

# Laughter, Humour and Comedy

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The three terms indicate three separate entities and yet their interrelation can hardly be questioned. Further, the term comedy declares an unambiguous allegiance to theatre. For example, one can describe a novel or a short story as 'comedy' only by stretching the sense of terminological propriety and conceptual aptness! On the other hand, non-dramatic expression is known to cause laughter, humour, as well as comedy. In other words, the triad requires some serious analysis.

A clearer understanding of the terms could be a help in the proposed inquiry.

Laughter - the first term - is generally understood to be a psycho-physical, resultant action in response to definite kinds of stimulus-situations. Though silent laughter is possible, it would normally be described differently. Humour on the other hand is understood to be a certain pleasurable disposition, a way of interpreting the world (within and around), an action which may or may not culminate in laughter. Finally, comedy is a formal mould, a framework that may or may not include laughter and humour though its pleasurable potential is hardly contested.

Indian terminology is equally enlightening. Bharata's thorough vision records '*hass*' as the stable, fundamental and mental sentiment or disposition which makes possible a specific manifestation namely '*hasya*' (the term could be translated as laughter). Bharata notes that *hasya* is brought out by imitation of other's 'walk or talk', senseless or absurd chatter and by a censorious reference to other's faults. It is noteworthy that the term '*hasah*' also means opening, blooming of a lotus as well as 'pride and arrogance'! As is well-known, there are theories which attribute laughter to a feeling of superiority felt (by the person who laughs) towards another person/object. Bharata goes on to explain six types of laughter. Unlike *hasya* which refers to a psycho-physical response, *vinod* suggests a mental disposition. *Vinod* is described as any interesting or amusing pursuit or occupation, thus throwing the door open to all arts and activities. The root-meaning being 'to divert, to remove, to drive away', *vinod* cannot be restricted ordinarily to drama or to any other specific artistic manifestation. It is expected to occur in a wide variety of activities and mediums. Finally, there is no traditional dramaturgical term corresponding to 'comedy' because the ultimate aim of all drama (in fact of all art) is stated to be *anand*, which actually refers to a blissful state, reaching far beyond the pain-pleasure, grief-delight and feeling-intelligence dichotomies. It is therefore valid to maintain that comedy is larger than humour which in turn is more accommodative than laughter. Having stated a nearly self-evident

position is time to attend to a common complaint lodged by performers, namely the scarcity of performable scripts/texts.

I would like to submit that there exists a separate category of ideas identifiable as 'performing' ideas and generally speaking texts/scripts as well as presentations suffer because the category is not recognized, explored and appreciated. Playwrights, directors and actors may fail to identify as well as to explore performing ideas - thus leading to a theatre of verbosity and dryness. In their turn theatre-writers and spectators fall short of recognizing exploitation as well as the flowering of performing ideas and this merely brings about a theatre-culture of superficial audience-responses dependent on a hollow aestheticism. Performing ideas, it should be noted, emerge from any or many of Bharata's four aspects of abhinaya. Failure to understand this alchemy may culminate in a wordy text, clumsy set design, 'gimmicky' lighting, mechanical movements and cliché gestures. In the final analysis theatre-behaviour of a society is shaped collectively by authors, directors, actors, theatre-writers and audiences. Unless all these five are aware of the nature, legitimacy, potency and the protean quality of performing ideas there is bound to be an all-round frustration. On this background some features of performing ideas are discussed here.

Firstly, performing ideas are characterized by a coexistence of emotive and cognitive aspects. Sometimes the emotive encases the cognitive and vice versa and any one of the two might be more relevant to a particular manifestation but exclusively emotive/cognitive performing ideas are impossible. This coming together of the two ignites into action a spark - a sure sign of moving towards impact or effectiveness. The process could be explained to some extent

The sparking-off means simultaneous chain-reactions of two processes, one intellectual and the other emotional. For example, Pt. Nehru's address to the nation on the day of Mahatma Gandhi's assassination set-off outwardly an emotional chain which however was accompanied by a chain of intellectual ideas alluding to the disruptive role of assassination as a political strategy in societies structured on a patriarchal model.

