Melancholia of Freedom: Humour and Nostalgia among Indians in South Africa

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Freedom produces jokes and jokes produce freedom.

Jean Paul Richter

As I began fieldwork in Chatsworth, a large, formerly Indian township outside of Durban in South Africa in 1998, I was immediately struck by two features of everyday life there. The first was a pervasive sense of loss and displacement in the face of the new freedoms afforded by the country’s tense but gentle transition to democracy in 1994. While the new era and its new possibilities were celebrated by some, including many well-educated people of Indian origin, the predominant feelings among the ordinary working class Indians in the township, colloquially known as charous [literally “burnt man” in Afrikaans] were those of loss and bewilderment. The oft-repeated saying – “[B]efore we were not white enough, now we are not black enough” – summed up this sentiment.

The sense of loss had a very real material basis in recent economic and spatial transformations. The new African National Congress (ANC) government embarked on a programme of economic liberalization that aimed at inviting global capital into the country and simultaneously closing or privatizing the many public and semi-public enterprises that had been part of the apartheid regime’s attempts to create a “protected” economy that would secure the prosperity of whites. Accompanying this came a restructuring of the labour and employment laws in order to strengthen and empower the African majority. These measures resulted in massive job losses and the economic marginalization of the Indian community that for years had inhabited a relatively cushioned position in South Africa’s economy (Freund 77–93). The efforts at simultaneously providing cheap housing and free schooling to everybody in the country resulted in a conspicuous redistribution of resources. Thousands of Africans live today in informal shacks or in newly built “government
houses” in Chatsworth; Africans are highly visible on streets and in shopping centres as well as in the public schools in the township, where Zulu-speaking children now constitute above 50 per cent of the students.

The effect of these changes was a multi-layered sense of loss: loss of economic security, loss of the township as “our place”; loss of perceived existential and physical safety; loss of a sense of “community unity” which was the product of the apartheid regime’s racialized deployment of political repression; and finally, a more imperceptible version of what Hegel famously called the “loss of the loss,” that is, the disappearance of the blockade – unfreedom and apartheid – that prevented true self-realization and thus could explain a range of problems and shortcomings in everyday life. With a new freedom, which is also a moment of uncertainty, compounded by changing relations among local, regional, and global forces, everybody in the country was left to rethink themselves beyond that overpowering shadow and structuring power that apartheid had imposed on them for decades.

The second remarkable feature of life in Chatsworth was the ubiquity of self-deprecating humour. Jokes, puns, and everyday mockery of the charou way of life constituted an important medium for reflection on the past, the bewilderment present, and a very uncertain future. Initially, I saw this as evasiveness, as a reluctance to include me in the often painful questions about the place of the 1.3 million Indians in South Africa – predominantly, descendants of indentured labourers who arrived between 1860 and 1890. Soon, as I began exploring community theatre and other performative practices among Indians in Durban, I realized that self-deprecating humour and satire had a long history there. Satire had been central to political critiques of apartheid, as well as a powerful medium of celebration and reflection on the inner life of what apartheid compressed and institutionalized into a single “Indian community” in South Africa (Hansen, “Plays”).

In this article, I will try to combine brief explorations of theatre performances and radio shows with ethnographic material from the township I have worked in over the past five years. I wish to explore how the pervasive post-apartheid melancholia among ordinary South African Indians is expressed in a range of performances on stage and on radio, as well as in the everyday “jokework” in the township. Drawing on Freud’s work on jokes and the comic, I will try to show that humour provides a way to reflect, indirectly, on a lost object that cannot be yearned for in any direct and public sense: Indian community life during apartheid. I shall focus on two of the most popular and widely appreciated cultural performances in the last few years: Rajesh Gopie’s play Out of Bounds, which has been the most widely acclaimed and circulated play by an Indian playwright in the post-apartheid era; and, in a different register, the radio show The Weekend Lift-Off on Radio LotusFM, particularly, the comical figures Bala and Peru, who became hugely popular among South African Indians from 2001 onwards. Now, the station features the show as Bala and Peru and its Web site runs comic strips with the two characters.

In his well-known essay “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud argues that, while mourning expresses the feeling of loss of a loved object, melancholia may be “a reaction to the loss of a loved object” (245) when one cannot see clearly what it is that has been lost. (The patient) knows whom he has lost but not what he has lost as a result. The symptoms of this condition are often difficult to gauge and understand, for both the melancholic and those around him. Yet, one symptom is clear: self-reproaches and self-revilings. Freud continues, “The melancholic displays something else besides which is lacking in mourning – an extraordinary diminution in his self-regard, an impoverishment of his ego on a grand scale” (246). In mourning, it is the world that has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself.

