serious. Our society demands an unwavering respect for elders, seniors. We still have families where children forgo their life's aspirations just to follow their parents' dictates. For ages we lived in large families with irrefutable respect for elders; a deep-rooted sense of decorum and propriety for women, a family system in which there was no place for sitting together to enjoy a good laugh. This attitude spills over in the society where people joking openly are considered uncouth.

We tend to think of humour as a quality inherent in our genes — it is either there or not. But a sense of humour can be cultivated. A sense of humour can make a serious difference. Positive humour helps us look at the bright side of things. If only we showed half the fervour with which we protest harmless attempts at humour in educating ourselves and our children about the biases in our society, we would be less mistrustful of the laughs.

Finally, there is scientific evidence that humour does not just make us feel better, but is actually making us better. It is a powerful antidote for stress and conflict; for pain and physical discomfort. A laughter-induced endorphin rush provides temporary relief from pain. Laughter can improve immune function and the natural killer cell activity which attacks tumour cells, and is therefore beneficial for those suffering from cancer or HIV.

It also improves blood circulation and protects the heart. It is believed that laughing 100 times is equivalent to 15 minutes on the stationary bicycle. Some studies have also discovered that laughing may positively affect blood glucose levels. By diffusing stress and

conflict, anxiety and fear, a roaring 'ha-ha' makes a person more agreeable, leading to a better social life that is sure to enhance the feeling of well-being. So, why clog the heart when you can bust the gut?