The second feature of performing ideas may sound a note alien to the accepted notions of what is art. Performing ideas tend to change basic orientations of both emotional and intellectual expressions to ensure an impact achieved by an array of 'artificial' strategies and means. In this context it may be stated that ideas identifiable as intellectual are beamed beyond individuals and at notional collectives. They are presented objectively and the possibility of alternative approaches is invariably accepted. In their comparison emotional ideas refer to a specific individual's appeal to a wide emotional spectrum of other indefinite groups and to individuals enjoying a similar cultural frame-work. In contrast, performing ideas are trained at specific audiences with the intention of arousing a specific range of emotions. Effectiveness or the impact of performing ideas cannot be treated as optional because audience constitutes a concrete, contemporary and contributory reality. As a consequence, the

total endeavour needs to be channelized necessitating a sound technique, clear purpose and an alert control. Performing ideas are essentially human creations and hence artificial.

Thirdly, performing ideas are articulated (unconsciously in the initial stages and consciously later) with a mounting anxiety aimed at transmission of the multi-layered nature of each experience. The main reason is the essentially synesthetic quality of every meaningful experience. Movements, gesture, vocalizations etc. are therefore to indicate expression and exploration of multiple sensibilities. For example, a Hamlet exclaiming 'words, words and words' in response to Polonius's officious query, would do well to respond to the neatness or otherwise of the binding, to the tactile experience afforded by the paper or even to the smell of the volume suggesting its long use etc. A meaningful experience is originally received in its entirety and the task is to pass it on in its totality - at least this is what a performer is to strive for. Performing idea, as an entity can be analyzed further and it certainly needs more attention. It may therefore help to examine the connection of the foregoing discussion with the triad, namely, laughter, humour and comedy. As stated earlier the three are not identical and yet enjoy certain common features:

a) The three aim at obliterating or at least blurring the lines that divide human body and mind.

It is known that every society creates a life-style through its accepted notions of art, culture and protocol, etc. These moulds, or the well-constructed canals serve the purpose of ensuring a controlled flow of life-forces within a society and thus there is no question of doing away with them! And yet, like any other well-defined frameworks they too begin resisting (even the) natural dynamics of cultural changes. Hence the useful role of the triad (namely laughter, humour and comedy) - of breaking the moulds, undoing the folds and loosening the holds. Laughter obviously creases the face and blurs the anatomical contours. Humour functions in a similar manner in relation to the verbalized moulds and their respective semantic hinter-lands. Comedy employs both laughter and humour in varying degrees yet products of bodily and linguistic rearrangements are not likely to be accepted as instances of 'comedic' expression! Perhaps this is a result of the reigning aesthetic equations between abstract and non-corporeal on the one hand with the aesthetic on the other.

b) Reaching out beyond laughter and humour, what does a comedy achieve?

In brief the comedic could be credited with the blurring of lines that divide the real and the imagined. Further, it also conveys a faith that the reality emerging from this operation portrays human life chiefly benign to the humans. Obviously, it does not mean that whatever happens in comedy is pleasant, or that everybody involved becomes happy or that the good is rewarded and the bad is punished! This is because

the comedic is basically driven to create an ambiguous and yet a generally friendly universe through its efforts of blurring the lines dividing the real and the imagined. It is easily understandable that the dividing lines cannot be 'blurred' unless they are first felt! These divides become nearly non-existent in a fantasy, but fantasy is hardly as pleasant and comforting as it is made out to be! The point is that the comedic allows existence of the said dividing contours without turning them into binding rigidities.

c) The comedic experience not only outreaches laughter and humour, but also outranges the accepted, classifiable, emotional spectrum. For example, take a comedy such as *The Tempest*. Prospero with his philosophical action of breaking the magic-wand arouses emotions which are not easily classifiable. The spirit of final, complete and a willing acceptance which characterizes Prospero's actions, in fact echoes the concept of moksha, an ultimate release, clearly beyond both laughter and humour. In this way the comedic experience will be found to be distinct from the one made possible by humour and laughter. The comedic moksha is equivalent to the tragicomic ananda of the Indian tradition. Both are connected with the non-classifiable emotions and naturally do not fit in the established typology of literary and performing genres.

d) The inadequacy of the genres and the thinking which formulates them is partly responsible for one feature common to laughter, humour and comedy. I am referring to the use of paradox. If an experience of 'yes-no' is to be imparted there is no strategy more potent than stating a paradox and no weapon more effective than employing an exaggeration. What paradox achieves is impressive. It shakes the very foundations of life-patterns which are average (i.e., those which do not display any distinctive quality), broad and objective (i.e., those which conveniently seek to deny the possibility of multiple alternatives) and mechanically logical/ intellectual (i.e., those which ignore the complex and necessarily physico-psychological nature of all actions).

To sum up, it is easy to laugh but not so easy to think about it!