While a projection of Freud’s clinical-analytical categories onto an entire community or group of people invariably lays itself open to a range of methodological objections, it is nonetheless striking how this formulation of melancholia, employed and reimagined here as a more historically grounded paradigm for social-cultural interpretation, powerfully evokes and even resonates with the multi-layered sense of loss and the representations of everyday life in this particular community. Much public debate, many performances, and much informal conversation are organized around an oscillation between intense self-reproach (of the past, of family life, tradition, of introversion, etc.) and loving self-absorption and idealization (of family-life, culture, and sociality) in what consistently is called “the community.” This oscillation arises, at one level, from a deep anxiety regarding how the identity and history of the community can be represented and enunciated. Misgivings about the post-apartheid loss of economic and existential security are often dismissed as embarrassing nostalgia caused by a necessary adjustment to a globalized and democratic present. Yet, a deeper and older sense of a loss of the innocence and intimacy of the “pure” Indian community during the colonial era and later in the apartheid townships reverberates through the various artistic and everyday reflections on identity and history, which I will discuss below. This is a shameful loss, a shameful yearning for a happy life in unfreedom. Through jokes and caricature, the object of this yearning is represented as a phase of immaturity of the community, in which an older generation indulged in the innocent pleasures of those who did not fully know that they were enslaved. This representation enables both a self-reproaching gesture of disavowal and the idealization of a wholesome community life of the past. In order to understand this oscillation more fully and the registers of jokes and humour it has given rise to, we need to explore briefly the peculiar historicity and features of the “Indian public” in South Africa, both as an actual audience for performances and as a space of identification for Indians in the country.

The formation of an effective national public sphere has proved to be a partic-
is English. This public is constituted by a number of newspapers, radio stations, and art forms, defined by particular accents, names, aesthetics, and forms of music.

From the late nineteenth century onwards, members of the small, educated Indian elite in South Africa, mostly merchants of Gujarati origin, were involved in protracted confrontations with the white authorities in Durban. Indian organizations strove to create physical and social spaces for leisure and cultural performances and to facilitate the visits of cultural performers and religious preachers from the subcontinent. At stake was the right to practise and perform Indian culture within designated community spaces and a desire to organize the diverse descendants of the plantation "coolies" as a unified and dignified "Indian community." The issue of recognition of the aesthetic qualities of Indian culture by the supremacists, at best paternalist, white culture was hardly an issue at this juncture.

Apartheid became the ruling ideology after 1948, and the National Party began to revive older repatriation schemes for Indians, widely regarded as alien to Africa. In 1949, serious riots broke out in Durban when African workers attacked Indian homes all over the city and left more than a hundred dead and thousands wounded and homeless. These events dealt a blow to the expanding and vivacious Indian culture of Durban. Faced with an international cultural boycott led by the newly independent India, a hostile urban policy that systematically destroyed the sprawling Indian neighbourhoods and relocated Indians to new townships, and with legislation that curbed interracial sociality, the Indian community cocooned and closed ranks.

Apartheid's central doctrine of "separate development" began to take shape in the late 1950s, and Indians were now to be governed through culturally specific institutions. Not only were Indians, for the first time in the history of the country, granted citizenship in 1961, they were also systematically "Indianized." The state provided institutional arenas for classical culture, air time for Bollywood film music on the radio, and a radio station for Indians (Radio LotusFM); subsidized religious practices and performances; and encouraged the study of Indian classics—religious texts, music, theatre, and so on, at educational institutions designated for Indians. This project aimed at converting race into space and into deep sociocultural practices, whose alleged incomensurability would, in turn, justify the project of separation itself. In this way, apartheid sought to produce its own cause—that is, to make effective the distinctions the state claimed were natural. Yet, South African Indians were no longer to regard themselves as belonging to the subcontinent. They were to be entirely South African and, moreover, to represent the more modern, evolved, and rational cultural-religious practices derived from the Indian subcontinent. This project of paternalist modernization of oriental culture was energetically promoted and celebrated for decades in an official publication with the telling title Flat Lux.
The subsequent emergence of Indians as an intermediate group in both economic and political terms produced a very complex structure of recognition. On the one hand, there was a contradictory desire to perform in an imaginary “white gaze”; that is, to be accepted, or at least acknowledged, by what even today is called a dominant or even mainstream white culture. This desire was, and still is, compounded by fears of what many Indians regard as a violent and sexually aggressive African culture, combined with overtly racist contempt for everything African.

On the other hand, the “Indian public” abounded with debates on community issues: imaginings of the motherland, the erosion of proper cultural practices, inter-generational conflicts, crime, worries about the westernization of youth and the corruption of sexual mores, inter-ethnic struggles between Tamils and Hindi speakers, and so on. Today, these debates revolve around how, and whether, a cultural “we” can be maintained after the external imposition of a racial identity has disappeared.

The Indian public is not closed to the gaze of other groups. It is unknown, but not hidden — just not considered interesting, let alone appealing, to people outside. To many whites, it is still the murky world of the “coolie” or an exotic world of alien customs and practices; while the world of the charou — a derogatory slang for Indians that has now become an affectionate sign of cultural intimacy — appears neither friendly nor open to most Africans. While Bollywood cinema enjoys enormous popularity in the rest of Africa, it enjoys virtually no African audience in Southern Africa (Hansen, “Search”). Sheltered by this dismissive indifference, Indians have developed traditions, musical forms, and a vernacular English with many linguistic influences from Zulu, Afrikaans, and Indian vernaculars (Meshtree).

The leading Indian newspaper in the country, the Post, started in the 1990s as the Natal Post, a hard-hitting tabloid with crime, sensation, and pin-up girls, catering mainly to the white working class. Immensely popular with Indian workers, it gradually metamorphosed into an Indian family newspaper in the 1980s. Many of the practices considered Indian — family structure, use of Indian vernaculars and ways of dressing, observance of religious ritual, and appreciation of Indian cultural products — have been slowly vanishing over the last decade or more, to be replaced by a more commercially packaged consumer culture with an Indian tinge. Radio Lotus has today developed a distinctly commercial profile as LotusFM, appealing to younger listeners (and consumers) and promoting DJs and contemporary Indian dance music (mainly from the United Kingdom). The station tries to appeal to a modern, “diasporic mindset” by running small fact sheets about the phenomenal success of some Indian entrepreneurs in the United States and the United Kingdom. The news items from India that featured prominently in earlier decades are regarded by most younger Indians as utterly irrelevant — except for the gossip about Bollywood stars. In the 1990s, the Indian public sphere has been supplemented by

the so-called extras — inserts in the major mainstream papers on Sundays, following the lines of the Post in terms of style, advertising, and themes discussed (Bollywood music, food, social problems, cultural events, etc.). The extras are no doubt arresting metaphors for the status of Indians as a “culturally alien” minority, effectively appended to a white but economically and culturally hegemonic minority — a colonialism within colonialism. At the same time, they have expanded the Indian public and opened it to a white gaze, a gaze that derives its main force from being potential and imaginary, rather than being an identifiable pool of actual white readers and audiences.

**THE PLEASURES OF “ETNICH CLOSURE”**

For decades, Bollywood film songs remained the visceral heart of the community, requiring a sense of colloquialism, memories of weddings and family gatherings, and insider perspectives to be fully appreciated. Film music marked a zone of the truly ethnic—popular, a zone of enjoyment and jouissance, a licence to indulge in things Indian without excuses, a sense of marking “our space” by playing “our tunes” — an indulgence in the ethnic, always more associated with the charou culture of the working class but also shared with the Indian middle class. This zone of cultural intimacy remains strongly associated with superstition, gullibility, funny accents, ridiculous submission to the white baas, and excessive drinking and is thus often a source of embarrassment.

**charousness** is firmly nested in the working class culture of the townships, it is also a performative category that does not just disappear with education or a new house. Many of the successful Indians who have left the townships have a nostalgic recollection of the township and their childhood. These are memories of a haven of mutual support, care, and security, where people did not have to lock their doors and where crime and violence was associated with the physically adjacent, but socially immensely distant, African townships. Advertising, newspaper columns, and talk-shows refer to the culture of the township charou as something simple, crude, or even quaint, but yet honest and unpretentious, unlike the charmed lives of the aspiring middle class. In the view of successful Indians, charoudom — funny accents, crude manners, simple food, and badly performed Hindi pop — signifies the Indianness they have left behind in order to embrace a modern, diasporic, and purer Indian identity. For the aspiring middle classes, charou culture is deeply ambiguous — ridiculed in much stand-up comedy and community theatre and despised when glimpsed in the behaviour or speech of people thought to be “cultured” but also half-secretly enjoyed and even celebrated as “our” past, the ethnic thing that is truly ours and is, therefore, the object of both intense enjoyment and simultaneous disavowal.

Let me dwell for a moment on the issue of the accents that continue to be a
central element in community theatre and on radio shows. Accents are used as comical devices in these performances, as either exaggeration or discrepancy. Exaggeration is the most widely used technique by which a typical charou, often an elderly person, is depicted as both naïve/endearing and ridiculous. Similarly, exaggerated “white” accents are deployed to portray the typical over-ambitious person who tries to expunge every trace of his Indianness but is betrayed by the exaggerated gesture itself. The other technique is to create a discrepancy between a person’s appearance/race/class position and her accent in order to generate a comical effect. For example, an expensively dressed Indian with a broad charou accent, or conversely, a character whose comportment and dress signals a charou but who, nonetheless, has a clipped “white” accent. As we shall see below, these two techniques are often combined to generate a comical situation – for instance, when a charou naively encounters an unfamiliar situation and reacts to it in altogether inadequate fashion, drawing on her own limited universe.

The comical effect of both these techniques bases itself on what Freud, in his work on jokes and humour, calls “difference (Differenz) between the two cathetic expenditures – one’s own and the other person’s as estimated by empathy” (Jokes 242). Freud continues, “[A] person appears comic to us if, in comparison with ourselves, he makes too great an expenditure on his bodily functions and too little on his mental ones […] our laughter expresses a pleasurable sense of the superiority we feel in relation to him” (242).

What is particularly interesting in this case is that the play’s jokes, and comedy afford the ordinary township dweller two simultaneous positions: first, the position of the enlightened and educated Indian who can feel “a sense of superiority” when charou ways and accents are ridiculed; second, the position of the charou laughing at herself and at the absurdities of family conflicts, petty jealousies, narrow-mindedness, the ridiculous ambition of upward mobile “coconuts,” and so on. As we shall see, this dual emotion allows for two simultaneous pleasures – the ridiculing of the charou as the past and the concomitant celebration of the achievements of the community away from charoudom, as well as mourning of the loss of that same past and its more innocent and authentic pleasures.

The effect of sharing the enjoyment of these comic performances amounts to what I call “ethnic closure.” By this, I mean two things: first, closure as in closing ranks – both the enjoyment of superiority vis-à-vis the charou world and the comical effects of the exaggerated accents presuppose a sharing of the spaces of cultural intimacy where these accents and their connotations exist; and second, closure in the ordinary therapeutic sense as reconciling oneself with a certain traumatic event or process – the key here is what Freud, in many places, calls “economy in psychological expenditure,” that is the exchange of energy between inhibitions (consuming energy) and their release in the laugh or the comical pleasure (Jokes). What Freud calls “joke-work” basically consists in providing mechanisms for discharge, that is exchange between pent-up inhibitions/repressions (that which one cannot say or perhaps even think) and the pre-conscious (that which becomes sayable, albeit in the specifically condensed and always displaced form that Freud argued was a central feature of jokes as well as dreams) (Jokes 143–93).

On a more sociological note, one should add that the social situation of the performance itself – the experience of community in the shared laughter of an audience or the everyday sharing, re-telling, and laughing at jokes by stand-up comedians or on radio shows – in itself adds to the experience of “ethnic closure.” The laughter reaffirms a “we” and provides emotional economy and discharge in a situation fraught with anxieties.

Let me illustrate some of these points in greater detail by turning to Rajesh Gopie’s play Out of Bounds, which became one of the most successful and acclaimed Indian plays in recent years. The play toured the country for several years and attracted many mixed audiences, especially in Johannesburg and Cape Town, whereas it was mainly regarded as an Indian play in Durban and KwaZulu Natal. When the play was at the Edinburgh Festival and toured the United Kingdom in 2003, it was promoted by an organization specializing in marketing Asian performance and entertainment. Audiences across the country were, however, predominantly white and middleclass. In a recent personal exchange with Rajesh Gopie (Personal communication), I learned that Nelson Mandela requested Gopie to do a performance at his residence. I wonder if Mandela saw in this play a gripping and very South African story being told with an appeal that transcended community or race, which constitutes a crucial part of a fledgling post-apartheid national public.

**HUMOUR AND EFFECT OUT OF BOUNDS?**

Like many of the most successful Indian plays in South Africa in the last decades, Out of Bounds is a one-man show. The extremely versatile Gopie performs some three dozen characters in quick shifts and with minimal props. The play is in the narrative genre, telling the story of a boy’s journey from an innocent childhood in the old Indian area of Inanda north of Durban, through the township of Phoenix and eventually through university, to middleclass respectability and a white accent, and finally, to the United States and an American girlfriend. The narration appears mainly as the taped voice of the protagonist, enabling Gopie to intersperse a quick succession of illustrative tableaux and exchanges throughout the performance.

The childhood is depicted from within a noisy, warm, multigenerational household, organized around three brothers: the narrator’s father, who is the brooding, silent, and proud elder brother, and the two younger brothers, one big, brave, but not too bright, the other smart, socially ambitious, and selfish. The house is set in Inanda, the site of Indian freeholdings acquired as inden-
tured labourers bought land and some respectability in the early twentieth century. The household and the narrator’s world revolves around the grandmother and her beloved mango tree in the garden and also around the much-loved African maid, Togo, who has to leave the household after becoming pregnant by one of the uncles.

Gopie depicts movingly how the boy experiences a painful contradiction between the brothers’ idea of themselves as strong and brave at home and their repeated emasculation in the wider world. The protagonist often feels ashamed of the raucous and unrefined charou life in his house and begins to imagine himself as living in a new, shiny, middle-class house in a modern nuclear family. The outside world intervenes mercilessly in a few short but poignant moments, demonstrating that the narrator’s aspirations and subjectivity matter little. He and his family are irrevocably charou. One scene depicts a happy and noisy family picnic at a beach. The idyllic scene is brutally interrupted by two white policemen, who tell the family that the area is reserved for whites. The vague protests of the brothers are brutally cut off by the policemen, leaving the brothers silent and humiliated.

In another scene, the 1985 riots in Inanda, where thousands of impoverished Zulus from adjoining areas set upon the Indian enclave, forcing the family off the land and into the township of Phoenix. The riots, and the African rioters, are depicted as a natural force, a furious storm, with no apparent cause, unleashed upon a harmonious and wholesome Indian community life, uprooting and destroying it, a destruction poignantly symbolized by the falling mango tree outside the house.

After this dramatic climax, the new life in the township is depicted as one of social dérouté. The community is still alive, but in a more brutal and less charmed way. In the cut-and-dry urban environment, the narrator’s father begins to appear as an emasculated and marginalized man, a man belonging to another and now lost world. The narrator feels increasingly ashamed of his charou background and aspires to the better and affluent life that the younger uncle has achieved through his business success. Making it to university, the narrator encounters, in some hilarious scenes, Indian elite culture, its snobbery and its contempt for everything charou. He tries to hide the fact that he is from Phoenix, the very symbol of charoudom, and grows ever more embarrassed by the ways of his family, particularly his father’s drinking and uncouth ways.

At the very end of the play the narrator, now in the United States, learns of his father’s death and begins to rethink, and appreciate, where he came from.

The key to the play’s success and appeal to both middle-class and charou audiences (and beyond) lies, to my mind, in three distinguishing features of the performance. First, there is Gopie’s ability to portray his characters as simultaneously endearing and flawed, as both proud and ridiculous, and not least, as caught in a perpetual state of misrecognition of themselves as they traverse different sociocultural worlds. The narrator tries to leave the world of the charou, to “whiten” himself and his lifestyle, but meets snobbery, denial, and embarrassment. His father was a lion in his old world but is uncouth and anachronistic in the narrator’s new and charmed world. The father is a historical residue, a leftover from the old world, a man who dies unhappy and never reconciled with his son—the future of the community. The younger uncle achieves economic success but at a high price—gossip, envy, and in the end, personal tragedy. In this way, the play powerfully captures a profound sense of loss. What is lost, however, is an object—the wholesome life of the Indian household/family/community—and a deeply flawed and undesirable past.

Secondly, the play manages to tell a universal story of the formation of a self, a modern and free South African Indian self, that struggles to come to terms with its origins in the humiliating, yet protected, unfreedom of apartheid and the confines of familiar community mores. There is little doubt that instruction by Tina Johnson, Gopie’s long-term American partner, has helped to bring out this larger theme of Bildung through a journey out of the past, through the township, and ultimately out of South Africa. This journey of painful Bildung is portrayed most poignantly through the use of the narrator’s own “evolved” accent. The play is a story of the constant and recurrent humiliation of Indian men in the face of worlds and realities they neither control nor fully understand. By taking the narrator out of South Africa in the end, Gopie introduces the possibility that true sovereignty of the self and true insight into one’s own interior life—the essence of Bildung and the prerequisite of true freedom (see e.g., Dumont) can only be attained from afar. The “diaporic” position makes it possible for the narrator to enter universal history, just as South Africa has been readmitted into the universal history of progress after 1994. By freeing him from the shackles of the myopic charou vision of the world and by removing him from the inscription of his body and self onto a racialized spatial economy in South Africa, the move abroad affords him a universalist gaze at himself as an evolved charou. It affords him the freedom to reconcile himself with that past because his past, and the past of the community, no longer own him. He can now reappropriate and own this past by telling the story we see unfold on stage. In this way, Out of Bounds manages, in an almost Hegelian fashion, to portray the little pleasures and the comforts of a life in unfreedom, the pain and the emotional costs of attaining freedom, and finally, the superior vision and the capacity of forgive and love his father, and his past, which freedom makes possible.

Thirdly, the play’s central storyline is neither very South African nor diaporic. It is, essentially, a tale of class mobility and the tensions that creates between a father and a son belonging to two different social worlds. This universal theme hit a nerve among Indian audiences in South Africa, where the real debate about how to be an Indian within the Indian public sphere primarily revolves around class mobility and the “evils” and charms of the charou culture and is much less concerned with relations with other racial and cultural
groups. Gopie captures very precisely this self-absorption and the sense of the outside world as somehow unintelligible. It was exactly the tale of class mobility, though cast in the very local idioms of the *charou* English vernacular, that was noted and enjoyed by audiences in the United Kingdom. The really lasting strength of the play clearly lies in this polyvalent quality, its ability to tell the same story at many levels at the same time.

Gopie uses different accents throughout the play to generate the dual emotion mentioned above, that is both the pleasure of a feeling of superiority vis-à-vis a *charou* past and a powerful feeling of recognition and ethnic closure among audiences. I saw the play for the first time performed at a school in the neighbourhood where Gopie grew up in Durban. There was immense pride among some of the locals that “our boy” had done so well and that “he [was] telling our story so well,” as an elderly woman told me after the show. Many commented on the fact that Gopie, as the first performer, took up the riots in 1985 and “showed exactly what happened. They stole the land of our ancestors and they took our houses,” as a man told me after the performance. Unbeknownst to many audiences abroad, or even outside Durban, Gopie was also making an effort to address the difficult and vexed issue of the relationship between Zulus and Indians in the province of KwaZulu Natal. When Gopie’s play hit the stage, a number of incidents of open anti-Indian feelings among Zulus and other Africans had been widely discussed.

In February 1999, a stridently anti-Indian editorial in the largest Zulu daily, *Ilango*, concluded with the sentence, “Blessed be the day when a new Ida Amin is born from the womb of a Zulu woman” (*Ilango*). Although the editor was severely reprimanded, the incident just added to the anxiety about Africans and the fear of the future that was so dominant in the Indian townships in Durban. These fears were once again fuelled when the well-known “struggle poet” and songwriter Mbongeni Njema, in May 2002, released a song called *AmaNdiya* [Zulu for “Indians”] accusing Indians of being oppressors.1

In this context, Gopie’s portrayal of Indians in *Inanda* as warm and loving people unjustly dispossessed and victimized hit a raw nerve. At the same time, his portrayal of the riots as a natural disaster of faceless destruction and anonymous anger was cautious and yet significant. In portraying Africans as nature, as an opaque and alien world driven by forces that cannot be understood but must be yielded to, just like the awesome and powerful African natural world, Gopie probably unwittingly reproduced a deeply sedimented colonial conceptualization of the native world that still is widespread among Indians in South Africa.

**JOKE-WORK ON A SATURDAY MORNING**

Radio Lotus went through a major makeover in the mid-1990s to become a modern station that provided entertainment but also more debate and more critical reflections among Indians than in the past. The most significant innovation was the talk show *Viewpoint*, which took up new issues for an hour every day, briefly and provocatively presented by the host and then based on listeners calling in. *Viewpoint*, nick-named “Spewpoint,” has emerged as the single most interesting and controversial programme on Lotus, not least due to the presenter Devi Sankaree Govender, who has repeatedly been at the centre of controversies because she insists on taking up issues like teenage pregnancies, infidelity, AIDS, Indian racism, the persistence of a subservient “coolie” attitude to whites, conversions to Christianity, domestic violence, the uses of accents to classify and blurt people, and so on.

The talk show hosts admit that there are always concerns about not crossing the thin line between the provocative and the inappropriate. Most of the media personalities have a rather clear perception of “the community” as being conservative, timid, narrow-minded, and unwilling to confront its own vices and problems. Like so many other educated Indians, the presenters see themselves as liberal and broadminded and ahead of “the community” in every respect—living liberal white lives, having a command of English with only a faint accent, and being well-travelled and exposed to the wider world. In other words, they are new Indians who, like the narrator in *Out of Bounds*, no longer feel owned by their history and are keen to author a new one. Devi Sankaree has made women’s issues a part of her trademark—domestic problems, education, moral values, the maintenance of Indian culture, prejudices, generational problems, and so on. She has, indeed, been successful in turning the programme into an important forum for women’s voices and she exercises a grammar in an important forum for women.”

This preference for women as the real victims and thus the speakers of truth in society and in their communities is not just Devi Sankaree’s idea. It is a wider trend in South Africa, instituted in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings and today a dominant trend in projects and initiatives in the African townships, where women head most households and are seen as constituting the heart and moral voice of communities.

Yet, Devi Sankaree and her colleagues do not always get it right. There are issues which are too embarrassing to talk about and to which no callers respond readily, in spite of their being prominent concerns of families and gossip: domestic violence, incest, racism, interracial marriages and liaisons, on air at all, this normally happens in general discussions based on rumours, stories, and parables—very rarely in discussions based on personal accounts or examples. These themes are so sensitive that they have to be left to the comedians.

A recent innovation is the comedy and talk show *The Weekend Lift-Off*. The
show was created by Ray Maharaj and Vikash Mathura as a mixture of light news, phone-in sessions, music, and weekly parodies performed by the two popular figures Bala and Peru, two pensioners from the town of Verulam—the only town in South Africa with a distinctly Indian (Tamil) name. Set in the heart of the sugar belt north of Durban, Verulam is widely seen as predominantly Tamil (as were the majority of indentured labourers), provincial, and backward. It was the seat of a rustic and uncouth charou culture before the migration to Durban from the 1940s onwards. Peru and Bala are portrayed as out of place and funny in multiple ways—they are old and do not quite understand all the changes in the country, their command of English is lacking in many ways, they are misogynist and talk about women—their wives in particular—in ways that mock and ridicule any attempt at being politically correct or producing a new role for women; and they are Tamil and from Verulam. They represent, in essence, the embarrassing past of the community, the unrefined charou and Tamil core of working class culture—innocent, simple-minded, and endearing.

Over the period of time the show has been running, Peru and Bala have “gone to India,” making lots of mistakes, being distinctly non-spiritual in their understanding of the place, acting petty-minded, and making the most abusive remarks about the place for which they are supposed to have some veneration. They have been to Johannesburg, behaving like country bumpkins and making very uncouth remarks about women, modern life, and Africans on the streets. They go to the seaside (to look at skimpily clad women) and to the doctor, all the time, complaining and talking about their failing health. They go to African healers, where they are tricked and make uncouth remarks about African medicine. The funny element is, of course, that they never get the larger picture; they misunderstand things, can only comprehend the most immediate things and phenomena and only within their own limited horizon. They are provincial in every sense and therefore deeply embarrassing. Bala and Peru are not merely on radio but appear at stage shows throughout the country—in the Indian enclaves, that is—and they have become immensely popular in many quarters, not least with men and younger people because of the riské transgression of the boundaries as to how misogynist jokes and sexually explicit language can be articulated in public.

Other sketches performed on The Weekend Liftoff take up current events or common frames (like “This is not the 8:45 news”) and make fun of public figures. The well-known Indian strongman and politician Amichand Rajbansi’s very public divorce and remarriage was depicted Bollywood-style, along the lines of Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, with badly performed songs and a narrative. In another sketch, an Indian man described a recipe for rum pudding and got ever more drunk in the process. His accent went from neat to a broad and “ridiculous” charou accent, implying that, beneath the cultivated exterior of a respectable Indian, is always an uncouth charou. Here it was the rum, made on sugar cane, that refers to the coolie and plantation past and to the vice of heavy drinking widely associated with the charou man. The two comedians normally stay away from politics and contentious issues and the only African figures they have made fun of have been Mandela (his life story told Bollywood style) and Desmond Tutu, both of them universally loved and respected and made fun of in a loving and respectful way.

It is no mere coincidence that both the comedians are Hindi speakers and that they use Hindi and Hindi film songs in other sketches and also use Hindi terms for sexual acts and organs (Danda, choot, ganda-ganda), as if to conceal them and yet pronounce them, thus making signifiers of physical intimacy into transmitters of cultural intimacy. But there is also more than a trace of disdain running through this mockery and self-deprecation—disdain of Tamil and charou culture by Hindi speakers, who historically have regarded themselves as more organized, purer Hindus and better Indians. It is indisputable that, taken as a whole, Hindi speakers have been economically and politically dominant, not least because most of the rich merchants who came to South Africa to trade belonged to the Hindi- and Gujarati-speaking universe of western and northern India. Hindi speakers are on the whole better educated and are dominant in civic and cultural organizations. It is also often emphasized by Hindi speakers that they are more devout Hindus, more strongly tied to India as a “cultural Motherland,” and less prone to convert to Christianity than the hundreds of thousands of Tamil and Telugu speakers who, in recent decades, have converted to Christianity. Since 1994, a new rift has opened between Hindi and Tamil speakers in South Africa with the formation of independent Tamil organizations, linked to global Tamil organizations and often sympathetic to the Tamil Tigers of Sri Lanka.

The talk-show hosts also display a different form of disdain, based on class and articulated through accent and the power of language. When receiving calls from listeners or reading news, they use almost “white” accents to demonstrate their competence and worthiness. The barely disguised element of disdain shows itself in interactions with listeners whose accents and imperfect English betray them as uneducated, that is charous. The hosts will make fun of them, ridicule them in ways they often do not quite understand, and they often make fun of letters they receive, reading out their spelling mistakes and broken grammar.

There have been complaints from Tamil speakers about this programme, but these complaints have generally been brushed aside as indications of a lack of a sense of humour, of an inability to join in the self-deprecation that is the dominant form of humour in this community space. A more serious controversy unfolded around the alleged (and very real) misogynist slant of much of the humour on air. After the programme had been running for six months, two female radio personalities created a competing programme called Breakfast in Bed, which was marketed by the radio station as a response to The
Weekend Lift-Off – a sort of battle of the sexes on air. The ironic and self-deprecat ing tone of both of these programmes was clearly lost on many in the older generation. I followed the programme and pondered many dramatic exchanges and conflicts that it engendered while I was in Durban in 2001. One such drama began with a listener’s letter to Mathura and Maharaj where he accused them of being misogynist. They responded by reading the letter out, mocking him, and calling him humourless and stuffy. They commented on air that he probably had been forced to write this by his wife and by the female Sunday morning DJs and that he clearly was too much of a coward to stand up to these women, and so on. In response, the listener in real life sued the radio station for defamation. A brief court case ensued and The Weekend Lift-Off was suspended for a few weeks.2

Opinions on the programme are, of course, wildly divided. Many educated Indians find the programme offensive and a disgrace – ostensibly because it portrays Indians as stupid and gullible – but as much because it foregrounds and represents the charou culture that middle-class Indians generally disavow. Yet, as was the case with Lotus during the apartheid years, many ordinary working-class people do tune into it Saturday morning to laugh and listen to Hindi pop. As the station manager estimated during a personal conversation with me, ratings suggest that the programme has almost 700,000 listeners – something like 70 per cent of adult Indians in the country – nothing less than an astounding success. Without official written records, my personal observation tells me that this figure is in close proximity with what has been happening. In the township where I live when in Durban, the programme could be heard from most houses, in taxis, shops, and at the outdoor market, and was the source of intense and unapologetic collective enjoyment. Phrases and ways of speaking from the programme were all over (e.g., when Peru yells “Baaaalau!” or the ironic use of the Tamil greeting Vanakkam among young people who do not speak the vernacular).

The success of this programme suggests that the culture of self-deprecation, of making fun of the charou, of the past, and of the provincial mindset of Indians, remains not only the dominant genre of fun and entertainment within the community but also the dominant mode of self-representation more generally. Although a whole range of problems internal to the community are incessantly debated on Viewpoint and in other fora, the larger and difficult issues of the future of Indians in the country, the relationship with Africans, and so on, remain difficult to discuss. Most Indians shy away from these subjects, even in informal conversations. This has for years left the representation of the history, predicaments, and experiences of Indians in South Africa to the established producers of the “discourse of the community” – politicians and a handful of academics. The younger media personalities discussed here do not offer a solution or a new narrative. They offer a release of inhibition, an “economy of psychic expenditure” (Jokes, 148), and ethnic closure through humour and jokes.

CONCLUSION

The quaint, ridiculous, and incongruous ways and accents of the charou have for long been at the heart of self-deprecating humour and jokes among Indians in South Africa. While the vices and the political apathy of the Indian community generated serious critique and stinging satire during the apartheid years, the coolie past and the charou present were, nonetheless, regarded as a shared resource for solidarity and political change. Apartheid’s compression of Indian sociality within the township gave body to the notion of a unified community that was imagined to have a better future. Post-apartheid realities have been perplexing, as the community has splintered very rapidly along lines of class, language, and religion. Charou culture is today less of a shared reality across class and religion than it used to be, and the townships are today sites of substantial economic deprivation and the social isolation of an impoverished Indian working class increasingly dependent on self-employment of various kinds. For the younger generation of Indians, particularly those with education, the townships are often regarded as embarrassing liabilities, the home of parents, aunts, and uncles and grandparents who belong to yesterday’s world. For young and trend-setting Indians, there is a radically non-contemporary quality to this world and what they see as its myopic cosmology. It appears as a cultural remnant from a past that has become irrelevant at a staggering speed. This has elicited the two types of responses I have tried to indicate.

One has been to make the charou culture into an attractive, wholesome, but non-retrievable past. The loss of this has produced a deep sense of melancholia. For those who have left this world, as Gopie’s narrator and the successful educated Indians, charoudom becomes a colourful, even innocent, past that has to die, tragically, to enable modern Indians to evolve and attain true freedom as modern individuals. Showing the shared past as both beautiful and charming and tragically inadequate was what made Out of Bounds a great success.

The other response, exemplified by Bala and Peri and replicated in much stand-up comedy, is to make the non-contemporary features of the charou culture into a farce. Here, the older and the uneducated and uncouth assume the role of those who enunciate the truth of the community, that is its “collective unconscious” – unbridled greed, envy, racist jokes, sexism, and so on. As Freud observed, dreams and jokes both work on the twin logic of displacement (of events, remarks, gestures out of context, etc.) and condensation of meanings into dense events or exchanges. The joke-work enabled by The Weekend Lift-Off is, indeed, both harsher and cruider than what most theatrical performances offer. Under the guise of the comforts of what I have called ethnic closure – closing ranks and healing – it offers a merciless, yet also loving, critique of the charou culture, as the ridiculous residue that prevents Indians from progressing and evolving and that, therefore, somehow must be abandoned. The closest analogy to this would be the way Yiddish humour in the United States
ridiculed the past of the Eastern European Jews, the ways of the shtetl, as the shameful and ridiculous mark of the past that kept Jews in ignorance and servitude. Yiddish humour was driven by optimism, by the promise of prosperity and ultimately of the full recognition accorded valued citizens. This secure position has, in recent decades, made the treasure of Yiddish humour into an object of fond memories and nostalgia and a commercial object, widely available on CDs, in books, and on Web sites (Weinstein). The future of Indians in South Africa is too insecure and ridden with anxieties and animosities for the humour to become a similar object of nostalgia and celebration.

If Gopie ultimately offers the vision of a free and evolved Indian’s reconstruction of the past as both picturesque and wholesome, Bala and Peru represent the other and self-reproaching, if not self-loathing, side of the melancholia of freedom that so powerfully defines this community in a corner of the world.

NOTES

1 In English translation the lyrics go, “Oh, brothers, oh, my fellow brothers/ We need strong and brave men to confront the Indians/ This (situation) is very difficult/ Indians don’t want to change/ Whites were better than Indians/ Even Mandela has failed to make them change.” The incident received intense press coverage; see e.g., newspaper archives at IOL.

2 The person in question threatened to sue the radio station, the manager took the programme off and the charge was dropped. See newspaper reporting in Post [Durban] in April and May 2002.

WORKS CITED


Station manager of Radio Lotus in Durban. Personal communication. 11 Nov. 2002.


